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Whatever Happened to the “People of God”? Thoughts on the Reception of Vatican II

by John E. Thiel

Last year, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, I was invited by the local chapter of Voice of the Faithful to offer a talk on the Council’s central text, *Lumen gentium*. The invitation was so professionally complete that my assigned topic was presented in the form of an interrogative title: “Whatever happened to the ‘People of God’?” Now usually I’d be happy to accept an invitation to give a talk but not very happy to have someone else propose the topic, to say nothing of the title itself, even in a series like the one the Fairfield County, Connecticut chapter of VOTF was sponsoring on the conciliar anniversary. But the title presented to me was so good that I quickly, though begrudgingly, admitted to myself that I couldn’t do better.

The title is a good one for a number of reasons. “People of God,” of course, is a phrase that the documents of Vatican II use to describe the reality of the Church, and that phrase struck a new chord in thinking about the nature of the Church. In Catholic belief, the Church is a sacramental community founded by Jesus Christ himself that conveys the truth and the graceful power of eternal life not only to believers but also to the world. It is through the Church, Catholics believe, that the saving power of Christ comes to the world. And so, if you hold this belief, how you imagine the Church has implications for virtually every aspect of what you believe.

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Prior to Vatican II, the Church was typically conceived as an institution and identified quickly with the hierarchy of the Church, its clerical leadership. In contrast to these clerical leaders—the Pope, bishops, and priests—the Church’s laypeople were typically understood to be followers in this institutional way of imagining the Church, as sheep needing the guidance and protection of their pastors. In the teaching of Vatican II, by contrast, the phrase “people of God” seems to convey an appreciation for the Church as a community of all believ-

ers, a community in which baptism authorized the participation of all the faithful in the life of the Church based on their spiritual talents and their own responsibility to the Gospel message and for its spread in the world. The question “whatever happened to the “People of God”” seems to suggest that the heritage of the Council, one of its great achievements, has been lost or, worse, maybe even betrayed in recent years. The question drips with disappointment and seems to identify a problem in need of redress. So, our title is a good one because it pushes us to ask ourselves if this is so. Is there a problem in need of redress and, if there is, what can we do to make it right?

The title is a good one for another reason. Its apparent assumption that the true legacy of Vatican II has been left behind might not be true at all and might not be true in more than one sense. Maybe the disappointment expressed

in the question is misguided because the more populist reading of Vatican II's teaching on the Church has been wrong-headed from the start. Or maybe the question is misguided because what it assumes has been lost never was at all, and the correct answer to the question is that the People of God are right here, thriving in the Church and even outside its visible boundaries as it always has. These different possible ways of making sense out of Vatican II thus bring us to the present moment in the life of the Church, in which very different and often rival interpretations of the Council continue to contend. Which interpretation is true—the (for want of a better term) “liberal” interpretation that believes the current leadership in the Church is bent on undermining the Council’s inclusive understanding of the Church, or the (for want of a better term) “conservative” interpretation that believes the Council’s teaching was distorted by modern sensibilities that see the Church as a democratic society in which the proper authority of the bishops as the successors of the apostles is minimized or even flouted by Catholics who think the Church is whatever they imagine it to be rather than a saving community that has endured in its properly hierarchical dimensions for nearly two thousand years?¹

In order to adjudicate these competing interpretations of the Council, let’s consider what the Council taught about the Church as the People of God.

The Ecclesiology of *Lumen gentium*

Of the many documents that the Council fathers produced, the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” or, as it is known by its Latin title, *Lumen gentium*, is unquestionably the most important. *Lumen gentium* begins by placing the mystery of the Church in the drama of salvation that began in the eternal love of God, continued in the creation of the universe and humanity’s place in it, and was brought to fruition in the Incarnation, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ founded the Church to be a sacrament, a means of grace, for its members and indeed for the whole world which, through the church, might achieve full unity in Christ. The opening paragraphs of the document rehearse a number of biblical metaphors to capture the reality of the Church. The Church, *Lumen gentium* teaches, is a “sheepfold, whose single necessary door is Christ.” It is “the estate or field of God.” It is “God’s building” and “the immaculate spouse of the immaculate lamb” (LG, 6).² The Church is “like an exile who seeks and savours the things that are above” (LG, 6, 7). The faithful of the Church form the “one body” of Christ who is their “head” (LG, 7).

