



## The Church on the Eve of Vatican II

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I was raised in the 1950's. We were American Catholics. We were from the immigrant working class of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. We never had a lot of money or prestige or social power. We were from honest, hardworking stock, a large old-fashioned family, all tucked together into an old farm house. We were members of the local community, active in the schools, and good neighbors.

The underlying basis of our lives, of course, was family. But the family was part of something bigger: the local parish. We were *from* our home town, but we *belonged* to our parish. The language reveals the intimate connection between daily life and faith. Faith - the center of our lives - was *certain* for us. The Protestants may have had the Presidency. They had Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale. But we were Catholics; we had the Mass. On our altars, Christ became *real*. We were certain. Presidents and preachers be damned. No one could top the Mass!

So when Vatican II reformed the Liturgy, a sea change occurred in Catholic self-understanding. The Council unwittingly tinkered with far more than the Liturgy of the Church when it did its work. It also tinkered with a huge, collective, unconscious Catholic memory which prevailed in the Church on the eve of the Council.

This is a memory of dark, heavy church aromas - incense lurking about the pews and beeswax candles burning silently at the tabernacle, leaving ages of sulfur behind them. A memory of sacristies, redolent with the fragrance of spilled wines and the after shave lotions of the priests. So many priests then. Altar servers playing with fire, lighting candles and charcoal, fumbling with the chains of the thurible, tripping on the hem of life.

It's a memory of faithful masses, kneeling in the pews: patient, silent, waiting. Genuflection was serious. Doubles during Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. God was watching. This was *His* place, (and there was no doubt about God's gender then). The high ceilings and unseen crosses at the tops of the steeples made God larger than life, than the very life created by God.

It's a memory of Benediction: a brief ceremony of songs, poems, and silence accentuated with incense, holy water, and gold monstrances. The monstrance: the most holy object at the parish church, the place where the priest put the host, larger than the ones you received, white, crisp, the Body of Christ. Round like the moon, rising above the kneeling congregation, "exposed" for all to gaze upon in absolute reverence. The Body of Christ was "exposed" in benediction, a vaguely, deeply sensual act. I think I remember being taught that you weren't even supposed to *move* while it was visible. Catholics fell to their knees to adore the sacred sacrament. The heart and soul of being Catholic was believing that this, indeed, is the true and absolute flesh and blood of God's own Son. As the *Tantum Ergo* came to a close, a clear and palpable sense of blessing descended on the congregation: Blessed be God. Blessed be His Holy Name. Blessed be Jesus Christ, true God and true Man . . . blessings, praises. A sweet beatitudinal sense of well-being and honor fell upon everyone.

And, of course, it's a memory of Latin. Memorized by priest and altar server alike, it added a surreal dimension to all the devotions. God, we might have believed, understood our prayers better when they were uttered in Latin.

*Introibo ad altare Dei. Ad deum qui laetificat juventutem meam.* Could that have been true? Did God understand Latin better?

It's a memory of Gregorian chant being sung *to us* by distant choirs huddled in lofts at the back of the church. We didn't want to sing. We wanted to be *sung to by the choir*. Protestants sing; Catholics listen. That's how it'd been since the sixteenth century.

Attending Mass and contributing money were the measures of being a good Catholic. The money we gave was spent for buildings, by and large: bricks and mortar. The buildings were ours; pastors would come and go, traveling missionaries would come through town, leaning out of pulpits, spinning stories about the horrors of life on the other side of the world, but the *building* was our foundation. It belonged to us. We built it.

It's a memory of Catholic devotional life. You could spot a Catholic car from 50 feet because there was a statue of a saint, normally Christopher, on the dashboard. Devotion to the saints and devotions in general were what we did. We used the saints to find lost things (St. Anthony) to bless farm fields (St. Isidore), and to protect us from harm (All the Rest).

I knew a woman once who believed firmly in spontaneous combustion, not of her or of anyone she knew, but of her house. She was convinced that at any time her attic might burst into flames! Because of this fear, she developed a staunch devotion to St. Florian, patron against home fires, and she gradually filled her attic with St. Florian medals and holy cards. She would occasionally go up there, sprinkle the place with holy water, and read a prayer to St. Florian who, apparently, helped her since the attic survived. During these little prayer services in the attic, this same woman would, of all things, *light a candle!* Florian protected her from all harm.

It's a memory of Mary. Mary, of course, was more. She wasn't "just another saint." She was the Saint of the saints, the leader. She offered Catholics a sort of female version of the deity, a place near God where power and glory were apportioned almost equally. After all, what decent fellow would not want his own mother to have as much glory as himself? There's really no basis for comparison among the holy men and women of the Church: Mary was The Greatest, The Queen. "Holy Mary," we prayed. "Mother of God, pray for us sinners (she wasn't one herself, after all) now and at the hour of our death."

