

Vatican II Renewal: Myth or Reality?

by Kenneth C. Jones

Pope Saint Gregory's Dream of Saint Francis by Giotto

Many of us are familiar with Saint Bonaventure's account of Saint Francis in the church of San Damiano. Saint Francis was praying before the crucifix in the decrepit old church when a voice said to him, "Francis, rebuild my house for, as you see, it is falling into ruins." He looked around and saw that San Damiano was in ruins and set about repairing it, selling his worldly possessions so he could buy stones to rebuild the church. It was only gradually that Saint Francis realized his mission was not to restore a building with bricks and mortar but to renovate the Mystical Body of Christ.

About 800 years later, it is beyond question that our Holy Mother Church is again falling into ruins. And if Saint Francis – who was, after all, a saint – was unable to recognize it initially in his day, it should be no surprise that many of today's Catholics fail to see how perilous is the present state of the Church. We might hear that there is a vocations shortage, or notice that there aren't any nuns in the schools anymore, or observe that a lot of our Catholic friends are getting annulments and divorces, but we really don't see the complete picture of the Church in crisis. And if we don't see that, we won't be able to assist in the renovation.

That was my motivation in writing *Index of Leading Catholic Indicators*: to collect the evidence of the crisis in the Church in a clear, accessible format so that people will be able to understand and respond to the emergency before it is too late.

One interesting way to present the statistics is to examine some of the myths and realities of Vatican II. I see five major myths surrounding the Council:

The myth that the Church was in need of renewal at the time the Council was called.

- The myth that Vatican II brought about a renewal.
- The myth that the situation has improved in the last few years during the pontificate of John Paul II.
- The myth that the Council taught any new infallible dogma and was not simply pastoral.
- The myth that the Council did not cause the crisis in the Church – the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* objection.

The myth of the need for renewal

What was the state of the Church in 1960? I wasn't there to experience it. I was born in 1964, as the Council was closing. The fact that I grew up after the Council was beneficial to me in writing the book, because personal anecdotes sometimes have a way of coloring our thinking and getting in the way of the facts. I can't tell you how many times I've heard comments like, "The Church was authoritarian and our pastor was a dictator," or "It was just pay, pray and obey," or "The nuns were mean and used to hit our knuckles with a ruler."

I have no personal stories about what it was like before the Council. But I do have facts. And the facts show that the Church was in the midst of an unprecedented period of growth in the several decades before the Council.

That conclusion is inescapable when we look at the figures in just a few representative areas. And forgive me for throwing a lot of numbers at you, but as a lawyer I feel a statistic-laden brief is necessary to establish my case beyond a reasonable doubt.

Priests: In 1920 there were 21,019 total priests in the United States. In 1930 there were 26,925 and in 1940 there were 33,912. Every five years thereafter, the numbers continued to rise: from 38,451 in 1945 to 42,970 in 1950 to 46,970 in 1955 and to 53,796 in 1960. This is not the mark of a declining Church, but of a vigorous Church – in 1960 it had a record number of men who were its frontline

soldiers, whose ranks had grown 15 percent in the five years between 1955 and 1960.

Seminarians: As one would expect, as the number of priests increased, so did the number of seminarians – and it continued to increase substantially up to the Council. In 1920 there were 8,944 seminarians, in 1930 there were 16,300, and in 1940 there were 17,087. Those numbers also continued to increase every five years thereafter, from 21,523 in 1945 to 25,622 in 1950 to 32,394 in 1955 and to 39,896 in 1960.

Seminaries: The bishops and heads of religious orders found it extremely difficult to keep up with demand and had to build scores of new seminaries. In 1945 there were 53 diocesan seminaries. By 1950 there were 72, five years later there were 78, and in 1960 there were 96. This was a huge increase in property plant and equipment to accommodate the young men who were storming the seminaries to be trained as priests.

