

The Church Is One

Cardinal William H. Keeler

William Henry Keeler was born March 4, 1931, in San Antonio, Texas, the son of Thomas L. Keeler and Margaret T. (Conway) Keeler. He was raised in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, where he attended St. Mary School and Lebanon Catholic High School. He received a bachelor of arts degree from St. Charles Seminary, Overbrook, Philadelphia, and a licentiate in sacred theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Ordained a priest on July 17, 1955, he became assistant pastor at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church, Marysville, and secretary of the diocesan tribunal (1956–58). He was then assigned to study canon law at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. In 1961 he received his doctorate in canon law and was re-appointed by Bishop George L. Leech as assistant pastor of Our Lady of Good Counsel Church. He became its pastor in 1964. As secretary to Bishop Leech during the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), he was appointed peritus or “special advisor” to the council by Pope John XXIII. During the council, he also served on the staff of the Council Digest, a daily communication service sponsored by the bishops of the United States.

After serving as vice chancellor, chancellor, and vicar general in the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania diocese he was named auxiliary bishop of Harrisburg in July and ordained as bishop on September 21, 1979. Pope John Paul II first appointed him bishop of Harrisburg in 1983 and then archbishop of Baltimore in 1989. In 1994 he was appointed a cardinal.

An influential participant in a wide range of national and international issues, Cardinal Keeler was elected president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) in 1992. As part of his work with the NCCB, Cardinal Keeler developed a reputation for effectively building interfaith bonds. He is particularly noted for his work in furthering Catholic-Jewish dia-

logue and serves as moderator of Catholic-Jewish relations for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Since 1994 he has served on the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. In addition to serving on the boards of many institutions, Cardinal Keeler is also Chairman of the Board of Catholic Charities, the largest non-governmental agency providing assistance to the needy of Maryland. He has received honorary degrees from 15 different colleges and universities in recognition of his outstanding contributions to church and society.

Reflections Rooted in Memories of Vatican II

Over the years, I have been asked to give many talks on the Second Vatican Council, usually with a question and answer period afterwards. My perspective is always that of a pastor, not an academic. I was in a small parish in a rural setting during the council, and only afterwards came to office work, but always with a share of parish obligations.

As Catholics, the council participants had been schooled in the marks of the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The underlying unity of the church was taken for granted by the council members, but they needed to find the language to meet new needs for the new times. The unity was evident in the bishops' respect for one another, in the private and public prayer (private, as so many stopped at the Blessed Sacrament altar in silence; public, in the enthronement of the gospel book and the celebration of the Eucharist that began each day's deliberations.) There was unity expressed also in the Latin of the texts and debates, and in the garb of participants, although that of the churchmen of the East brought a touch of color to the scene.

The bishops' self-understanding of their role in an ecumenical council also evidenced this unity. Even as the apostles in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) saw their task as one of preaching the gospel to the whole world and, more specifically, as adapting the church of their day to this task, so the bishops of Vatican II saw themselves as meeting around the successor of Peter for a similar purpose.

At the outset of the third period of the council, Pope Paul VI commented on this mark of the church's unity:

Recapitulating in our persons and in our functions the universal Church, we proclaim this council ecumenical. Here is the exercise of unity, here the exercise of that universality by which the Church gives evidence of her prodigious vitality, her marvelous capacity to make men brothers and to welcome within her embrace the most diverse civilizations and languages, the most individualized liturgies and types of

spirituality, the most varied expressions of national, social and cultural genius, harmonizing all in felicitous union, yet always respecting legitimate variety and complexity (Council Daybook, Session 3, p. 4).

Working toward Conciliar Unity

The Second Vatican Council gave expression to its unity in the sixteen documents it promulgated; but this unity was achieved through the process of council members listening carefully to one another and respecting the diversity of perspectives.

