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How Vatican II Helped the Jesuits Do Their Job

By Tyler Flynn

Vatican II marked a significant change which, unlike many previous ecumenical councils, did not occur on any dogmatic or doctrinal level. Rather, it created a new sense of Catholic culture, in dialogue with the modern world, which now integrates itself into every aspect of Christian life. This changing culture is marked by laity involvement in the church, a blending with modern culture, a focus on the individual, and a greater emphasis on the importance of service to others, all of which are promoted in Jesuit Catholic universities.

The Jesuit University is a unique lens through which the changes made within the church can be seen and evaluated. The focus of these institutions may not be on the rigorous study of theology and the application of Catholic doctrines and dogmas; nevertheless, they create a sense of Christian identity and culture through their students' commitment to service and to the good of the surrounding community. Taking Pedro Arrupe's idea of creating "men and women for others," Jesuit universities, for example, John Carroll, provide students with hundreds of service opportunities throughout the school year.

The focus of these universities is not to convert their students to Catholicism. While early Jesuits may have focused their ministries on saving souls, Vatican II, with its publication of *Dignitatis Humanae*, teaches that salvation is not limited to those within the church. Thus,



Jesuit institutions, through their dedication to service, can create "anonymous Christians" in the vision of Karl Rahner, a Jesuit whose ideas had a significant influence on the Second Vatican Council. In a sense, these schools graduate students who may not follow Christ, but still live their lives within His image.

Apart from offering salvation outside the Church, Vatican II also allowed for far more laity involvement. Though missionary Jesuits like Matteo Ricci had exemplified the importance of the vernacular in the Mass and inculturation centuries earlier, Vatican II implemented these ideals on a universal scale. Not only can laity now better understand the Mass, but they can also incorporate their own culture into the liturgy. University students celebrate Mass

later in the afternoon or at night with music which encourages them to be more fully present.

Additionally, these lay students help plan the Mass. Without this opportunity to be engaged, the church might have lost its appeal to university students. More importantly, the laity have become more involved in theological discussion. Those called to religious vocations no longer dominate theological education. Most professors in the theology departments are laity whose interest in theology can sometimes engage their students more fully than priests can. This interest in theology creates more reasoned and aware Catholics who now have more ready access to the decisions of the Church, as made manifest by Vatican II's publication of *Gaudium et Spes*.

While students certainly may have gained a greater respect for the field of theology than they had before Vatican II, it is still not the dominant field of study in any Jesuit university. However, Vatican II allowed for a greater appreciation for other fields of study. Much like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's idea of finding God in his particular field of paleontology, Jesuit universities have continued in the Ignatian tradition of finding God in all things.

This and other Jesuit principles have, through this council, managed to make their way into the everyday life of the Church. In this sense, Vatican II may have ultimately allowed Jesuits to do what they had been trying to do for years, incorporating their ideas into their universities on a more broad level. While it is true that, since 1965, other problems have occurred due to the changes Vatican II produced, these council decrees were necessary for the growth and continuity of the church. However, like anything for which the Jesuits have ever been criticized, it may have taken a few years for Vatican II to be fully appreciated in context of modernity with the next generation of Christians present at Jesuit universities. ■

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