Religious seminaries experienced similar growth. There were 258 in 1945, 316 in 1950, 385 in 1955, and 429 in 1960. Remember that building a seminary is a tremendous investment – it is really a leap of faith by the chief executive officer, in this case the bishop or head of a religious order, that the organization is growing and will continue to grow in the future. The tremendous boom in seminary construction was a true testament that the Church was growing and, more importantly, perceived itself to be growing, in the period before the Council.

Priestless parishes: And as one would also expect, as the number of priests increased, the number of parishes without a resident priest was declining. In 1945 there were 839 parishes without a resident pastor, in 1950 there were 791, in 1955 there were 673, and in 1960 there were 546.

Brothers: The number of religious brothers was also on the increase in the decades before the Council. In 1945 there were 6,594 – a figure that had increased to 7,377 by 1950, to 8,752 by 1955, and to 10,473 by 1960.

Sisters: The next book that is crying out to be written is a study of the destruction of the convents and women's religious orders since the Second Vatican Council. What a profound tragedy. And the wreckage has been so devastating, so thorough, that one can only wonder whether it had a diabolical aspect to it. But contrary to what some would have you believe, it wasn't like that before the Council. In 1945 there were 138,079 sisters. Five years later there were 147,310, a figure that increased to 158,069 in 1955

and 168,527 in 1960.

Parochial schools: Dioceses and parishes predict the future by building more schools in order to educate young Catholics. In 1920 there were 5,852 parochial schools. That figure had grown to 7,225 by 1930 and to 7,597 by 1940. In 1945 there were 7,493, in 1950 there were 7,914, in 1955 there were 8,843, and in 1960 there were 9,897.

Parochial school students: Parents who send their children to parochial schools show that they value a Catholic education and trust the parish to educate their children in the Faith. In 1920 there were 1.7 million parochial school students. In 1930 there were 2.2 million. In 1940 the figure was 2.1 million, in 1945 it was 2 million, in 1950 it was 2.4 million, in 1955 it was 3.2 million, and in 1960 it had reached 4.2 million.

Infant baptisms: There were 710,000 in 1945, 943,000 in 1950, 1.1 million in 1955, and 1.3 million in 1960.

Adult baptisms: The number of adult baptisms is a true sign of the strength of any religious organization. And in the years before the Council the number of adult baptisms was skyrocketing: 38,232 in 1930, 73,677 in 1940, 84,908 in 1945, 119,173 in 1950, 137,310 in 1955, and 146,212 in 1960.

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I must also add that many people were infected by a sort of false optimism in calling the Council, by the idea that the world was starting anew in 1962. People who cautioned that having an ecumenical council might not be beneficial for the Church were chided for being obstructionist. Indeed, I respectfully observe that Pope John XXIII himself warned against such pessimism in his opening speech to the Council: "We feel we must disagree with those prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand."

Well, as I say in the introduction to my book, forty years later the end of the world has not arrived. But we are now facing the disaster.

The myth of a post-Vatican II renewal

Even some in the Vatican have recognized it. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said: "Certainly the results [of Vatican

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II] seem cruelly opposed to the expectations of everyone, beginning with those of Pope John XXIII and then of Pope Paul VI: expected was a new Catholic unity and instead we have been exposed to dissension which, to use the words of Pope Paul VI, seems to have gone from self-criticism to self-destruction. Expected was a new enthusiasm, and many wound up discouraged and bored.

“Expected was a great step forward; instead we find ourselves faced with a progressive process of decadence which has developed for the most part under the sign of a calling back to the Council, and has therefore contributed to discrediting it for many. The net result therefore seems negative. I am repeating here what I said ten years after the conclusion of the work: it is incontrovertible that this period has definitely been unfavorable for the Catholic Church.”

Since Cardinal Ratzinger made these remarks in 1984, the crisis in the Church has accelerated. In every area that is statistically verifiable – for example, the number of priests, seminarians, priestless parishes, nuns, Mass attendance, converts and annulments – the “process of decadence” is apparent.

