

Bishop George Leo Thomas' Installation Homily



Photo by: Erik Gloege

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On October 20, 1958, the aging Cardinal of Venice, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, was elected to the papacy and chose the name John XXIII.

Pope John was wildly popular, described in the press as affable and affectionate, portly and plebian. He appealed to a wide swath of people both within and outside the Church. It was hardly a surprise when he was chosen as Time Magazine's "Man of the Year," 1962.

But the adulation was not universal.

There were certain Vatican observers who immediately dismissed John as a caretaker Pope, an interim and innocuous leader, and segue to a more effective and enduring papacy. There were some within the Vatican itself who considered John a dangerous innovator, and the harbinger of unwelcome and unnecessary change.

Neither side was prepared for the seismic waves that followed when the 78 year old Pope announced his intention to convene a worldwide Ecumenical Council.

In the face of support and resistance, the unflappable Pope John pressed on with optimism and resolve. He ordered Vatican officials to initiate the labor intensive preparations required for a worldwide Ecumenical Council. Eight hundred theologians were summoned to Rome to assist in this massive three year period of preparation.

In those intervening years, Pope John personally paved the way. He introduced new terminology and a new attitude, described in Italian as “aggiornamento”--i.e., opening the windows of the Church to the powerful, refreshing, and indeed unpredictable winds of the Holy Spirit.

When the opening day of the Council finally arrived, Pope John gave a passionate and moving address. There were 2,400 bishops hailing from 116 countries from across the world.

In that memorable oration, Pope John adroitly turned an eye toward his detractors, acknowledging that errors in the Church will come and go “like fog before the sun.” He conceded that the Church must always concern herself with “safeguarding and teaching more efficaciously the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine.” But for this, he insisted, a Council was not necessary.

Rather, the Pope asserted that the Church “must ever look to the present, to the new conditions,” new questions, and challenges emerging in the modern world.

John was personally troubled by those outside the Church still ignorant of Christ, and personally pained by those within in the Church who were complacent, indifferent and unresponsive to the message of the Gospel.

To their great credit, the Council Fathers captured well the mind and heart of Pope John when they wrote, “The Church must scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel.” But she must also present herself “as a loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness...helping everyone to welcome the good tidings of salvation.”

Pope John did not live long enough to bring the Council to completion, succumbing to stomach cancer on June 3, 1963. But the Council materialized as that seismic event anticipated in the dawn of his meteoric tenure.

The Council Fathers have left a timeless legacy to the Church. They have given us a pastoral blueprint, a pathway into the future, a way to amplify the Gospel and to magnify its power in both Church and society.

Their entire body of writing is predicated on the deeply held conviction that Jesus Christ is sent as a “light to all nations,” and given to every person as the “definitive answer to the question of the meaning of life.”

When the final session drew to a close on December 8, 1965, the Archbishop of Baltimore said it well. “The Council has ended. The Council has just begun.”

Since the moment he emerged onto the world stage in 2013, Pope Francis has been unleashing powerful Pentecostal energy of the Council throughout the Church. He is intentionally and systematically invigorating the Council’s spirit, copiously dispensing the medicine of mercy, and reawakening the Council’s vision for both Church and society.

It is my hope that in our own Diocese of Las Vegas, that same Pentecostal energy will move through the Church like a new wind and fire, lighting our way, and guiding us into a future with that sure and certain hope that flows from the One who is the “Way, the Truth and the Life.”

The Second Vatican Council bequeathed to us a pastoral vision containing distinctive mile markers, sign posts that provide dioceses with direction and pastoral orientation.

I will briefly identify seven of those signposts that hail from the heart of the Council. There are many more. The signposts will help this Diocese “keep the eyes of our hearts fixed on Christ” and faithfully reflect the mind and mission of the Church. The signposts I identify will serve us well in ordinary time, but will become critically important when the road becomes enshrouded in fog, when the curves ahead are blind, and unexpected obstacles fall unexpectedly onto our pathway.

The first two signposts set the stage for the remaining five, and point us in the right direction.

