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**A Response to Ross Douthat: He is Wrong about Vatican II**

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In October of 2022, *New York Times* Op/Ed columnist Ross Douthat marked the 60th anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council with an article entitled “How Catholics Became Prisoners of Vatican II,” which featured the broad, provocative, largely unsubstantiated declaration: “the Council was a failure.” Douthat, a convert to Catholicism, argued that Vatican II failed to accomplish its stated goal of making the church more attractive to modern people. Actually, the Church declined everywhere in the developed world, according to Douthat, under both the conservative Pope John Paul II and the liberal Pope Francis. The new liturgy with “middling guitar music,” in “ugly modern churches” failed to attract Catholics to Mass and “the Church lost Europe to secularism and Latin America to Pentecostalism.” Given the failure of the Council, we now have a Church filled with unresolved tensions among “traditionalists, conservatives and progressives.” Douthat concluded: “The Church cannot return to the pre-Council days, but must live with Vatican II, wrestle with it and somehow resolve the contradictions it bequeathed us.”

Unfortunately, we do not have a detailed theological critique of Douthat’s article to provide his large audience with a more positive assessment of the Council. David Gibson, Director of Fordham’s Center on Religion and Culture did respond to Douthat with a series of suggestive tweets. He challenged Douthat’s claim of a widespread numerical decline in church membership since Vatican II, pointing out that the Catholic population has soared to more than 1.3 billion in the last 60 years, most of the gain in the Southern Hemisphere. Gibson noted that this unprecedented expansion of Catholicism in the global South is due in large part to the conciliar reforms of the liturgy that allow for local languages and customs.

As to the evident decline in Mass attendance in the U.S., Gibson accuses Douthat of the logical fallacy known as *Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc,*” which in this case implies that because the decline came after Vatican II that the council caused it. Actually, the more likely causes are an expanding secularization process, the sex abuse scandal and the Covid pandemic.

Furthermore, Gibson claims Douthat lacks a sense of history and offers examples of ways previous councils could be thought failures because of later developments. The 16th century Council of Trent was followed by Wars of Religion, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The First Vatican Council (1869-1870) was followed by the Modernist crisis and two World Wars. Furthermore, all the ecumenical Councils have produced tensions and disputes which are part of the long often contentious process of assimilating conciliar teachings.

It seems to me that there is a more fundamental critique of Douthat’s negative assessment of Vatican II. It is primarily a quantitative analysis based on declining Church attendance in the western world, which he interprets as an alarming development. Before the Council began in 1962, the German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner published a book translated as *The Christian Commitment* which now serves as a challenge to Douthat’s approach and conclusion. In the first chapter, Rahner argues that the Church is now in a “diaspora” situation, existing as a minority throughout the whole world. Developments in the modern world made a decline in church membership inevitable, but Rahner advises not to obsess over this decline or fall victim to “a tyranny of numbers.” On the contrary, we should recognize positive possibilities in the new situation to fulfill God’s plan to save all people. The diaspora Church can concentrate on improving the quality of Christian life and witness. It can develop new and creative ways of influencing the secular world without trying to control or dominate it. It can focus on proclaiming the essential truths and practices of the Christian tradition, enabling the faithful to persevere in the faith without depending on social support. It can also better focus and target the ongoing missionary work of the Church. From this Rahnerian perspective, it appears that Douthat has surrendered to the tyranny of numbers, which blind him to important qualitative achievements of Vatican II.

Concentrating on qualitative developments, let us recall the way parish life in the United States has improved over the last 60 years. Theologically, a parish is not a static institution, or simply a segment of the larger Church or the personal fiefdom of a male celibate clergy. It is, rather, a dynamic event; the concrete actualization of the universal Church; the Body of Christ in action in a particular area; the people of God gathered for worship and mission; the pilgrim community wending its way through history. To illustrate the point let me offer a personal example. When I was an associate pastor at St. Mary’s Church in Sandusky, Ohio, in 1962, the year the council began, the pastor and his three associates did almost all the pastoral ministry. We celebrated daily Mass in Latin, read the one-cycle of scripture readings and distributed communion on the tongue to those who knelt at the altar rail. We spent long hours on Saturday afternoons and evenings hearing confessions. We prepared couples for marriage and presided at their weddings. We instructed potential converts one at a time and then baptized them individually. We ministered to the sick by making regular rounds at the hospitals, responding to late night emergency calls and taking communion monthly to the homebound, usually a long list. The pastor relied on his card playing friends for financial advice, selected the lay leaders of the parish societies, directed the ministry of his associates and led the weekly Sorrowful Mother devotions.