Priests: After skyrocketing from about 27,000 in 1930 to 58,000 in 1965, the number of priests in the United States dropped to 45,000 in 2002. And remember that in all of these statistics, the per capita decline has been even worse, because the number of Catholics has continued to increase since 1965. In 1965 there were 12,185 priests for every 10,000 Catholics; in 2002 there were 7.10 – a decline of 46 percent. By 2020, there will be about 31,000 priests – and only 15,000 will be under the age of 70. Right now there are more priests aged 80 to 84 than there are aged 30 to 34.

Ordinations: In 1965 there were 1,575 ordinations to the priesthood; in 2002 there were 450, a decline of 350 percent. Taking into account ordinations, deaths and departures, in 1965 there was a net gain of 725 priests. In 1998, there was a net loss of 810.

Priestless parishes: About three percent of parishes, 549, were without a resident priest in 1965. In 2002 there were 2,928 priestless parishes, about 15 percent of U.S. parishes. By 2020, a quarter of all parishes, 4,656, will have no priest.

Seminarians: Between 1965 and 2002, the number of seminarians dropped from 49,000 to 4,700 – a 90 percent decrease. Without any students, seminaries across the country have been sold or shuttered. There were 596 seminaries in 1965, and only 200 in 2000.

Sisters: Some 180,000 sisters were the backbone of the Catholic education and health systems in 1965. In 2002, there were 75,000 sisters, with an average age of 68. By 2020, the number of sisters will drop to 40,000 – and of these, only 21,000 will be age 70 or under. In 1965, 104,000 sisters were teaching, while in 2002 there were only 8,200 teachers. From 1965 to 2002, per capita, the number of sisters fell from 39.43 per 10,000 to 11.56 – a decline of 71 percent.

Brothers: The number of professed brothers decreased from about 12,000 in 1965 to 5,700 in 2002, with a further drop to 3,100 predicted for 2020.

High Schools: Between 1965 and 2002 the number of diocesan high schools fell from 1,566 to 786. At the same time the number of students dropped from almost 700,000 to 386,000.

Parochial Grade Schools: There were 10,503 parochial grade schools in 1965 and 6,623 in 2002. The number of students went from 4.5 million to 1.9 million.

Sacramental life: In 1965 there were 1.3 million infant baptisms; in 2002 there were 1 million. (In 1965 there were 287 infant baptisms for every 10,000 Catholics,

while in 2002 there were 154 – a decline of 46 percent.) In 1965 there were 126,000 adult baptisms; in 2002 there were 80,000. In 1965 there were 352,000 Catholic marriages; in 2002 there were 256,000. In 1968 there were 338 annulments; in 2002 there were 50,000.

Mass attendance: A 1958 Gallup poll reported that 74 percent of Catholics went to Sunday Mass in 1958. A 1994 University of Notre Dame study found that the attendance rate was 26.6 percent. A more recent study by Fordham University professor James

Lothian concluded that 65 percent of Catholics went to Sunday Mass in 1965, but only 25 percent in 2000 did.

The decline in Mass attendance highlights another significant fact – fewer and fewer people who call themselves Catholic actually follow Church rules or accept Church doctrine. For example, a 1999 poll by the *National Catholic Reporter* shows that 77 percent believe a person can be a good Catholic without going to Mass every Sunday, 65 percent believe good Catholics can divorce and remarry, and 53 percent believe Catholics can have abortions and remain in good standing. Only 10 percent of lay religion teachers accept Church teaching on artificial birth control, according to a 2000 University of Notre Dame poll. And a *New York Times* poll revealed that 70 percent of Catholics aged 18-44 believe the Eucharist is merely a “symbolic

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reminder” of Jesus.