(1) The late Avery Cardinal Dulles calls the first signpost the single most distinguishing feature of the Second Vatican Council.

In pre-Council days, holiness was most often associated with clergy and cloister and consecrated life. The lay faithful were often considered passive recipients of their ministry and mission.

The Council Fathers presented a new vision, underscoring the fact that holiness of life is the vocation of every Christian, and flows from the grace of Baptism, the shared DNA of every Christian. “Through Baptism,” wrote the Council Fathers, “lay persons are made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ.” Through Baptism they carry out their own part in the mission of the Church....”

The Fathers were quick to point out that priests are called forth from the community of the Baptized. They further underscored that the Sacrament of Holy Orders differs in essence from the priesthood of the faithful. Priests are co-workers with the episcopal order, sharing the mission of building up and guiding the Church, always following the example of the One who came, “not to be served, but to serve.”

Less than six weeks ago, Pope Francis issued a powerful exhortation that focused on this very topic—the universal call to holiness. “The Lord has in mind a particular path for each believer,” he wrote. “Holiness keeps you faithful to your deepest self, free from every form of enslavement and bearing fruit for the world.”

The universal call to holiness is the first signpost of the Second Vatican Council.

(2) The second signpost is related to the first. The Council Fathers exhorted pastors that “we are not meant by Christ to shoulder alone the saving mission of the Church....” The call to holiness is accompanied by a commensurate call for shared responsibility. The Council Fathers introduced a new conceptual vocabulary of consultation, collaboration, cooperation and collegiality. Pope Benedict raised the ante, insisting that the laity are co-missioned to share in the saving work of the Gospel. Francis is clearly committed to Council’s vision of consultation and synodality.

As pastors, we must know what we do not know, and gather wise people around the table, drawing from their expertise and wisdom and utilizing their experience, most especially in temporal affairs effecting the Church. Conversely, Church leaders have the responsibility to form the laity, teaching them *sentire cum ecclesiae*, encouraging them to take seriously their responsibility to carry the light of the Gospel into the complex circumstances of life, whether in the family or marketplace, the political sphere, or the professions. Shared responsibility is the second signpost of the Council.

(3) Since the time of the Apostles, the Eucharist has been identified as the heartbeat of the Church and the lifeblood of the apostolic community. We are a Eucharistic people. How did the disciples on the road to Emmaus come to know Jesus but through “the breaking of the Bread.”

Pope John Paul II described the Eucharist as *Inestimabile Donum*, the Church’s most priceless gift. In the 10th century, on the feast of Corpus Christi, St. Thomas Aquinas, portrayed the Eucharist in poetic imagery—*Panis Angelicus*--“the Bread of Angels.”

The Council Fathers describe the Eucharist as the “source and summit” of the life of the Church.

In the Diocese of Las Vegas, all we are and all we do together must begin at the altar of the Lord, and return us there together in prayerful thanksgiving and praise.

We will not take lightly the Council Fathers strong admonition that liturgy requires the “full, active, conscious participation of the faithful.” At the celebration of Eucharist, there are to be no passive bystanders or casual onlookers as the Church prays her greatest and most efficacious prayer.

The Council Fathers identified Sacred Scripture as “sustenance” and “food for the soul.” They unabashedly echoed the strong words of St. Jerome, who stated that “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.”

The Council Fathers enjoined every diocese to promote a “warm and living love for Scripture among its people.”

We also have a pressing responsibility to inculcate sound, substantial and systematic faith formation, both for the young and not so young, forming the hearts and minds of our people in the ways of Christ and the Church.

The Council Fathers turned their attention to priests and deacons, saying that they have as their primary duty the proclamation of the gospel. We can never lose sight of the fact that good preaching is an integral part of the formation of souls. Effective preaching is a *sine qua non* in a vibrant healthy parish. Priests and deacons were reminded of this by Pope Francis when he wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “The homily is the touchstone for judging a pastor’s closeness to his people and his ability to communicate with them.”

The Table of Word and Sacrament is the third mark of the Council.