Although the press almost immediately divided the council participants into “conservative” and “liberal” groupings, it would be more accurate to describe the differences in scriptural terms. There were the shepherds who wanted to lose nothing of the church’s precious heritage from the past, and there were the fishers emboldened to let down their nets for a fresh catch. But each participant brought an individual background to bear, and so, in the give-and-take of the discussion, was adjusting to the new realities presented by those who offered other points of view, perhaps from the perspective of another culture or another country. As a result, the conciliar documents went through significant modification in the debates, with at least three drafts required before a final, usually nearly unanimous, vote.

We could see this process taking shape in the debate about the use of modern languages in the liturgy. Pope John XXIII did well to put liturgy as the first topic on the agenda: every bishop is familiar with it and may be considered a pastoral specialist in the field. Also, so many of the bishops of the Western church knew Latin well—after all, they were conducting their debate in Latin—and had good reason to retain it as their language of worship. They saw it as a constant factor in the church’s life, no matter where one might travel.

They listened as their brothers from mission countries told them that the people of those lands did not understand Latin but, even more, regarded it as a sign of colonialism in an age when newly emerging countries of Africa and Asia were leaving colonialism behind. Those from the communist bloc countries argued persuasively that church services offered the only opportunity to catechize God’s people, and it would be better to conduct the liturgy in an understandable language.

In the second period of the council, the constitution on the liturgy was completed and the number of bishops voting in favor of an initial use of the vernacular at Mass grew from 1,922 out of 2,118 to an incredible 2,247 out of 2,251. In the end, after all the discussion, there were only four neg-

ative votes on the document that, of all the conciliar decisions, had the most direct impact on Catholics in the parish.

Clearly, the bishops concluded that a shift to the vernacular would not harm the unity of the church. After the council's action, the initial offerings in the languages of the people met with such approval that translations were rushed through, often without apparent sensitivity to the doctrinal meaning of the words or how well they sounded to the ear.

The council's fundamental document, *Lumen gentium*, the constitution on the nature of the church, likewise garnered almost unanimous support, the result of two lengthy periods of discussion and voting and the intense work of the Commission on Doctrine to evaluate and respond to the specific observations made by the bishops. This document complements the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy and opens up the approaches developed more fully in subsequent documents, including those on the missionary nature of the church, the office of bishops, the role of priests and consecrated religious, and the call to ecumenical unity.

As the First Vatican Council had lifted up one principle for unity in the church, the Second Vatican Council completed the picture by describing a second, dynamic principle of unity, that of collegiality, with the college of bishops seen in succession to the body or college of apostles. With eloquence, speakers evoked the vision of the author of the Book of Revelation, of the heavenly Jerusalem rising on the foundation of the "twelve apostles of the lamb" (Rev 21:14).

In the final period of the council, 1965, three other documents were the focus of a final consensus and passage: *Dei verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation; *Nostra aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions; and *Dignitatis humanae*, the Declaration on Religious Liberty. The latter two marked new insights in the development of Catholic teaching as the church reached out to those around it. With respect to the two declarations, the first drafts were rejected by the bishops, possibly because the initial members of the Secretariat for Christian Unity had been appointed from among those sympathetic to ecumenical thinking rather than elected by the council as a whole. One result: the drafts tended to reflect a particular point of view, drawn up as they were without the internal debate that came from a broader spectrum of Catholic thinking. The Secretariat was expanded by election and the drafts revised in the light of the discussion in the council hall. On October 28, 1965, the Council adopted *Nostra aetate* 2,221 to 88 and so began Catholic efforts to engage other world religions in the dialogue

for justice and peace. On its last working day, December 7, 1965, the council passed *Dignitatis humanae* by a vote of 2,308 to 70, thus formally opening a new page in the church's dealing with a basic human right.