Religious orders: I’m not being Chicken Little here, but the religious orders will soon be virtually non-existent in the United States. For example, in 1965 there were 5,277 Jesuit priests and 3,559 seminarians; in 2000 there were 3,172 priests and 389 seminarians. There were 2,534 OFM Franciscan priests and 2,251 seminarians in 1965; in 2000 there were 1,492 priests and 60 seminarians. There were 2,434 Christian Brothers in 1965 and 912 seminarians; in 2000 there were 959 Brothers and seven seminarians. There were 1,148 Redemptorist priests in 1965 and 1,128 seminarians; in 2000 there were 349 priests and 24 seminarians. Every major religious order in the United States mirrors these statistics.

If this is renewal, I don’t want to be around when the decline sets in.

As Father Louis Bouyer said five years after the Council: “Unless we are blind, we must even state bluntly that what we see looks less like the hoped-for regeneration of Catholicism than its accelerated decomposition.”

Professor James Hitchcock echoed Father Bouyer’s thoughts in 1972:

There are many curiosities in the history of the Church in the post-conciliar years, and not the least is the fact that so few progressives have noticed the extent to which the reactionaries’ predictions prior to the Council have been proven correct and that their own expectations have been contradicted. They continue to treat the conservatives as ignorant, prejudiced, and out of touch with reality. Yet the progressives’ hope for “renewal” now seems largely chimerical, a grandiose expectation, an attractive theory, but one which failed of achievement. In the heady days of the Council it was common to hear predictions that the conciliar reforms would lead to a massive resurgence of the flagging Catholic spirit. Laymen would be stirred from their apathy and alienation and would join enthusiastically in apostolic projects. Liturgy and theology, having been brought to life and made relevant, would be constant sources of inspiration to the faithful. The religious orders, reformed to bring them into line with modernity, would find themselves overwhelmed with candidates who were generous and enthusiastic. The Church would find the number of converts increasing dramatically as it cast off its moribund visage and indeed would come to be respected and influential in worldly circles as it had not been for centuries. In virtually every case the precise opposite

of these predictions has come to pass.... In terms of the all-pervading spiritual revival which was expected to take place, renewal has obviously been a failure.... Little in the Church seems entirely healthy or promising; everything seems vaguely sick and vaguely hollow.

The myth that the situation has improved recently

Another myth popular among certain Catholics is that things have gotten better in the last decade or so, coinciding primarily with the pontificate of John Paul II. Actually the statistics do not bear out this claim – in fact, the rate of decline has accelerated in some cases. Consider the number of priests. In 1975, three years before John Paul was elected, there were 58,909 priests. In 1980, two years after his election, there were 58,621, a one percent decrease from five years previously. But the pace of the decline has picked up since then – 57,317 in 1985, 53,111 in 1990, 49,947 in 1995, 45,713 in 2000, 44,874 predicted for 2005, 37,624 in 2010, and 30,992 in 2020.

Seminarians: 17,802 in 1975, 13,226 in 1980, 11,028 in 1985, 6,233 in 1990, 5,083 in 1995, 4,719 in 2002.

Sisters: 135,225 in 1975, 126,517 in 1980, 115,386 in 1985, 103,269 in 1990, 92,107 in 1995, 75,500 in 2002.

As Michael Davies has noted, the Pope himself has repeatedly remarked that we are experiencing a new spring-time since the Second Vatican Council. In his sermon for Pentecost 2001, the Pope celebrated the 38th anniversary of John XXIII’s death: “The Second Vatican Council, announced, convoked, and opened by Pope John XXIII, was

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conscious of this vocation of the Church. One can well say that the Holy Spirit was the protagonist of the Council from the moment the Pope convoked it, declaring that he had welcomed as coming from above an interior voice that imposed itself upon his spirit. This ‘gentle breeze’ became a ‘violent wind’ and the conciliar event took the form of a new Pentecost. ‘It is, indeed, in the doctrine and spirit of Pentecost,’ affirmed Pope John, ‘that the great event which is an ecumenical council draws its substance and its life.’”

