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It's Not Over Yet!

One of the council's last surviving bishops talks about its message and unfinished work.

BY ALICIA VON STAMWITZ

IN 1962, REMI J. DE ROO was pastor of Holy Cross Parish in the Canadian city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Then, early one morning while he was presiding at a weekday Mass, Pope John XXIII announced that he had selected 38-year-old De Roo to be the bishop of Victoria. Six days later, De Roo was on his way to Rome to attend the first session of the Second Vatican Council. Pope John

XXIII called De Roo his "Benjamin," because he was the youngest of the North American Council Fathers.

Today, De Roo is one of the last surviving bishops to have attended all four sessions of the council, an experience that "radically altered" his outlook. For more than 50 years, he has lectured throughout the world, sharing his enthusiasm and insights on the vision of the council.

"I feel that I owe it to the people to keep telling the story of Vatican II," he said in an exclusive interview with *St. Anthony Messenger*, "because its teachings impact everybody." De Roo adds that although it was good in 2012 to mark the 50th anniversary of the opening of the council, the December 8, 1965, closing date is more important because that's when the teachings of the council became effective.

During the interview, which took place in St. Louis, Missouri, De Roo reflected on the key messages of the council, Pope Francis' leadership, and his hope for the future of the Church.

Q. I understand you met Pope Francis last spring.

A. Yes, I traveled to the Vatican for the

All these years later, Bishop Remi De Roo (right) still considers himself a "pilgrim of the Second Vatican Council." (Opposite page) Shortly after being appointed bishop of Victoria, Canada, in 1962, Bishop De Roo was summoned to Rome to take part in Vatican II.



PHOTO BY KEVIN DOYLE





While attending the canonization ceremony of Sts. John XXIII and John Paul II, De Roo, who retired in 1999, had the opportunity to meet Pope Francis, who kissed De Roo's ring that all those who participated in Vatican II were given.

canonization of Pope John Paul II and Pope John XXIII—who, of course, called the Second Vatican Council. When I travel these days I use a wheelchair as a precaution because occasionally I have problems with my balance. A young priest wheeled me right next to the popemobile, so as the pope was approaching I called out to him in Italian, “*Sono padre del concilio vaticano!*” I am a Vatican Council father!

Well, Pope Francis' face lit up. He came over and said words to the effect of, “What a wonderful experience you must have had!” Then he took my hands and held on to both of them for the longest while, as he continued talking. I don't remember half of what he said because I was totally engrossed by his presence. But to my amazement, he then bowed down and kissed the Vatican council ring on my right hand. There aren't many times in Catholic Church history that the pope has kissed a bishop's ring.

(Right) Throughout his papacy, Pope Francis has continually reached out to the marginalized, such as this elderly woman during his visit to Paraguay. Such actions, says De Roo, reinforce the Gospel and council message “that every single member of the Church is equal in dignity.”

Q. This was a few months after the publication of “The Joy of the Gospel.” What did you think of the pope's first apostolic exhortation?

A. It is possibly the best updated summary of the meaning of Vatican II. In a sentence, it's an invitation to begin a new chapter of evangelization, and the invitation is for all of us. That's a point that Pope Francis has stressed many times. I hope that we are going to wake up to that message because

after 50 years of lecturing on Vatican II, I'm still not persuaded that most Catholics have really heard the message.

Even fewer have embraced the original vision and are doing something about it, with the possible exception of the religious orders of women. And these women have paid a price for their faithfulness in terms of criticism—generally from people who are uninformed about the council's vision.

Q. Can you remind us of that vision?

A. One of the main rediscoveries of Vatican II is the reclaiming of the ancient teaching that takes us right back to the beginning of the Church: the baptismal priesthood of the laity, which is the foundation of all the other gifts and charisms we receive in the Church. We need to reverse the model that has put one supposedly elite group at the top of the pyramid and all the rest in descending roles, with ordinary people of faith down at the bottom. That pyramid is the exact opposite of the Gospel.

The Gospel says, and the council emphasized, that every single member of the Church is equal in dignity and in the capacity to serve. It's critical



that every one of us, without exception, picks up the message of the council and of Pope Francis and achieves the joy of knowing the Gospel, living by the Gospel, and sharing the Gospel with others.

We sometimes forget that ultimately our faith is a way of life. We're not in the world to capture converts or persuade people to believe exactly what we believe. Yes, there are truths that are important; but don't forget that the early Christians were known as "followers of the way." It was the way they lived, much more than what they believed, that was critically important. Even the divinity of Jesus Christ was argued over by the Church for a long time at the intellectual level. But on the emotional and physical level, people put their bodies on the line and really loved one another; and so the Gospel was credibly preached by their actions.

Q. How does Pope Francis communicate this—that faith is a way of life?

A. By reaching out to people on the margins, and by keeping his mind and his heart open. I love that time he said, "Who am I to judge?" Because if there's

one weakness in the Church today, it's precisely that so many people are judging one another. I think one of the reasons why this pope is so popular is he's showing everybody that he loves them all. He reaches out to the untouchables, and he's showing in his daily life what the Gospel's all about. So when he writes something or says something profound, we know it's coming from lived experience, not just theory. We're not short of theory in our Church. We have many scholars and lay theologians, but they are not responsible for the Church. We are *all* responsible, because *we* are the Church.

