

As many of you know, I have lived and taught at St Michael's College at the U of T for close to 50 years. In all that time, the last several months have been in many ways the most unusual. With few students, faculty or staff on campus, the atmosphere has become quasi-monastic.

During this period I have spent a good deal of the time studying the Second Vatican Council, its history and the documents it produced. Some 2000 bishops from around the globe gathered in Rome each fall from 1962 to 1965. I was there on graduate studies for two of those years and then spend two more in Germany working with theologians who had been deeply involved in the Council.

Almost everyone was surprised when, in 1959, Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convoke an ecumenical council. The previous such Council took place in 1869-70 and the one before that in the mid 16th century. Although Pope John had no detailed programme for the Council, he had a general idea of what he hoped it would achieve. He spoke at times of a new Pentecost, a new outpouring of the Spirit that would renew the spiritual and moral life of the whole church. He used the word aggiornamento to suggest the bringing up to date of the language with which we proclaim the gospel and the rituals with which we celebrate it. He wanted the council to be positive and not condemnatory and forward-looking and what he called "pastoral," something that would make a real difference in the lives of believers. He also hoped that the Council would

contribute to a greater understanding, respect and collaboration among Christians from all the churches.

Pope John died between the first and second sessions of the Council and was succeeded by Cardinal Montini of Milan who took the name Paul VI. He and other cardinals had come to a conviction by the end of the first session that the central theme of the Council should be the church, both in its inner life and in its relation to those outside of it. These latter included other Christian churches, Judaism, Islam and the contemporary world.

The area in which most Catholics first experienced the impact of the Council was in the liturgy. In addition to achieving a deeper religious and theological understanding of it, the Council embraced certain principles for the reform of the Eucharist and other rituals, the most important of which was the full, conscious and active participation of all in them. On the basis of that principle, the liturgy was simplified and above all translated into the vernacular.

If the church is primarily a religious reality - the body of Christ and the temple of the Spirit - it is also a community of people, a community every member of which is called to play an active role in its life and ministry. More was said at this Council than at all previous councils about the role and dignity of the laity. Particularly challenging was the effort to clarify the precise nature of the

role of the individual bishop in his diocese and the co-responsibility of all the bishops together with the pope for the life and mission of the universal church.

I have always thought of what the Council says about the church's relation to what is outside of it as a wonderful gift to English-speaking Canadian Catholics. When I was growing up, Catholics in Toronto were a small minority of the population. That has changed and the changes have left us with new responsibilities as Catholics for our city and our country.

The document on the church in the world emphasizes the responsibility of believers to contribute to the building up of a better world. What the council said about certain social, economic, familial, and other issues would be said differently today. Today too we would address issues that were not on people's radar at that time, issues like ecology, racism, and the plight of refugees.

The attitude to the world the Council wanted to foster is evoked in the document's opening lines. "The joys and hopes, the grief and anxiety of the people of our time," it says, "especially of those who are poor or afflicted are the joys and hopes, the grief and anxiety of the followers of Christ as well."

People often say that Vatican II was the most important church event in the 20th century. However that may be, it was certainly crucial in shaping my identity as a Catholic, and as a priest. For that, I remain deeply grateful.