

Speaker looks at Vatican II legacy

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

Although there are several different ways to view the impact of the Second Vatican Council, all Catholics can agree that the climate in the American Catholic Church changed dramatically in its aftermath, according to *New York Times* columnist Peter Steinfels. American culture has also changed dramatically in that time, causing the church to enter a crisis period, and several steps need to be taken to prevent its further decline, he believes.

Steinfels, the *Times*' senior religion correspondent from 1988-97, spoke at Nazareth College Sept. 30 as part of "Vision, Reality, Challenge: Vatican II, Forty Years Later," a lecture series marking Vatican II's 40th anniversary. His lecture, titled "In the Wake of Vatican II: A People Adrift?" was sponsored by Nazareth's William H. Shannon Chair in Catholic Studies.

Vatican II, which took place from 1962-65, had very practical consequences for American Catholics, who tend to look at it in one of four ways, Steinfels maintained. These perspectives, he said, range from ultraconservative (the council was an

"unfortunate mistake" to be corrected) to the radically liberal (the council was a halfhearted break from the past, naive of the requirements of authentic reform).

According to the moderately conservative view, the council was misrepresented by some but remained a landmark event and the work of the Holy Spirit, introducing badly needed reforms, giving the church a jolt of energy and making Catholicism a global faith.

From a moderate liberal perspective, the council was a singular inspiration, with the Holy Spirit working through Pope John XXIII. From this perspective, the council reached out to those of other faiths and recognized the importance of change and dialogue, among other things, Steinfels said.

Steinfels said he takes a middle-of-the-road position, believing that while Vatican II did mark a break from the immediate past, it also reaffirmed earlier expressions of the faith. The "spirit of the council" can be used to help understand the documents and apply them to unforeseen circumstances, he said, noting that the church has confronted many such unforeseen issues since 1965.



Reuters/CNS

Homelessness among children

A homeless child sleeps under an old, rusty car on a street in Cairo, Egypt, Aug. 20. During a Vatican-sponsored conference on street children, Archbishop Agostino Marchetto said the United Nations and Amnesty International estimate that there are between 100 million and 150 million street children in the world.

"Today, the Roman Catholic Church in the United States is on the verge of either an irreversible decline or a thoroughgoing transformation," Steinfels said, echoing the first sentence of the introduction to his recent book, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*.

This decline would not be a sudden collapse of the church, but rather a gradual "hollowing out of the faith; a soft slide into a kind of nominal Catholicism," Steinfels said. In this scenario, faith and the church would have little bearing on the way Catholics lived their lives and raised their children.


The reasons for such a decline go deeper than the recent clergy sex-abuse scandals, shortage of parish priests and declining Mass attendance, although all are linked, Steinfels said. They stem in part from the church's refusal to acknowledge cultural changes, such as the global movement for the equality of women, religious illiteracy among younger Catholics, declining credibility when the church teaches about sex and the fact that clerical leadership is giving way to lay leadership, he said. The possible decline also

would relate to the sharp divisions between liberal and conservative Catholics.

"It's time conservatives and liberals gracefully recognized that here and there, the other side in this trench warfare may actually have been proven right," Steinfels said, noting that American Catholics need to break free of the constricting viewpoints that have existed since Vatican II.

In order to prevent Catholicism's decline, church leaders must balance concern for theological principles with attention to practical pastoral realities, Steinfels added. Perhaps instead of spending so much energy debating the theology of hymn lyrics, church leaders should pay more attention to how many people in the church are actually singing and how many understand the significance of what they're singing, he suggested.

"I think it helps to remember the enthusiasm and the courage with which the council was received," Margaret O'Brien Steinfels said in a short response to her husband's lecture. O'Brien Steinfels is an editor, writer and commentator and previously served as editor of the Catholic opinion magazine *Commonweal*.



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