The second chapter of *Lumen gentium* is entitled “The People of God” and here we find the imagery with which we are especially concerned in addressing our question. The People of God is a phrase drawn from the New Testament’s first letter of Peter to describe God’s desire to extend his ancient election of Israel as his holy people to all in the good news of the New Covenant that broke into the world in the Christ event. In the words of *Lumen gentium*:

This is the new covenant that Christ instituted, the new testament in his blood..., calling together from Jews and gentiles a people which would be bound together in unity not according to the flesh but in the Spirit, and which would be the new people of God. Believers in Christ have been born again not from a perishable but from an imperishable seed through the word of the living God ..., not of flesh but of water and the holy Spirit...; and they have been finally set up as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people...once no people now God’s people” (1 Pt 2: 9-10) (LG, 9).

As one can see from *Lumen gentium*’s introduction of the term, there’s nothing particularly new or revolutionary in this conciliar image of the Church as the People of God. The Council Fathers retrieved a New Testament im-

1 On the divergent interpretations of the Council, see Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012).

2 All quotations from the documents of Vatican II are from *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, ed. N. P. Tanner, S.J. (Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1990). References are provided parenthetically in the text to the abbreviated conciliar document and the paragraph cited.

age expressing a Christian belief that goes back to the time of Paul—that Christ died and rose so that all might be saved, so that God’s election of the people of Israel could now include all as the People of God. This is one of the oldest and most basic of Christian beliefs. How, then, did this image of the People of God come to be invested with such post-conciliar hopes that some in the Church judge not to have been fulfilled? Let’s consider some of the other claims that the Council Fathers made in this chapter on the People of God.

There are several teachings of *Lumen gentium* that are, I think, remarkable developments in the doctrine of the Church. While insisting on the essential difference between the “ministerial or hierarchical priesthood” and the “common priesthood of the faithful,” *Lumen gentium* nonetheless teaches that these two exercises of priesthood are “nevertheless interrelated: each in its own particular way shares in the one priesthood of Christ” (LG, 10). By virtue of their baptism, all the faithful share in “the sacred character and the organic structure of the priestly community,” which “are brought into effect by means of the sacraments and the virtues.” The text goes on to say how this is true of each and every sacrament but consider especially this account of the Eucharist, the sacramental practice that stands at the heart of Catholic faith:

When they take part in the eucharistic sacrifice, the source and culmination of all christian life, [the faithful] offer to God the divine victim and themselves along with it; and so both in this offering and in holy communion all fulfill their own part in the liturgical action, not in a confused manner but one in one way and one in another. Indeed, refreshed as they are by the body of Christ in the sacred gathering, they show forth in a concrete way the unity of the people of God, which in this most noble sacrament is both suitably symbolized and wonderfully brought about (LG, 11).

We might expect, as transpires in the text shortly after this, that the special contributions of the laity to the common priesthood would be on display through, say, the lived commitment of the sacrament of marriage, or through the many other ways that lay people might exercise their spiritual talents in and for the Church. But the preceding passage claims that all the faithful share in the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice, an accent that stresses just how much the one People of God is united in the mutual ordering of the hierarchical priesthood and the common priesthood of the faithful. Thus, *Lumen gentium* extends the notion of priesthood to all believers in a way that is unprecedented in earlier Catholic tradition.

