

Catholic Leadership in the Church Today

Fifty years ago, an important event took place in Rome, for the Roman Catholic Church. Pope John XXIII - good Pope John, called for an Ecumenical Council for the church. This is a gathering of bishops from all over the world, to discuss and update the church and its ministry for our time. Bishop Jennings, our first bishop attended this council.

The Council ran for three years - from 1962-65. During its sessions, everything about the Catholic church was discussed, analyzed and updated. Good Pope John called it an 'aggiornamento', a new dawn, opening the doors and windows of the church to let in some fresh air! Not everyone was happy with this - it meant much work, much study, much discussion, many decisions, and costs. But it was a major development in the history of our church - and today we are living that enhanced understanding church in our daily lives.

There were many documents produced by the council - 16 major documents, that dealt with everything from - how we celebrate the Mass and pray, to our understanding of the Word of God in our lives, to an explanation of how the Church sees itself in this modern world. They talked of missions and missionaries, of priests and religious, of non-catholics and Jews, of the mass media and ecumenism. But of all the things that came from the Council, and what we see most readily in all aspects of Church life, is the role of the laity in the work of the Church, in the work of evangelization.

Until that time - it was majorly the duty of priests and religious to be witnesses to faith in the church. They were the teachers, the missionaries, the catechists and the sacramental dispensers. Lay people followed the direction and guidance of the priest, bishop or religious sister, and many times, never questioned their position.

Have things changed - and I must say, in my opinion, for the better. The major document on the Church, which defined the church in the world, used language that was inclusive. The Church was defined as "the people of God". Not a building, or a chapel, or a convent or seminary, but the people of God, united through their common baptism. This is important since this set the stage for our shared responsibility in the work of the Church, each using his or her God given gifts to continue the work of Jesus.

You no longer had to be a priest to lead prayers. You no longer had to be a religious sister to teach religion or be a catechist. You no longer had to be a priest to distribute Holy Communion or read the readings at Mass or serve the Mass. Ministries were opened to the laity in a variety of ways. And so they should have been.

New structures were developed in our parishes. We now had Parish councils, finance councils, ministry groups, catechetical teams, RCIA, sponsorships, religion teachers, prayer groups etc. even the laity representing the church in special ways, by baptizing and witnessing marriages in some cases. There were more people becoming missionaries - and going to preach and teach the Gospel. We were all seeing how through our baptism, and the use of our individual gifts, we could help make the Gospel and Jesus Himself, present in our world.

Tonight as we gather to show special thanks to Marlene Pavletic and Joe Salini for their generous use of their gifts in leadership in our Church, let us remember, that they are an example of merely two - of the thousands of devout Catholics in our church and throughout our world who are giving this example. To be a leader in the world today is a challenge for anyone. To be a provincial leader in two of the most prominent and important organizations in the Catholic church today, the Knights of Columbus and the Catholic Women's League, is both a challenge and also a privilege. Marlene and Joe might not think it is much of a privilege, with all the responsibilities each position entails, but we know that if the Lord puts you in this position, He will surely see you through in your responsibilities and needs.

We know that in leadership, we are not alone in the task. As the bishop I rely on my priests and deacons in a special way to assist me in my work. And I trust they will support and encourage me in all that I must do as the bishop. We know also that as members of the Catholic Women's League or Knights of Columbus, we do not lead alone - but count on and are supported by, our members and families who enhance our leadership by the generous giving and sharing of their gifts and talents. No leader has all the gifts and all the knowledge - not even the bishop or the Pope! Every leader needs others to support and to encourage them in a positive way.

Pope John Paul II mentioned in his documents "The New Millennium" that we are called as a Church, not to be critical or jealous of one another but to see each others gifts as a part of our own, and to realize that as we

work cooperatively together with a common purpose and goal, we are doing the work of Jesus, the work of God in our world.

Our evening tonight is to recognize this leadership, as exemplified in Marlene and Joe, and to not only thank them, but to encourage others to see in them an example, of how we can put the message of the Gospel into action in our world. Following Jesus and living and proclaiming his Gospel is not easy today. Our modern world is not very open to this message. The Second Vatican Council bishops knew this, and that is why they called the church to unity and to cooperation as 'the people of God'.

Joe and Marlene, thank you both for your witness to us. Thank you for using your gifts and talents to enhance our church, and our society with Gospel values and the message of the Lord. May your example, inspire all of us to see leadership as a call from Christ - a vocation - a response to our baptismal and confirmational calls. We know of the great works of the League and of the Knights - who build a stronger Church and better society for all - no matter what their faith.

We are happy to be here tonight with you. With your family and friends and with your supporters and coworkers. This is what the Church is all about. This is what the Council Fathers envisioned in their discussions and documents from the Second Vatican Council. This is "the Church in the Modern World" and its challenge today. May God bless you in a special way for responding to this challenge, may you be supported by those around you, who share your tasks, and may others follow in your footsteps and on the strong foundations you create for them.

As they say in latin: "Ad Multos Annos" - which means - may you have many years of joy in your ministry and work for the Lord.