The Council's Closing Days

That same day, the presidents of twenty-four national conferences of bishops, including Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle of Washington, DC, were invited to concelebrate the closing Eucharist with Pope Paul VI. At that Mass the unity of the church in council was strikingly evident: the sun fell on the altar of St. Peter's Basilica, illuminating the concelebrants as together they recited the great eucharistic prayer. More than 2,400 bishops joined in chanting the "Holy, holy, holy" echoing the angelic chant in the vision of Isaiah the prophet. There was a deep unity of heart expressed in the varying accents and tones, a unity very hard to convey through the modern media.

Subsequently, the bishops witnessed an extraordinary act of ecumenical reconciliation. A joint statement of Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras was read by Bishop (later Cardinal) Jan Willebrands with these striking words: "They (the Pope and the Patriarch) likewise regret and remove both from memory and from the midst of the Church the sentences of excommunication which followed these events, the memory of which has influenced actions up to our day and has hindered closer relations in charity, and they commit these excommunications to oblivion." At the same time, in Istanbul, at the Phanar, in the presence of Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, Cardinal Lawrence J. Shehan of Baltimore was witness to the reading of the same document by an Orthodox representative.

The next day, December 8, the 2,400 council members processed into St. Peter's Square under a bright sun. They rejoiced in an incredible sense of the unity forged through four periods of intense prayer, discussion, and reflection. Also present for this final event were the observers from other Christian churches, grown from a mere handful in the first period of the council to more than a hundred, most of them witnesses to the heart-to-heart sharing of those who had voice and vote in the hall. Of these, many could say that their own observations had been voiced on the council floor by bishops who grasped their insights and agreed that others should hear them.

The task since the end of the council has been to explain the meaning and consequences of the council's actions. The task is ongoing. In 1984, we bishops of the United States met in Collegeville, Minnesota, to prepare for the extraordinary synod the following year. Beforehand, I consulted with the laity in the diocese in which I served. They told me, "The changes in

the liturgy have been a blessing, but we miss the sense of the sacred we often had, and ecumenism is a great blessing, but something has happened to the clarity of Catholic teaching.”

The synod of 1985 took steps to remedy complaints from around the world: a catechism was commissioned to respond to the need for doctrinal clarity, and steps were taken to be sure that our worship could regain, where needed, a sense of the transcendent God.

In his travels throughout the world, Pope John Paul II was the Lord’s own tool in making the council come alive, especially in leading celebrations of the Eucharist. His encyclicals, too, pushed ahead the themes of the council, especially its missionary nature. He was the great Catholic evangelist of his day, preaching the gospel of Jesus to unparalleled numbers of people. And he developed, in ways undreamed of at the council, the themes of ecumenical and interreligious openness. I think here of his visits to the United States in 1987 and to the Holy Land in 2000. What were principles stated at and hoped for during Vatican II became ways of life: consider the extraordinary interreligious meetings at Assisi in 1986 and 2002. On both occasions Pope John Paul II gathered leaders from all major religions of the world to pray for peace.

In November 2000, at the death camp at Majdanik, just outside of Lublin, I witnessed a deeply moving service inspired by the teaching of the pope. The Romanian Orthodox Patriarch, the Chief Rabbi of Rome, the Muslim Imam of Poland and the ranking Protestant clergyman of the land helped lead the service. I had a part, reading in English the psalm with the words, “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” The hour-and-a-half program was televised live through all of Poland. All could hear the testimony of survivors that the loudspeakers carried as we walked, some 4,000 strong, from station to station in the camp. By the end all felt the seriousness and the weight of the sad memories of the camp, and I was reminded of another reality.

When Pope John Paul II was born, his land was home to the largest number of Jews in the world. When he was ordained a priest a quarter of a century later—after the Nazis had taken the lives of millions of Jews—only a pitiful remnant remained. This priest from Poland seized the opportunity not just of a lifetime but of a millennium. The world will be forever better for it.

This is the hope and vitality of the council that continues to stimulate and enliven the fishers who want to let down their nets; this is the tradition and history that is the spiritual foundation of those shepherds who want to preserve with love the precious heritage of the church.