We see this same accent too in the Council’s interesting teaching on the authority of the faithful in discerning the truth of God’s Spirit in tradition. According to *Lumen gentium*, the “holy People of God has a share, too, in the prophetic office of Christ...” and to such a degree that the “universal body of the faithful who have received the anointing of the holy one ... cannot be mistaken in belief.” All the faithful, by virtue of baptism, possess a graceful sensibility—*Lumen gentium* calls it the *sensus fidei*, the “sense of the faith”—that allows them communally to judge truthfully in matters of faith and morals. This supernatural gift for truthful judgment is not exercised individually and is always measured by the magisterium, the teaching authority of the church. Yet, by this sense of the faithful “aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the people of God, under the guidance of the sacred magisterium to which it is fully obedient, receives no longer the words of human beings but truly the word of God...” (LG, 12). I think we would be justified in saying that this teaching of the Council envisages how all the faithful, through their truthful judgment, participate in the exercise of infallibility. Once again, what were conceived as the traditional and exclusive prerogatives of the hierarchy prior to the Council have since been imagined to extend in real ways to all the faithful and in a way that offers, at least at this level of authoritative teaching, a novel understanding of the infallibility of the entire Church.

These extraordinary ways of conceiving the truly communal proportions of the Church as the People of God are reflected in other dimensions of *Lumen gentium's* ecclesiology. Thus far, we have considered how *Lumen gentium* accentuates the communal reality of the Church within its visible boundaries, among baptized and practicing Catholics. But the document also considers how the saving power of the Church extends beyond its visible boundaries. The Church, the Council teaches, “is necessary for salvation” (LG, 14). Throughout nearly all of the Catholic tradition, this claim would have expressed the belief that outside the boundaries of the institutional Catholic Church, salvation could not be achieved. Indeed, consider this expression of the age-old belief taught as authoritative doctrine by the fifteen-century Council of Florence (1438-45):

[The Holy Roman Church] firmly believes, professes and preaches that all those who are outside the catholic church, not only pagans but also Jews or heretics and schismatics, cannot share in eternal life and will go *into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels* (Matt. 25: 41), unless they are joined to the catholic church before the end of their lives; that the unity of the ecclesiastical body is of such importance that only for those who abide in it do the church's sacraments contribute to salvation and do fasts, almsgiving and other works of piety and practices of the Christian militia produce eternal rewards; and that nobody can be saved, no matter how much he has given away in alms and even if he has shed his blood in the name of Christ, unless he has persevered in the bosom and the unity of the catholic church.³

As I noted, Vatican II repeats the traditional teaching that the Church is necessary for salvation, but creatively understands the boundaries of the Church to be much wider than this—to us I think rather frightening—teaching of the Council of Florence. *Lumen gentium* qualifies the way in which the Church is necessary for salvation by making its necessity a function of knowledge: “Therefore, those cannot be saved who refuse to enter the church or to remain in it, if they are aware that the catholic church was founded by God through Jesus Christ as a necessity for salvation” (LG, 14). Thus, in the conciliar teaching, the burden of responsibility on the necessity of the Church for salvation falls on believers, faithful or lapsed, who still clearly see the truth of the Church as a means of grace, and imagines condemnation for knowing apostates, a most unusual category that, one would think, would number the very few.

This generous understanding of the boundaries of the Church continues in the text by its noting that “those who have not yet accepted the gospel are related to the people of God in various ways.” First to be mentioned are the people of Israel, whom God called before all others to be his people and from whom came the savior whose gospel extended the covenant with Israel to all. Mentioned next are the Muslims, who believe in the Creator and who hold to the faith of Abraham. But finally, in mysterious and so undefined ways, the Church's salvation reaches to all who enact the virtues that Christians are able to identify as Jesus' teaching: “There are those who without any fault do not know anything about Christ or his church, yet who search for God with a sincere heart and, under the influence of grace, try to put into effect the will of God as known to them through the dictate of conscience: these too can obtain eternal salvation. Nor does divine Providence deny the helps that are necessary for salvation to those who, through no fault of their own, have not yet attained to the express recognition of God yet who strive, not without divine grace, to lead an upright life” (LG, 16).