Q. It sounds like Pope Francis has given you hope for the Church.

A. Yes, but there is a danger in that we'll get into a new and refined form of paternalism in this era of Pope Francis because we're proud we've got such a great pope. We think the pope is the Church, and that he can do it all. He's not and he can't. So I hope we'll take the pope's words seriously and live them by accepting our own responsibility to move the Church forward. We can't just applaud from the sidelines.

Q. Not everyone applauds Pope Francis, though. How do we address those who believe he's taking the Church in the wrong direction?

A. Any good executive of any major corporation knows very well that you've got to work with your people and you have to have their support if you want your dreams and ideals to be realized. The problem is that sometimes people don't know their own history. You often find that people who take narrow-minded stances are uninformed, or they are reacting out of a negative emotion, like fear.

What to do? Continue loving them, and don't get into arguments. Psychologists will tell you that you never get unity through the head; unity comes through the heart. Brains are made to sort and file, divide and make distinctions; so arguments get you nowhere. In fact, they may harden others, and you may lose your good relationships with them.



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Bishop De Roo and the
Second Vatican Council.

Instead, take time to bring yourself up to date on where the Church is, so that you have solid answers to people's questions. Invite others to explain to you why they think the way they do, and try to explore with them the deeper, substantial teaching of the Church, and the work of the Spirit. Lovingly, firmly, doggedly, keep asking questions.

Q. Even if you disagree on important Church teachings?

A. Yes. Remember that following Christ is much more than just accepting certain teachings. We focus so much on the truth, but where has it led us? Down through the centuries we've had all these battles over doctrine. People have been killed because they were seen as not believing what one school of theology believed and tried to impose on the other. The truth is important but, as I said before, Jesus is also the *way* and the *life*.

Living the Gospel means being open to receive from Jesus the grace, the vitality, and the energy that we need. So we need to keep all three in balance and recognize that people today need witnesses as much or more than teachers, as Pope Paul VI said.

Q. Can you speak to any failure or disappointment of the council itself?

A. The council failed to set up an enabling agency to put its teachings into practice. My hope would have

been that Pope Paul VI would have commissioned the recognized leaders of the council to implement its teachings: people like Cardinals Leo Suenens, Jean Daniélou, and John Dearden; and theologians like Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, and Gregory Baum. This is by no means a complete list of the most influential leaders, but these are some of the men that I knew best, the men that I worked with during the council.

Q. Is it too late to set up such an agency now?

A. Well, that is now the challenge for Pope Francis. His appointment of a group of cardinals to help him govern is a very good sign. He's undertaken a tremendous task in the reform of the Curia, which definitely needs it. The Curia has to be an instrument that facilitates the work of the bishops' conferences, not a group of pseudo-judges that sits there interfering and judging, or doing things that the bishops should be doing.

For instance, if someone writes a book with which the Vatican or whoever has a problem, it's the bishops of that area who should be dealing with the person in terms of orthodoxy—not the bishop of Rome or a member of the Curia. Rome should have nothing to do with local foibles and problems. The pope should intervene only if the local bishops are unable to reach an understanding. Then it makes sense

for them to ask their brother bishop in Rome to help them clarify a question in order to strengthen the local Church and restore unity.

Q. You were investigated by the Curia many years ago. Can you tell us about that?

A. In 1986, in Washington, DC, I made a declaration at a conference that I have repeated many times since. I said the question of the ministries of women is of such importance that it

Bishop De Roo, seen here greeting Pope Paul VI, says he wishes the pontiff would have commissioned the leaders of the council to implement its teachings.



PHOTO BY FOTO FELICI

requires the communal spiritual discernment of the whole people of God, not just the hierarchy. And I'm not limiting *ministry* to the priesthood or to ordination: that's only one aspect. I mean ministries in the broader sense of the word—the variety of roles women can assume to help transform the patriarchal Church into a community of equal disciples.

After the conference, Cardinal Ratzinger called me to Rome to explain my position; but the president of the Canadian Catholic Conference supported me and suggested the investigation be terminated. Now, I see that Pope Francis has repeatedly said we need “a very serious study” of the roles of women, and I'm encouraged by that.

Q. What do you hope will be the takeaway from this interview for our readers?

A. I would like to see more people take an objective, serene second look at the substantive and deep teachings of the council. I especially trust that we will all reclaim our baptismal priesthood. I invite all believers to explore and ponder the council's teachings about revelation, the fullness of which is found in the person of Jesus Christ—both the messenger and the message. I hope they will recognize that other Christian Churches can also serve as instruments of grace: that all believers have seeds of the Divine planted in their hearts.

Finally, I hope Christians everywhere will reclaim the notion of sacramentality as applying to all of creation—something Pope Francis has taken up in his new encyclical, “*Laudato Si'*.” Modern science warns us that our planet is fragile and in grave danger because of our carelessness, our arrogance, and our aggressive exploitation. May we all heed the Church's call to a deeper spiritual, cultural, and ecological conversion! **A**

Alicia von Stamwitz is an award-winning freelance author and longtime editor with the religious press. Her essays and articles have appeared in this magazine, as well as *The New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, *The Sun*, *America*, and *The United Church Observer*.

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