At that time, lay people played a limited role in our parish ministry. Some generous men were active in the St. Vincent de Paul Society which provided assistance to the needy. There were monthly father-son communion breakfasts after Sunday Mass. Dedicated women served on the Altar and Rosary Society that kept the church looking clean and beautiful, especially for the annual Forty Hours Devotion when area priests came to participate and socialize. Not all parishes were like St. Mary’s with four active priests but in parishes all over the country, large and small, urban and rural, clergy performed the bulk of the pastoral ministry.

We should note that the priests who ministered before the Council did excellent pastoral work in meeting the needs of the Catholic faithful: leading parishes that provided Catholic immigrants with a true “haven in a hostile world;” providing the grace of the sacraments and the comfort of familiar devotions; collaborating with generous dedicated religious women in running parish schools; and offering practical assistance to help parishioners move into the mainstream of American life. All of this dedicated ministry built up a great reservoir of respect and appreciation for priests among the growing Catholic population.

Moreover, it is clear that the Vatican II reforms have dramatically improved the quality of ministry in most parishes in the United States. This progress is based in large measure on the conciliar teaching on baptism as the primary sacrament. All baptized persons are called to holiness and are co-responsible for building up the Body of Christ and spreading the reign of God in the world. All the baptized are empowered by the Spirit to use their gifts to further the mission of Christ to humanize the world. At the same time, the Council decree on *The Ministry and Life of Priests* says ordained pastors “must discover with faith, recognize with joy, and foster with diligence the many and varied charismatic gifts of the laity,” whether “humble or more exalted” (n9).

This synergistic interaction between the ordained and baptismal priesthood has produced concrete improvements in parish life. For example, the RCIA process has generally done a better job of preparing converts for living a full informed Catholic life than did individual instructions by a priest. Marriage preparation programs run by married couples drawing on their experience are a big improvement over the well-intentioned efforts of celibate clergy. Eucharistic ministers who take communion to the homebound often spend more time visiting and offering practical assistance than can overworked priests. Most parishes have functioning committees that have enriched parish life: parish councils that represent a broad range of parishioners; finance councils that can offer informed advice to the pastor; social justice committees that can help the needy and challenge systemic injustice; and pro-life committees that focus attention on a variety of life issues.

The conciliar call for full, conscious, active participation in the liturgy has turned many passive spectators into active participants in Sunday Mass. We now have recognized ministries for women and men as acolytes, lectors and eucharistic ministers. The three-year cycle of scripture readings at Sunday Mass proclaimed by lectors and deacons has opened up more of the Bible to the congregation. Priests today generally give more homilies on the scriptures than priests did in the past who typically delivered sermons on favorite topics, often on parish financial needs. It should be noted that the current stilted, hard to understand English translation of the liturgical texts is not the fault of the Council, but of a violation of the conciliar directive that national hierarchies should be primarily responsible for producing translations for their language group. It is true that some Catholics do not like the liturgical reforms and there are traditional Catholics who prefer the Tridentine Latin Mass. However, polls indicate that most Catholics have accepted and prefer various elements of the reformed liturgy: priests facing the assembly; reciting texts in English rather than Latin; receiving communion in the hand and from the cup; having lay distributors of communion; and the greeting of peace. There is no doubt parishioners participate more fully now in the liturgy than before the Council.

There is another fundamental problem with the Douthat criticism of Vatican II. He treats the Council as a purely secular event without taking into account a faith perspective. Eyes of faith see the Council as a new Pentecost, an epiphany of the Holy Spirit and an official expression of authentic belief. Christ promised to send the Paraclete to guide the whole Church to the truth. We believe the Spirit was at work as the college of bishops from around the world, united with their head the Bishop of Rome, met from 1962 to 1965 in a process of learning, discussing and voting that produced 16 documents. They did not define any new infallible dogmas, but they encouraged developments with long-term consequences. For example, the Council opened the door to cultural adaptations of the liturgy which has already aided the missionary effort of the Church and holds great promise for the future. The Council’s call for dialogue and collaboration between Christians and Muslims, who believe in the one God, honor Jesus as a prophet and have high moral standards, is an enduring development with importance now and in the future for the cause of world peace. The conciliar emphasis on baptism as the primary sacrament which grounds the dignity and full participation of lay persons in the life and mission of the Church is an enduring theological development which promises more fruitful interactions between the ordained and baptismal priesthood. None of these developments or others readily envisioned are inevitable or guaranteed; but we can hope that guided by the Holy Spirit they will enrich the Church and its ongoing mission.

From this faith perspective, it is misguided, short-sighted and erroneous to call Vatican II a failure. It is more accurate and fruitful to celebrate the Council as the work of the Holy Spirit which has significantly improved the quality of Catholic parish life and holds great promise to continue to guide the ongoing process of Church renewal. Those of us who reject Douthat’s blanket condemnation of Vatican II should do all we can in our own limited sphere of influence to propagate a more positive view of the Council and to assist the ongoing process of receiving its teachings and directives for glorifying God and serving the kingdom of justice, peace and love.