On March 5, 2000, *The Catholic Times* of London reported that the Pope had said that the little seed planted by Pope John XXIII had become “a tree which has spread its majestic and mighty branches over the vineyard of the Lord.” He added, “It has given us many fruits in these 35 years of life, and it will give us many more in the years to come.”

Now it is not being disloyal to point out, respectfully, that the facts do not support that conclusion. This is not a

matter of judging the Holy Father, or contradicting Church teaching. Either there are many fruits of the Council, or there are not. The facts speak for themselves.

The myth that the Council taught any new dogmas infallibly

I have to submit that one of the greatest obstacles to facing the reality of the disaster after Vatican II – and to working toward reversing the decline – is that many think erroneously that you can't criticize the Council or its aftermath because it imposed infallible dogma. Again, as Michael Davies says, a council can do so, but this council, as acknowledged by popes and bishops, did not.



Another obstacle is a misunderstanding of the nature of infallibility. Some people do not understand that the protection provided by the Holy Spirit is a negative protection – that a Council together with the pope will not teach error in matters of faith and morals that it proposes for acceptance by the universal Church. This is not a guarantee that the calling of a Council is divinely inspired or that every word of every line contained in the documents is inspired or even beneficial.

As Cardinal Ratzinger said in 1988: “The Second Vatican Council has not been treated as a part of the entire living Tradition of the Church, but as an end of Tradition, a new start from zero. The truth is that this particular Council defined no dogma at all, and deliberately chose to remain on a modest level, as a merely pastoral council; and yet many treat it as though it had made itself into a sort of superdogma which takes away the importance of all the rest.”

The myth of the “*post hoc ergo propter hoc*” fallacy

The final myth I want to discuss is the idea that the crisis we now face was not caused by the Council or the changes imposed in its name. Those who advance this view would doubtless object to Mel Gibson's recent statement in *Time* magazine, when he was asked about the effects of Vatican II on the Church: “Look at the main fruits: dwindling numbers and pedophilia.”

I have several responses to the *post hoc* objection, an objection that comes mainly from conservative Catholics.

First, the correlation in time between the holding of the Council and the subsequent decline is just so startling that it is simply not reasonable to deny the link. I shall not go through the numbers again, but in every area the numbers flipped almost immediately with the Council – numbers that were on a steep increase immediately before suddenly began a precipitous slide.

Second, the most serious declines came in exactly those areas that were most affected by the changes – for example, reform of seminaries and convents led to an immediate decline in vocations; the de-emphasis of the distinction between priest and laity was followed by a dearth of priests; the change of the Mass resulted in plummeting Mass attendance; and the emphasis on ecumenism brought about a decline in conversions and missionary activity. The list is endless.

Third, I think the burden is on those who make the *post hoc* argument to offer a better explanation. If the changes made after Vatican II did not cause the crisis, what did? They offer no other reason.

In response to the *post hoc* objection, I submit another Latin slogan: *res ipsa loquitur* – the thing speaks for itself.

What Is to Be Done?

I myself become frustrated when speakers tell me how bad things are but then don't tell me how to make them better. If you feel the same way, I hope I don't add to your frustration, because I don't have a step-by-step program for renewal. But I do have a few thoughts to share on how we might start.

The first is to pray. I used to think that that advice was to some degree a prescription for doing nothing. But the older I get and the more I understand my faith, the more I conclude that prayer really is the only effective response to the crisis. Remember Christ's words to Martha and Mary. A deep prayer life with regular, scheduled prayer and the reception of the sacraments is our only way out of the crisis. As Cardinal Ratzinger said, we don't need more reformers, we need more saints.

That being said, the one piece of advice I can give is – do *something*. And don't be afraid to be confrontational. The more I observe and experience the behavior of our shepherds, the more I've come to believe that they will make no concession unless they are forced to. They will act in the area of true reform as they acted in connection with the priest sex abuse crisis – they will ignore it until they are exposed. I have to agree with Pat Buchanan, who advocates what he calls the politics of conflict. He put it well in his autobiography, *Right from the Beginning*. In one chapter he discussed a possible run for the Republican nomination in 1988 against Jack Kemp:

Jack and I have different styles. [He is] a positive, outgoing, upbeat, ebullient, optimistic man of the Congress, [whose] rhetoric is sprinkled with phrases like “my distinguished colleague,” and “my good friend.” While his

convictions are conservative, his mindset is congressional. To me, the times require that we not only boldly enunciate our agenda for America, but expose and attack, with all the political weapons in our armory.

