

## **Remarks at the Jan.25, 2008 Celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Declaration of Vatican II**

by Fr. Patrick J. Howell, S.J.  
Seattle University Vice President for Mission and Ministry,  
S.U. School of Theology and Ministry former Dean,  
and S. U. Jesuit Community Rector and Professor of Pastoral Theology

Fifty years ago, Pope John XXIII announced the convening of an ecumenical council, the first in nearly a century and only the 20th in the long history of the church.

Known as Vatican II, that council revolutionized the Catholic Church.

At age 77, Angelo Roncalli, “the good Pope John,” was an unlikely pope. He quickly won the hearts and minds of all who encountered him. He startled his handlers by walking the streets of Rome, visiting prisons, and hospitals. His trips outside the Vatican created traffic jams.

As 2,500 bishops gathered in Rome three years later in October, 1962, Pope John recommended “making use of the medicine of mercy.” It was to be a council inviting openness, dialogue, healing, and reconciliation.

Pope John pushed forward three mandates:

**That the church engage and learn** from all the best that the world had to offer,  
**That the church become truly ecumenical**, welcoming and embracing all believers in Christ,  
**That the church become an advocate** and companion with the poor.

Ever since the Age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution in 1789, the church had been fighting modernization, a fight fueled no doubt by the slaughter of hundreds of priests and nuns during the revolution and by Napoleon’s dragging Pope Pius VII to France and demanding a ransom.

For the next century and a half, the church had been suspicious of reforms effected during the Age of Enlightenment: separation of church and state, freedom of conscience, and of a whole new understanding of scripture resulting from modern, scholarly research.

At the outset of the 1962 council, there was a standoff between the central Roman Curia bishops and the progressive bishops, especially leading cardinals from major European archdioceses.

The conservative minority (15 percent) wanted to shore up traditional teaching. The progressives (85 percent) wanted a modern church that would speak to the joys, hopes, griefs and sorrows of all humankind.

But by the end of the council, in 1965, a fresh wind had blown through the church:

- The Mass and sacraments were to be in the vernacular rather than in Latin.
- The priest celebrated Mass facing the people rather than facing the altar up against the wall.
- Freedom of conscience and freedom to practice one’s faith, whatever it was, were radically affirmed.
- A document that brought much solace and reconciliation, *Nostra Aetate* (“In Our Time”) recognized God’s lasting covenant with the Jews and also affirmed the religious traditions of Muslims and other faiths.

In the midst of all this theological ferment was a newly consecrated, 42-year-old bishop from Helena, Mont.

Raymond Hunthausen later served as archbishop of Seattle from 1975 to 1991. He said the council was absolutely the best preparation a bishop could have for pastoral leadership in the church.

“I learned so much. You can imagine at the end of a long day, a few of us bishops sitting on the steps of a nearby church conversing with a couple leading theologians and discovering what was really going on,” he commented.

Years later, after leading the Roman Catholic church in Western Washington in a kindly, pastoral, transformative way, Archbishop Hunthausen’s comments at a lecture at Seattle University **showed he was still a leader open to change:**

“The church of our time is in crisis,” he said. “That is not always a bad thing. Crisis is an opportunity to grow. It’s chaos only if the Spirit isn’t hovering over it.

“We need to devote ourselves to prayer, to ask for insight. We need to seek the assistance of the Spirit. We cannot make the Spirit happen. The Spirit is a gift. We need that sense of anticipation. We need a miracle. Expect one. Be people of hope. Expect a miracle.”