Vatican II: Some Reminiscences After Fifty Years

by Leslie J. Hoppe, O.F.M.

I was an eighteen-year-old novice when Vatican II began. My attention and energy, and that of the twenty-three others in my class, were focused on our new life as Franciscans. But we were aware that something momentous was happening in the Church’s life. Every day we said the prayer for the success of the Council requested by Pope John XXIII. Displayed in our classroom was a poster with photographs of all the Franciscan bishops who were participating in the Council. Still, we wondered what the events in Rome had to do with us. Our novice master tried to put matters into perspective when he told us that it would take many years before we would feel the effects of the Council’s decisions in our lives. In the meantime, he said, life would go on in the Church and the Order—and in our novitiate. Neither our novice master nor we had any idea how quickly and dramatically Vatican II would change our lives.

During the novitiate, we were cut off from most contacts with the world outside the novitiate—no telephone calls, no newspapers, no radio or television. Our parents were permitted to visit us only on the Sunday after Christmas and the Sunday after Easter. We could correspond with our parents but not with other relatives or friends. But we did have one outlet to the “world”: the Catholic press. America, Commonweal, The Critic, and Heythrop Journal were our guides to the deliberations in Rome. Also, in 1962, almost all religious communities of men published a magazine; among those were Ave Maria, The Sign, St. Anthony Messenger, St. Jude Messenger, The Liguorian, and The Franciscan Message. They kept our attention on the Council. We did not have access to the New Yorker, but we became acquainted with the lively and provocative reports on the Council by “Xavier Rynne” (Francis X. Murphy, C.Ss.R.), which appeared there since those reports garnered a lot of attention in the Catholic press.

After I completed the novitiate, I moved to my Province’s college seminary. While we still did not have access to newspapers, we did have a much broader selection of periodicals available to us, including Time and Newsweek. In reading accounts of the Council, I was intrigued by the differences between the “progressives” and the “conservatives.” I was surprised that bishops differed with each other on significant matters such as the Scripture and Tradition, the liturgy, other Christian Churches, other world religions, and freedom of conscience. All this stimulated my curiosity; I needed to learn about the issues facing the bishops. Fortunately, our library had very helpful resources and I began with the liturgy, ecumenism, and Scripture.

One consequence of the attention that the Council devoted to the issue of Divine Revelation was the addition of introductory courses on Scripture to the curriculum of our college seminary. Our teacher was a young friar who

Leslie J. Hoppe, O.F.M., is a Professor of Old Testament Studies at Catholic Theological Union and the General Editor of the Catholic Biblical Quarterly. His latest book is Isaiah in the Collegeville Biblical Commentary series.
was working on his doctorate in New Testament studies. His familiarity with the issues at the heart of the conciliar debates on the role of Scripture in shaping the faith and life of the Church made for some exciting classes.

The Council’s call for religious women and men to reclaim the charism of their founders led us to abandon some the monastic practices that had crept into Franciscan life: the discipline (self-flagellation), the chapter of faults, precedence, and clericalism. We stopped calling our houses “monasteries” and began referring to them as “friaries.” We then moved on to more substantive matters, examining our order’s Constitutions in order to have them better reflect Franciscan spirituality. Provincial Chapters became less concerned about legislation and more focused on enhancing the bonds of fraternity. The engines that moved the renewal along were fraternal dialogue and consultation.

Like the rest of the Church, we friars first felt the Council’s effects in the area of liturgy. We had some experience with liturgical changes. Just before the Council, the Divine Office had undergone a simplification, a new calendar of saints’ feast days was introduced, and the rituals of the Sacred Triduum were modified. Even before the vernacular was introduced into the Mass, we were permitted to sing English Eucharistic hymns in place of customary Latin hymns during Benediction. While today that change seems minor—almost insignificant—it was difficult to remain unmoved the first time we were able to conduct the entire Benediction service in English. The introduction of English in the celebration of the Mass was preceded by careful preparation in our friary. We had several *Missae siccæ*, literally “dry Masses,” in which we did a full dress rehearsal of the liturgy but without the sacramental elements. While the canon of the Mass and some other prayers remained in Latin, it was a beginning. We were no longer singing Gregorian chant from the *Liber Usualis* but were singing English hymns and chants from *The Friends of the English Liturgy* hymnal. It is difficult to convey in words what the introduction of the vernacular meant for us.

Certainly the most dramatic liturgical event I experienced was the first concelebrated Eucharist in our friary. Religious communities were authorized to “experiment” with concelebration. We were given general guidelines to follow. We were asked to report on how the celebration went, describe any unforeseen problems, and offer suggestions for the development of the ritual in its final form. The “experimental” concelebrated liturgy took place during our annual retreat. About thirty priests participated. All were fully vested and they stood behind a long altar made up of folding tables. Together they recited the Roman Canon aloud and in Latin. They sang the doxology at the end of the canon and when we responded, I realized, for the first time, what liturgists were referring to when they spoke of the “Great Amen.”

While English was introduced into the Mass, it was another matter with the Divine Office. Those who said the Liturgy of the Hours privately were permitted to pray in English; however, those religious communities that had choral obligation, i.e., the obligation to pray office every day in common, were required to pray the office entirely in Latin. Several times the Ministers General of the Friars Minor, Conventuals, Capuchins, and Third Order Regular together petitioned the Holy See for permission to use the vernacular for the recitation of the Office in common. Each time they were refused. Eventually we Friars Minor dropped the choral obligation from our constitutions so it became possible to pray the Office together in English.

The shift from Latin to English was a welcome move for most friars and a problem for a few. But for all, it was a highly emotional experience. Even those who were fluent in Latin felt a new surge of intimacy with God when they were able to celebrate the liturgy in English. But certainly the most moving experience I had in making the transition to English did not happen in the friary. It happened in the Catholic chapel at Southern Wisconsin Colony in Union Grove, Wisconsin. Southern Colony is a state institution for developmentally disabled children and adults, many of whom also suffer from physical disabilities. I was one of several friars who assisted the Catholic chaplain
at this institution. When the Mass was entirely in Latin, we had to do our best to keep the children occupied by saying the rosary and singing hymns while the chaplain offered a “Low Mass” in Latin. We prepared the children for the introduction of the vernacular by having a *Missa sicca* with them. The chaplain asked me to take the role of the “commentator” and recite the proper parts of the Mass and read the epistle. The ritual for the Mass at the time of the introduction of the vernacular was still that of Pius V, the so-called Tridentine Rite. My first task was to recite the Introit, psalm verses that were sung or said at the beginning of the Mass. Psalm 47:1 served as the Introit of our *Missa sicca*: “All you peoples, clap your hands and shout to God with songs of joy.” Before I could finish that verse, the children began clapping and shouting. They understood. They responded. They were active participants in the Church’s liturgy. I was totally surprised by their response, but I should not have been. The psalmist invited them to clap their hands and indeed they did. The psalmist invited them to shout for joy and indeed they did. The chapel was in an uproar, but it was a joyful noise. The introduction of English into the celebration of the Mass made it possible for God’s special children to worship as only they could—with the joyful abandon that comes with the innocence that they possess.

When the Council began, our novice master advised us that it would take many years before we would feel its effects. He could not have been more mistaken. In the fifty years since the bishops convened in Council, the lives of all Catholics have been transformed in ways no one foresaw. It has been an exciting fifty years.