Buchanan also related a story about Vince Lombardi, who said: "Football is not a contact sport, it is a collision sport; dancing is a contact sport." "Better than most," wrote Buchanan, "Jack Kemp knows that about football; but that is how I feel about politics."

That doesn't mean we have to be rude, obnoxious or boorish. It means we have to know our principles and be willing and able to defend them, and to bring the battle to our enemies. Too often we are on the defensive. We have 2,000 years of tradition behind us; we have nothing to apologize for.

We also should take seriously the affirmation in the documents of Vatican II that the laity have a real role in the Church. One of my guides here is Cardinal Newman. Newman wrote a history of the Arian heresy in which he emphasized the role of the laity in leading the Church through that crisis. He said:

It is not a little remarkable that though, historically speaking, the fourth century is the age of doctors, illustrated as it is by the Saints Athanasius, Hilary, the two Gregories, Basil, Chrysostom, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine...nevertheless in that very day the Divine tradition committed to the infallible Church was proclaimed and maintained far more by the faithful than by the Episcopate.

Here of course I must explain: in saying this then, undoubtedly I am not denying that the great body of the Bishops were in their internal belief orthodox; nor that there were numbers of clergy who stood by the laity and acted as their centers and guides; nor that the laity actually received their faith, in the first instance, from the Bishops and clergy; nor that some portions of the laity were ignorant, and other portions were at length corrupted by the Arian teachers, who got possession of the sees, and ordained an heretical clergy: but I mean still, that in that time of immense confusion the divine dogma of our Lord's divinity was proclaimed, enforced, maintained, and (humanly speaking) preserved, far more by the *Ecclesia docta* than by the *Ecclesia docens*; that the body of the Episcopate was unfaithful to its commission, while the

body of the laity was faithful to its baptism; that at one time the pope, at other times a patriarchal, metropolitan, or other great see, at other times general councils, said what they should not have said, or did what obscured and compromised revealed truth; while, on the other hand, it was the Christian people, who, under Providence, were the ecclesiastical strength of Athanasius, Hilary, Eusebius of Vercellae, and other great solitary confessors, who would have failed without them.

My final piece of advice is: let's turn back the clock. And don't tell me it can't be done, because it can. In fact, people do it all the time. Remember in 1985 when Coca Cola was the dominant producer of soda in the world? Company experts got the great idea of introducing New

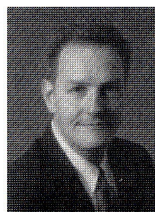
Coke and doing away with old Coke. How did people react? Sales of Coca Cola plummeted; the numbers proved that it was a failure. And what did the company do? It turned back the clock. It pulled New Coke from the market, and brought back Coke Classic, the real thing.

Chesterton had an apt comment in his book *What's Wrong With The World*: "The need here is a need of complete freedom for restoration as well as revolution.... There is one metaphor of which the moderns are very fond; they are always saying, 'You can't put the clock back.' The simple and obvious answer is 'You can.'... There is another proverb, 'As you have made your bed, so you must lie on it'; which again is simply a lie.

If I have made my bed uncomfortable, please God I will make it again. We could restore the Heptarchy or the stage coaches if we chose. It might take some time to do, and it might be very inadvisable to do it; but certainly it is not impossible as bringing back last Friday is impossible. This is, as I say, the first freedom that I claim: the freedom to restore."

I say it's time we discard New Catholicism, as we discarded New Coke. It's time to bring back Catholicism Classic, the real thing. ✠

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