All these issues are capitulated in a famous distinction between the Catholic Church and the Church of Christ that *Lumen gentium* draws early in its pages. The institution of the Catholic Church, the text says, is intimately bound up with the Church of Christ, the spiritual community of the Mystical Body of Christ, and so much so that they

³ “Decrees of the Council of Florence,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, ed. N. P. Tanner, S.J. (Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1990), 578.

“must not be considered as two things, but as forming one complex reality comprising a human and a divine element.”

This Church of Christ, “set up and organized as a society, subsists in the catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him” (*LG*, 8). The Church of Christ *subsists in* the Catholic Church—a noteworthy sentence in the heritage of Vatican II, since it has a provocative history. The key word in this sentence is its verb, in Latin “subsistit,” translated by its English cognate “subsists.” Much has been made of the fact that earlier drafts of *Lumen gentium* have the Latin word “est,” “is,” as the verb of the sentence and that the final draft left the word “is” behind in favor of “subsists.”⁴ If the Church of Christ *is* the Catholic Church, then the true Church is completely contained in the institutional boundaries of the Catholic Church, a position Pope Pius XII seemed to teach just a few years before the Council in his insistence that the Protestant churches did not share in the true Church of Christ, which he identified exclusively with the Catholic Church.⁵

But all that we have seen in the text of *Lumen gentium* seems to extend the truth and salvation of Christ beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church. This theological position was applied in the Council’s “Decree on Ecumenism” (*Unitatis redintegratio*), which stated that Christian believers who “have been truly baptized are in some kind of communion with the catholic church, even though this communion is imperfect.” Moreover, the “Decree on Ecumenism” insists that “some, even most, of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the catholic Church” (*UR*, 3). Much in the same manner, the Council’s “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (*Nostra aetate*) claims that the Catholic Church “rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these [non-Christian] religions. It regards with respect those ways of acting and living and those precepts and teachings which, though often at variance with what it holds and expounds, frequently reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens everyone” (*NA*, 2). Thus, the view of the Church promulgated by the Council seems to justify an understanding of the word “subsists” in the sentence “The Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church” as meaning “dwells imperfectly in and yet dwells in the greatest possible historical fullness in.” And so now, the conciliar claim: the Church of Christ dwells imperfectly, i.e., not exclusively, in the Catholic Church and yet dwells in the greatest possible historical fullness in the Catholic Church.” It seems that *Lumen Gentium* offers an understanding of the Church as the People of God that appreciates not only how all intentionally within its community contribute to its flourishing but also how the saving offices of the Church extend to the world at-large. The conciliar document *Gaudium et spes*, “The Church in the Modern World,” complements these teachings by considering too how the Church can learn from the world, a perspective that rounds out Vatican’s II’s ecclesiology of *aggiornamento*, John XXIII’s vision of a Church that has refreshed itself by opening its windows to the outside world (*GS*, 44).

Authority in the Post-Conciliar Church

So, whatever happened to this new development in the doctrine of the Church that issued from Vatican II? And, even more importantly, whatever happened to the reality that the doctrine named? Whatever happened to the People of God? I should say as I venture an answer that I share the sense of disappointment with the current state of the Church that posing the question this way seems to express. And I do want to say how and why I’m disappointed. But before I do, I’d like to say that, in my judgment, the best short answer to this question is one of the options that I presented at the beginning of this essay—the People of God are right here, thriving in the Church and even outside its visible boundaries as they always have. And this in spite of what is undeniably a reactionary turn

4 For a fairly recent variation on the controversy, see Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., “Quaestio Disputata: A Response to Karl Becker, S.J., on the Meaning of *Subsistit In*,” *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 395-409.

5 Pius XII, *Mystici corporis Christi* (June 29, 1943), no. 57, in *The Papal Encyclicals: 1939-1958*, ed. C. Carlen (Raleigh: McGrath, 1981), 48.

in the Church on the part of some Catholics, and not a few bishops, since the time of the Council and especially in the last thirty years.