We knew she would if we asked sweetly. What a blessing to have Mary praying for you. Devotion to Mary, alone among devotions, sometimes even rivaled the Mass for its place in our Catholic lives. It was, after all, something we could do without a priest. When someone died, the first thing a family did was to pray a rosary. When bad weather blew in from the West, Catholics headed to their basements, rosary cases and blankets in hand, to sit among the vegetables in the root cellar and pray to Mary for protection.

She wasn't our only source of blessing, of course. There was also a jar of holy water standing on the banister in most Catholic houses with which we blessed ourselves and our homes. Every night after our bedtime prayers, Catholic Moms moved quietly through their houses with the holy water jar, blessing each child and, finally, herself and Dad. What a lovely gesture, what a loving, gentle way to enter sleep. Each year we waited in the car after the Easter Vigil, the memories of those solemn ceremonies still fresh while the Easter bunny was on his way, as Mom obtained a new supply from the parish crock. The parish moms seemed to like this moment in the year, standing among the lilies with each other, dressed in pink and yellow spring dresses, putting all their hopes for the blessing of their families into mayonnaise jars.

Catholic boys, the pre-seminarian ones, kept extensive holy card collections like others did baseball cards, except our cards were blessed, powerful in some important, invisible way. They had pictures of the saints on them, but they also had "ejaculations." Holy card ejaculations were brief prayers one memorized and, periodically, spontaneously uttered! "All for the honor and glory of God and for the poor souls in purgatory!"

These holy cards were icons of our Catholic devotional identity. They carried an energy all their own, and those prayers printed on them merited indulgences for the user. Catholics could build up an "account" of these indulgences counted as "days off in purgatory," 500 days for this, 1,000 days for that. It was all rather like a frequent flier club for Catholic souls who were willing to sacrifice themselves for God. There were *Catholic* holy cards and *Catholic* indulgences. No one else had them.

It would be inaccurate to paint too romantic a view of life in the Church on the eve of the council. There were also terribly fierce, inflexible rules which, when enforced, caused great harm. Families expelled their own children for marrying improperly, for divorcing, and for failing to follow the rules exactly. "Fallen away" Catholics were treated harshly and excluded from Catholic circles where they were left to roam among Protestants. And Protestants were considered apostates and heretics, people who had left the one true Church and who now would not see heaven. The unbaptized of the world, including all the Jews, Buddhists, and others, were simply targets for conversion to Catholicism. Their failure to convert sentenced them to Limbo at best and to Hell at worst.

The huge, collective Catholic consciousness that existed on the eve of Vatican II consisted of an odd mixture of love and fear. It was both sublime and harsh. It was Benediction and Bingo.

Then, rather suddenly it seemed, things began to change. In the American church and much of the world, the change was not only ecclesial but also cultural. Revolutions raged through the nations. Unprecedented rights and freedoms were being demanded: civil rights, women's rights, personal rights, religious liberty. Where did all this come from? In whose name were all these demands being set forth? From whom would such rights come?

In 1960 a Catholic was elected President of the United States, the first in its history, the most powerful man in the world. At the same time, a new pope was in Rome, Pope John XXIII, arguably the most popular man in the world. These two men, both named John, stood on the threshold of a new era and both seemed to know it.

Here was a pope who was funny! He was plump! He was welcoming to Protestants and Jews. He had a pastor's heart and, on the sheer force of his personality and profound faith, he called his flock together in Rome in the early 1960s to meet as the Second Vatican Council. He was absolutely extraordinary! We'd never seen a Catholic, much less a pope, like him. And soon thereafter, Vatican II got underway leading us to a Catholic Church we'd never seen before either.

Change began rapidly. The council convened in the fall of 1962 and by Advent of 1964, just two short years later, most Catholics were praying in the vernacular and facing the presider during Mass. Other changes followed, one upon the other, until we emerged from the Council as a new people, the People of God! We Catholics were called from our spot on those kneelers, into the dramatic work on ministry flowing from our baptisms. We were called into the streets to work for justice and peace. We were called to really *pray* the Mass not merely *attend* it. We were called to embrace other Christians and all men and women of good will as sisters and brothers. We began reading and studying Scripture, creating little domestic churches in our homes, and changing how

we approached Catholic devotional life. And the most dramatic and far-reaching change of them all was that universal call to holiness. We were called to an intimate relationship with Christ and to translate that into daily life: forgiveness, generosity, hospitality, a heart for the poor, an end to grudges, and a willingness to die to ourselves in love. This call above all the others – the call to be holy as lay women and men – transformed us into living our faith, not just having it.

With all those memories of the Church on the eve of the Council still fresh in our minds – or being learned from our elders for those of us younger than 50 – the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vatican II reminds us that this being called by God, this summons to ministry and holiness, making us into a People of God, *this is the real work of the Spirit* in our Church today. Minor changes in liturgical practice aside, the profound work of the Holy Spirit which spread throughout the Church like a fresh breeze during and after Vatican II, *this* has the power to establish the Reign of God on earth and save the world.