

COLUMNISTS

The many positives of Vatican II

In a discussion last week on other matters, a question came up about "What's better about the church since Vatican II?" After a brief few minutes to collect our thoughts, we each tried an answer. I mentioned four areas that have influenced my own experience of Catholicism in positive ways.

First is the fact that we worship in our own language. It isn't just that we no longer have to follow along using an English translation while the priest pronounces Latin. The significance of that change went much deeper. The point is that we need to experience God in terms we understand. In fact, we need to meet God in our experience. It's not enough to have someone else communicating with and about the mystery of God in terms we don't even know. That's no longer the spirituality we're trying to promote. Instead, it is in the very ordinary terms of our daily life, terms we use every day, in experiences we have every day — that's where we meet God and where we communicate with God.

It wasn't just a matter of translation that prompted the council fathers to declare that liturgy should be conducted in vernacular languages. It was a matter of newly appreciated spirituality rooted in the real lives that people live. I think this makes for a much better church.

Second, Vatican II turned the theology of the church upside down. Instead of talking in terms that would have retained a kind of "bi-level" idea of the church where the hierarchy seemed to be the "real" church with the rest of us as pas-



the
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life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

sive recipients of their ministry, Vatican II promoted a different idea. Vatican II rooted all church structures, ministries and the call to holiness itself in the sacrament of baptism. Before this shift in emphasis, Catholics sometimes had the impression that priests and those in orders were somehow "more Catholic" than the rank and file of the laity.

This impression was reinforced by a sort of division between the sacred and the profane. Laity took care of secular, "non-sacred" matters, while only those in orders could enter the sanctuary, handle sacred vessels and understand the Latin language.

It could almost seem in those days that only those in vows or orders were actually "called to holiness." They had set prayers to say each day, went to Mass daily and led lives closely linked to the sanctuary of the church. The rest of us were concerned about our jobs, families, chores around the house, hobbies and other responsibilities.

Vatican II emphasized that baptism called all of us to holiness, and tried to

lessen the separation. One way this was done was by underscoring the connection between God's activity and all human pursuits. Prayer, worship and liturgy are surely important, but they are not the only activities that bring us into contact with grace. Jobs, family responsibilities, relationships, hobbies and every occupation and endeavor that is human can be an occasion of grace. Furthermore, lay people, too, belong in important roles associated with worship, liturgy and "the sacred." All the baptized are called to holiness.

Third, Vatican II made it clear that "the world" is the arena of God's saving activity and is not to be viewed in as negative a way as had been the case previously. Instead of "the world" being religiously threatening, or at least morally neutral, Catholics were encouraged to view "the world" as very much connected to God's activity and very much the object of Christian ministry and activity.

New concern for social justice, new involvements in neighborhood organizing, new openness to the truth that exists outside the Catholic Church came to characterize parish life and drew the attention of individual Catholics in new directions. Seminarians began to study not just theology and philosophy, but were also urged to understand something of economics, sociology and psychology, too. New tools were needed for the enlarged sphere of church involvement and concern. Catholics were encouraged to read "the signs of the times" and to find in the "joys and hopes, the

fears and anxieties" of people around them a connection with God and a call to Christian holiness.

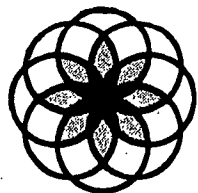
The fourth area is in the matter of ecumenical and interfaith relations. As a Catholic growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, I remember well a kind of "fear" that was actually associated with other religions. We were never to attend weddings or funerals in other churches. We were never to enter even a Christian church unless it was a Catholic church.

I remember my relatives using the phrase that the Catholic Church was "the one true church." I recall weddings between Catholics and non-Catholics that could not be held in church because it was a "mixed" marriage. I remember our family shunning an uncle of mine because he was a "fallen away" Catholic who would surely go to hell so could not be invited to family picnics! I rejoice in Vatican II's teaching that there is truth in other Christian religions and in all religions, that religious freedom is a right for all, that positive ecumenical and interfaith relationships enrich the church and all of us.

This short review of these four areas of my life reminds me of the tremendous difference Vatican II introduced into Catholicism. There is so much about the church that is so rewarding because of the direction set by that council. It might be a rewarding few minutes to try this exercise yourself!

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.



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