In affirming that the ecclesiology of Vatican II is still alive in the Church, I want to be clear that what's alive is the teaching of the Council and not some extrapolation of it that might be imagined as the heritage of Vatican II by some Catholic sensibilities. The Council did not lay an explicit groundwork for the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood through its teaching on the common priesthood of believers. Nor did the Council set new directions for a Catholic version of congregationalist church polity in which the laity assume responsibility for leadership and finances in their local parishes. Nor did the Council's communal understanding of the Church as the People of God authorize the practice of a local diocese choosing its own bishop. Any one of these beliefs might be judged good, and we might imagine a future in which beliefs like these are practiced to the benefit of the Church. But the Council fathers did not teach such things nor imagine them to be in the future trajectory of their teaching.

We should not forget that the chapter in *Lumen gentium* that immediately follows the chapter entitled "The People of God" is entitled "The Hierarchical Constitution of the Church," and this chapter details the authentic role of the bishops as the successors of the apostles in teaching, guiding, and, when necessary, disciplining the faithful. "In the bishops," *Lumen gentium* teaches, "...there is present in the midst of believers the Lord Jesus Christ, the supreme high priest" (LG, 21). Moreover, the text goes on, "the bishops, when they are teaching in communion with the Roman Pontiff, are to be respected by all as witnesses to the divine and catholic truth; and the faithful ought to concur with their bishop's judgment concerning faith and morals, which he delivers in the name of Christ, and they are to adhere to this with a religious assent of mind" (LG, 25). Lest we romanticize *Lumen gentium's* teaching on the People of God by envisaging it as an ecclesiology of empowered grassroots community, it is important ever to keep in mind that in *Lumen gentium's* teaching the Church is the mystical body of Christ that is yet hierarchically governed according to the will of its founder. So, let us recognize the properly hierarchical dimensions of the Church that have a very long history in authentic Catholic tradition and that were re-affirmed in the teaching of Vatican II.

Hierarchy in the Church, though, can be practiced in a variety of ways. Vatican II, for example, taught the importance of subsidiarity in the proper exercise of hierarchy. Authority in the Church needs to recognize its limits by recognizing how it is shared. *Lumen gentium* teaches, for example, that bishops are not vicars of the Pope in their local exercise of pastoral authority; rather their pastoral power is possessed by them fully in service to the congregation over which they preside (LG, 27). By the same token, local bishops in the practice of hierarchy have an obligation to heed the voice of the laity who, by virtue of the "knowledge, competence or authority that they possess, ... have the right and indeed sometimes the duty to make known their opinion on matters which concern the good of the church" (LG, 37). In the teaching of the Council, these are exemplary ways in which hierarchy can be practiced in the Church. Has this kind of hierarchy, from both above and below so to speak, been practiced in the Church well in the past fifty years? In my judgment, the answer is no. There are many examples of such poor performance.

First and foremost, of course, is the sex abuse crisis in which many bishops rationalized their callous disregard for innocent victims by telling themselves that they were protecting the good reputation of the Church. More broadly speaking, in the aftermath of the Council the poor practice of hierarchy has gravitated around an anxiety about hierarchical authority among bishops that does much to explain our present ecclesial moment. We could sketch the history of this anxiety in several ways, but the year 1968 would be a good point of departure. The year 1968 witnessed many protests against political authority worldwide, and that challenge to political institutions reverberated through the institutional Church. This was the year in which Paul VI re-affirmed the magisterium's condemnation of artificial contraception in his encyclical *Humanae vitae*. Given the utter lack of reception of this teaching among

Catholics since the time of its appearance, we today can look back and see this as an opportune moment in the Church to have heeded the sense of the faith in the Church at-large and, by doing so, to have practiced the teaching of *Lumen gentium* on the common infallibility of the People of God. The reluctance of Paul VI to do so issued to some degree from his concern that this would have been a very public reversal of magisterial teaching and his fear that such a public change would compromise the teaching authority of the hierarchy itself.

