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Editorial: The promise of Vatican II to the people of God

NCR Editorial Staff | Oct. 11, 2012

Oct. 11 marks the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Subscribers to *NCR* will have already received our 52-page special edition, which was titled "A church reborn." The photograph by Peter Geymayer on the cover is reproduced here. It is not, as you can see, in the style of many of the photos we see from the council. Typical photos show rows of mitered men sitting or standing in St. Peter's Basilica, deciding the fate of the Roman Catholic church.

In designing this publication, editor Dennis Coday asked art director Toni-Ann Ortiz and photo coordinator Teresa Malcolm to keep the phrase "the people of God" in mind. For *NCR* readers, this phrase probably describes best what Vatican II gave birth to and what still gives meaning to us today.

The phrase "people of God" appears in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the first document approved by the council. That document altered an ecclesiology that had become rigid and brittle over time, opening space for new theological insights and a new way of understanding what church is and who its members are. How that document came to be is telling as we try to understand what happened at the council and how to prepare for the next 50 years. The early drafts of *Lumen Gentium* began with a reflection on the mystery of the church followed by the hierarchical constitution of pope and bishops, then by a discussion of the laity. In deliberations, the assembly revised this outline, placing the topic of the people of God immediately after the discussion of the mystery of the church.

Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether has written about the significance of this change. "Thus the shared baptism of all Christians (including members of non-Catholic churches) became the foundational ground of the church. The ordained hierarchy were situated within the whole People of God as servants of a common mission and call to holiness, [that] they all share, rather than outside and above them as their source."

In the closing essay of our special edition, Boston College theologian Richard Gaillardetz writes, "*Lumen Gentium* affirmed that each of the baptized possesses a supernatural instinct of the faith (*sensus fidei*) that allows us to hear God's word, penetrate its meaning and apply it more fully in our lives." Note Gaillardetz's pronouns: *us* and *our*. The church is, above all else, a community.

In that phrase, the people of God, is the promise of full equality and full inclusion of all, men and women, ordained and not ordained, educated and ignorant, gay and straight, rich and poor, saints and sinners, all colors, all tribes and ethnicities. The church is we. It is all of us or it is nothing. It is -- to use another council phrase -- the full and active participation of all.

Some scholars argue that reformers place undue emphasis on the phrase, imbuing it with a Western, political, and even American democratic sense of "people." Perhaps. But inasmuch as the council anticipated the great questions of the coming century, as well as the groaning of people everywhere to be free, to be fully human, to be afforded full dignity, the phrase is most fitting.

Vatican II rests appropriately in the long tradition of biblical paradox: of the already but the not yet. It rests, too,

in a history of debate and argument that goes back to the earliest days of the community, to the disputes over who would be allowed in, and who left out, about what food could be eaten, and who would be cared for or ignored. We inherit a tradition that tells us the answer should always be the most generous and gracious imaginable.

That's the God of whom we are the people -- and perhaps that is the best guidance, expressed in other phrases such as "preferential option for the poor" and "pilgrim people" -- for how we will best be church for the next 50 years.

Unlike the laypeople in Geymayer's photograph of 50 years ago, we are no longer just onlookers, excluded by language, dress, education, vocation and rubric from any significant participation in the community. The people in the photograph couldn't have known that the gathering prelates would soon determine that they, the laity, should be brought in, as close as any others to the mystery.

Our challenge, then, for the next 50 years is to more fully realize the promise of inclusion.

The opening sentence in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, provides a principle for proceeding:

The joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the women and men of this age, especially the poor and those afflicted in any way, are the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the followers of Jesus Christ.

And so, people of God, pilgrim people, we continue.

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