(4) I will describe the fourth signpost with the odd descriptor—the theology of the ampersand, or a theology of connections. This sign post is powerfully portrayed in the life and ministry of Pope Francis.

The Council teachings connect liturgy and compassion, sacrament and service, prayer and justice, word and action, or in the parlance of Scripture “Love of God and love of neighbor.

This connection obligates us boldly and unapologetically to proclaim that all life is sacred, and that every person is fashioned in the image and likeness of God. There are no throwaway people, no disposable souls, and no second-class citizens. No exceptions. This is the heart of Catholic Social Teaching.

We are a Church that will never remain silent when human life is threatened, whether in the womb or on the deathbed. We cannot remain mute when gun violence casts its deadly shadow

over our precious schoolchildren or cuts short the lives of innocent concertgoers in a city still recovering from a broken heart.

We cannot look the other way when people are trafficked for profit and immigrants and Dreamers are left waiting interminably for lawful resolution and inner peace. In the vision of Catholic Social doctrine, the Church will always be friend and advocate of the vulnerable and the marginalized, always with a preferential option for the poor. We will be there for you. We will not forget you.

(5) Pope John asked the Church to apply the medicine of mercy copiously and generously. Mercy is also a living leitmotif in the ministry of Pope Francis. The Church must be the home of forgiveness and the household of reconciliation, because we are all in need of God's tender mercy.

Each of us is carrying wounds, scars, and sins that are crying out for the healing touch of the Divine Physician. Each of us harbors hurts and sorrows that can weigh upon our hearts and rob our nights of sleep. Mercy is the doorway to freedom. Mercy leads the heart of Jesus. Mercy is the pathway into his arms and opens the doors to inner peace and harmony. The Gospel of mercy enjoins us to "be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful." To paraphrase William Shakespeare: The quality of mercy falls like gentle rain from heaven; it is twice blessed, blessing the one who gives and the one who receives.

(6) Pope Francis and each of his predecessors have underscored the import of evangelization in a world that has grown distant from Christ, distracted by secular values, and anesthetized by sensuality. In our world, too many people are living a *carpe diem* existence without regard to the final judgment or the hope of everlasting life.

Francis has urged all of us to be courageous missionary disciples, attending to those who are alienated from Christ or estranged from the Church. Missionary work begins within our own family and circle of friends, urging us to constantly ask, "Who is not at the table, and what can we do to bring them home?"

This Holy Father has strongly admonished the clergy to leave the comfort of the sacristy and the security of the sanctuary in order to bring the Gospel to the peripheries, with special solicitude toward those who live and labor on the margins of society.

The first gospel we preach, of course, is the example of our daily life. St. Teresa of Avila wrote, "Spare me, O Lord, from sour-faced saints." The example of a joyful life is the most compelling attractant to life in the Spirit of God. In the words of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God."

(7) And finally, the seventh signpost is *communio* theology, never allowing ourselves, our parishes, or our diocese to become self-enclosed, self-absorbed, or self-congratulatory. *Communio* theology calls us into deep and meaningful communion with our Holy Father, union with the Bishop, and generous solitude with our mission territories.

Communio theology causes us to yearn for greater unity with the ecumenical and interfaith communities, always preferring dialogue over diatribe, invitation over invective, persuasion above polemic, and accompaniment over alienation.

I am so grateful for the presence of representatives from the ecumenical and interfaith communities, and look forward to a long and fruitful relationship, beginning at today's liturgy.

As I begin this new chapter in my life as Bishop of Las Vegas, I come to you as brother, bishop, pastor and friend, eager to know you, eager to listen to you, and eager to build upon the blessings you have received from our beloved Bishop Joseph Pepe.

On a personal level, I know that I will miss the Diocese of Helena terribly. However, the Holy Father is asking bishops to have the hearts of missionary disciples.

Therefore I will pour out my heart and life among you each and every day, knowing that our burdens are lightened because we are walking together in the presence of the Lord, Who, of course, is “ever in our midst as one who serves.”



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[Back](#)