Thus began a pattern of actions on the part of the hierarchy that has continued to our day, in which authority often is exercised in the context of the fear of losing authority. And, as was the case with *Humanae vitae*, occasions to exercise authority creatively and in consonance with the religious judgment of the whole Church are eclipsed by an ever-increasing anxiety about authority that prompts the exercise of authority as control. As the practice of that kind of authority fails to win the control it seeks, we find bishops talking more and more about their authority, which expresses insecurity about authority that continues to weaken authority. And so the cycle continues in which the hierarchy's anxiety about retaining authority manifests itself in the poor practice of authority that often fails to win the support of the faithful. Unfortunately, it is rather easy for the bishops to interpret the negative reaction of the faithful as the workings of sin and their own steadfast affirmation of the unreceived teaching as prophetic commitment unwilling to compromise with a secular culture hostile to the Gospel. Pope Francis I has set a new and refreshing tone in the Church with his accent on the gospel's good news of grace, his harsh judgment of ecclesiastical careerism, and his call for "a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."⁶ Yet, it remains to be seen whether his call for ecclesial conversion, including a conversion in leadership style, will be truly heeded.

Now, it is important to note that believers in the Church utterly affirm the core doctrines of the Christian tradition and do so collectively every time they sincerely recite the Nicene Creed at Sunday mass. Catholic Christians don't disagree about God's creative love, the divinity of Christ, and the saving presence of the Spirit of God in our lives, in our Church, and in our history that brings us to the happiness of resurrected life. Since the Council, the magisterium has exercised its authority not by placing these core beliefs at the center of its authoritative proclamation but instead by making disputed issues the measure of Catholic faithfulness, neuralgic issues that many in the Church see as possible candidates for the development of doctrine such as the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood, an expanded view of what might constitute a sacramental marriage in light of the loving experience of gay and lesbian couples, and a more dialogical understanding of the Church.

The manner in which the magisterium has rejected positions like these, often by censuring the works of theologians who propose ways in which these views can have integrity in the Catholic tradition, has further eroded its teaching authority. The teaching authority of the magisterium has been diminished by its often-repeated insistence that its own arguments in defense of its teaching finally do not matter; only the authority of the magisterium in promulgating its teachings does. The teaching authority of the magisterium has not been enhanced by its tendency in the past twenty years to make the verbatim words of the *Catechism* the signature test of Catholic orthodoxy. If the verbatim words of the *Catechism* exclusively measured Catholic truth, then there could be no development of doctrine in the tradition that appreciated new claims for truthful Catholic tradition, and the very teachings in the *Catechism* themselves, most of which developed over time and originally as new claims, would never have come to be. Nor has the teaching authority of the magisterium been enhanced by its explicit direction that the proper course of action for those who disagree with its teaching is to keep silent. In the world in which mature people live, authority is measured by the good arguments that justify it, real truth is nuanced and cannot be captured in

⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 49, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papafrancesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html.

formulas, and secure authority is happy to hear and consider contrary positions, knowing as it does that open dialogue among those of good faith ever advances the dialogue partners toward of fuller appreciation of the truth.

The Ambiguous Work of Reception

Currently in the Church there is a debate raging between those who explain Vatican II as a Council whose teaching offered a new direction to the Church and those who downplay and even deny those claims to novelty, interpreting the Council in traditionalist ways that underplay the Council's attention to the Church as the People of God that I have explored here. Getting the meaning of an ecumenical council right is serious business for Catholics. In the nearly two-thousand year history of the Church, there have been twenty-one ecumenical councils, Nicea in the year 325 the first and Vatican II in 1962-65 the last. There have been only three councils since the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth-century: Trent in 1545-64, Vatican I in 1869-70, and, fifty years ago, Vatican II. Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in an ecumenical council, guiding its teaching toward the truth of the Church's Sacred Tradition, so how we as the faithful interpret any council amounts to an interpretation of Sacred Tradition. In Catholic belief, Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture together constitute God's revelation to the world, and divine revelation is the truth of all reality, the meaning of everyone's life here and now and for all eternity. Thus, understanding the Second Vatican Council's contribution to this body of truth matters significantly.

It is a truism to say that Vatican II was a pastoral council. Previous ecumenical councils were called to settle some disputed point of doctrine or teaching for the Church that had reached the point of crisis. Vatican II, the standard reading goes, did not address a scandalous disagreement in the Church that required adjudication but instead was called by John XXIII for the reform of Catholic life and practice. The truism that Vatican II was a pastoral council is, however, only partly true. Certainly, the most significant post-conciliar change in Catholic life and practice came through the Council's liturgical reforms and not through any one of its dogmatic teachings. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find many Catholics who lived through the Council who could actually cite a single dogmatic or doctrinal teaching of Vatican II. All, though, could vividly describe the vast changes in the liturgy and ecclesial practice that the Council brought. Yet, these liturgical reforms that very quickly and dramatically changed the way that believers communally practiced their faith were informed by doctrinal judgments and eventually explicit doctrinal teachings about the nature of the Church itself, some of the very teachings that we have considered here. Even though there was no explicit crisis in the Church that the teaching of Vatican II settled, perhaps the context of the council was yet a crisis, one more amorphous though every bit as real as the crises that occasioned previous ecumenical Councils.

Like Vatican I, Vatican II negotiated the crisis that the rise of modern culture posed to the Church. The two Vatican Councils, though, dealt with modernity in different ways. Vatican I pushed back at the spirit of the modern age by closing the doors of the Church to the forays of the modern spirit into intellectual life, politics, and society. The achievement of John XXIII was his recognition that the Church had yet to deal with the crisis of modernity constructively, in a way that would recognize all that the Church had to offer the modern world and all that the modern world had to offer the Church. This is the theological sensibility that we find in Vatican II's teaching on the Church as the People of God and that so informed its "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," *Gaudium et spes*. Even though Vatican II was a pastoral council, it was called to deal with a crisis, one so complex and so pervasive that we find ourselves even more immersed in it since the time of the Council. Perhaps the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* itself on the nature of the Church, traditional but with new accents, has actually heightened the crisis of modernity in the aftermath of the Council, since now the Council's teaching even more sharply defines the challenge the Church faces in responding constructively to the modern world. Considered in this way, the crisis of the Church's relationship to modernity was not simply the context for the calling of the Council but itself

an articulated consequence of the achievement of Vatican II. In other words, the changes wrought by the Council in Catholic faith and practice allowed all in the Church to see the consequences of the conciliar efforts to mediate between Catholic tradition and modern culture. And, as we all know some fifty years later, Catholics with very different Catholic sensibilities have judged the changes that Vatican II brought to Catholic life in very different ways. Interestingly, nearly everyone is disappointed.

Ecumenical councils sometimes take a long time to work out their agenda and for their teaching to take hold. The first ecumenical council, held at Nicea in 325 in present-day Turkey, is an excellent example of this. Against the Arian Christians who claimed that Christ was created out of nothing by God and so, as a creature, was not divine by nature, the Fathers at Nicea formulated the core words of the later Nicene Creed that the faithful continue to profess—that Christ is eternally begotten of the Father, that he is begotten, not made, and that he is “one in being” with the Father in divinity. In the decades following Nicea, it often seemed as though its teaching would not prevail and that the Arian faith would pass through history as orthodox Christianity. It was not until the second ecumenical council was held—the Council of Constantinople in 381, fifty-six years later—that the Arian position seemed to be clearly in retreat. And Arian communities continued to flourish throughout the western Mediterranean world until the sixth century, some two hundred years later. By comparison with the aftermath of Nicea, our efforts to negotiate the meaning of Vatican II some fifty years later, don’t seem all that unusual and perhaps not even all that daunting.

Our efforts, as difficult and frustrating as they often seem, are remarkably important. The meaning of an ecumenical council flourishes in the faith and practice of believers, the very believers whom Vatican II calls the “People of God.” If I am correct in my judgment that the People of God are right here, thriving in the Church and even outside its visible boundaries as they always have, then what is our responsibility to the teaching that the Church is the People of God and that we all together are that Church? It seems to me that we must be faithful to the Council’s teaching on the *sensus fidei*, and understand our own efforts to interpret Vatican II as the serious practice of its tradition-shaping power. Graced by baptism with a supernatural sense of the faith able to discern the presence and truth of the Holy Spirit, we must be engaged as Church in cultivating the true spirit of Church and be willing to identify our communal failures in living into the gospel message that animates the Church of Christ. In other words, we must be committed to the faithful work of receiving the teaching of the Council into the faith and practice of the Church. Our responsibility is the responsibility of reception. We’re in no different a position from those Christians after the Council of Nicea who defended the truthful interpretation of the Council, struggling as they did for many years and in the face of powerful opposition for their vision of traditional truth. Let me take that back a bit. We’re in exactly the same position as those post-Nicea Christians with regard to the struggle for the reception of the Council. The difference now is that we know how the struggle for Nicea turned out. Some fifty years after Vatican II, we don’t know how the meaning of the Council will be finally adjudicated in Catholic tradition. We are still so much in the midst of working out the meaning of the Council that our current struggles between liberal and conservative Catholics to determine the meaning of the Council are short, and perhaps far short, of historical closure.

The irony in all this is that the liberal and conservative factions in our very polarized Church are engaged in exactly the same faithful task that I just described. All of us hear the call to interpret and practice the meaning of the Council truthfully and recognize our responsibility to do so, and yet the meanings we discern have their differences. This means that what we, the entire People of God, one day will commonly affirm as the true meaning of Vatican II remains uncertain to us in our day in which our discernments, as faithful as they intend to be, often yield very different results. Amidst these different Catholic understandings of the truly Catholic, our challenge is to resist the arrogance of knowing that is so inconsistent with the humility of any authentic act of faith. We need

to resist the impatience with the time that the unity of tradition takes to form, and with the ambiguity of differing claims to authority in this tradition-forming time. We need to appreciate too that so-called liberal and conservative sensibilities in the Church both have their truth to tell. All the People of God would do well to remember that the Holy Spirit is an omnipotent multi-tasker, conservatively preserving the Church's truth while at the same time moving it in new ways toward its heavenly destiny as the Church of Christ. If some of us have the kind of Catholic faith that discerns the Spirit's conserving work, this is a gift. If some of us have the kind of Catholic faith that discerns the Spirit's surprises, this is a gift too. Unfortunately, our "either-or" ways of looking at things prevent us from appreciating how our mutual efforts to discern all that the Spirit does in tradition can capture so much more of what the Spirit does do. We all need to reflect on how our different Catholic sensibilities can be sources of mutual understanding rather than the markers of division that we often make them to be.

Lumen gentium teaches that the bishops in the exercise of their episcopal office should appreciate the various gifts of the faithful for the "renewal and building up of the church..." In doing so, the bishops are urged in the exercise of their office "especially not to extinguish the Spirit" (LG, 12). This is crucial advice, advice that I think the present generation of bishops would do well to heed better than they have. But this is also good advice for the entire People of God. Certainly we all have not done as well as we might in not extinguishing the Spirit. Perhaps we all have been too ready to assume that the Spirit is ours and to judge Catholic sensibilities different from ours to be alien to the Spirit, almost as though such sensibilities are outside the Spirit and thus, by inference, outside the Church where there is no salvation. As we have seen, this kind of judgment issues from a sensibility utterly at odds with Vatican II's teaching on the Church as the People of God. May all the faithful be open to Pope Francis' call for a Church responsive to the joy of the gospel!