

Keeping the conversation open: *Open House* and Vatican II

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Abstract

The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) set out a new vision of the role of lay people in the Roman Catholic Church whereby they were no longer seen as passive recipients of clerical initiatives, but as active ministers of the Gospel. This article describes the historical context from which Vatican II emerged and outlines the scale and significance of the changes it set in train. It then considers the Council’s developing theology of the laity and the challenges of implementing it. In the local context, the article examines the way in which these issues were reflected in the pages of *Open House*, an independent Scottish Catholic journal of comment, opinion and reflection, founded in 1990 with the aim of giving lay people a voice, enabling them to keep the conversation about Vatican II alive. It concludes by welcoming Pope Francis’ call for a synodal church, in which all the people of God share in the church’s life and mission, seeing this as offering a fresh interpretation of the Council and a new synthesis of its teaching.

Among those Roman Catholics who welcome Pope Francis’ call for a synodal church are Scottish lay people who were formed by the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). At its heart is an understanding of the Church as the People of God, in which lay people as well as clergy, by virtue of their baptism, make up the *Christifidelis* [Christ’s faithful people] who share in the building up of the Church and the fulfilment of its mission.

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The church struggled to translate this vision into practice in the years following the Council. This is the context in which *Open House*, an independent Catholic journal of comment, opinion and reflection, was founded in Dundee 1990. It aimed to keep alive Vatican II's vision of the church by giving a voice to lay people and highlighting examples of good practice in the implementation of the Council's reforms in Scotland.

In this article, I will outline the historical context from which Vatican II emerged and the scale and significance of the changes it set in train; consider the Council's developing theology of the laity and the challenges of implementing it; and look at the way in which these issues are reflected in the pages of *Open House*.



Vatican II: The historical context

The Second Vatican Council is sometimes described as bringing to an end the Catholic Church's 'long nineteenth century'. Joe Holland describes it in these terms:

After the French Revolution, when [the] first stage of modern industrial capitalism truly exploded upon the Catholic continental European world, the Catholic papacy reeled in strategic shock. The classical aristocratic paradigm, which for a millennium and a half had provided the societal foundation for the identity, mission, and ministry of European Catholic leadership, was suddenly doomed. In reaction, for most of the nineteenth century, the popes clung to a premodern strategy of vehemently condemning the emerging bourgeois liberal movement [...] as a destroyer of aristocratic Christian civilization'¹

The church's negative judgement of this new world provided what Joseph Komonchak describes as 'the basic ideological justification for the construction of modern Roman Catholicism in the face of an apostate world'.²

¹ Joe Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740–1958* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 14.

² Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Significance of Vatican II for Ecclesiology", in *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology in honor of Patrick Granfield*,

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This form of Catholicism ‘stressed the dogmas that stood in greatest contrast to the errors and heresies of modernity [such as] original sin, the atonement, and the right of Christ to rule over society and culture’; it ‘encouraged devotions that would provide a popular reinforcement for this faith’; it promoted Catholic associations and movements to ‘solidify a sense of identity among Catholics, to immunize them from contamination by the world, and mobilize and energize them to restore the world to Christ’; and it promoted uniformity and an ‘increasing centralization of authority in Rome by means of an exaltation of the person and role of the pope’.³ Its high point was the definition of papal primacy and infallibility at the First Vatican Council in 1870.⁴

Within this highly structured, top-down institution, which set itself apart from the world as a ‘perfect society’, the duty of lay people was simply to obey their pastors. This was most clearly expressed in 1906 by Pope Pius X in his encyclical, *Vehementer Nos*, in which he describes the church as ‘essentially an unequal society [...] comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock, [...] the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors’.⁵

By the middle of the twentieth century, the world had changed. A further, global stage of industrial capitalism began with the electronic revolution, the creation of transnational corporations, and rapid systems of transport and communication. In response, Pope John XXIII (1881–1963) pointed the church towards ‘global ecumenism, interfaith co-operation, cross-ideological dialogue, and a prophetic path of justice and peace, all in service of a new humanistic civilization on a planetary scale’.⁶ Part of this strategy was an attempt to integrate clergy, religious and laity in the common framework of the people of God.⁷ In his opening speech to the

O.S.B., ed. Peter C. Phan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 69–92, at 71.

³ Komonchak, “Significance of Vatican II”, 71.

⁴ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Concepts of Communion: Past and Present”, *Cristianesimo nella storia* 16 (1995), 321–40, <https://jakomonchak.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/jak-concepts-of-communion.pdf>.

⁵ Pius X, *Vehementer Nos* [Encyclical of Pope Pius X on the French Law of Separation], The Holy See, February 11, 1906, sec 16, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_11021906_vehementer-nos.html.

⁶ Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 3.

⁷ Holland, 296.

Second Vatican Council, Pope John spoke of the ‘needs [and] opportunities of the modern age’ and the ‘new order of things’.⁸

The Council he called was a watershed for the Catholic Church: it marked the end of one distinctive form of Catholicism and pointed the church towards another, more open and inclusive engagement with the world, with other faiths and other Christian traditions. Its sixteen documents, shaped by four years of debate by over two thousand bishops from across the world, address the church’s self-understanding and its relationship with the world, with other Christian churches and other faiths. The documents bear the imprint of the theology they were leaving behind and contain elements of a new theology which remained to be developed. This can clearly be seen in the emerging ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium*, the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which was approved in November 1964.



The ecclesiology of the Council

The theological commission charged with drafting a document on the church for debate at the Council assumed that its role was primarily to articulate a defence of the faith against modern errors.⁹ But when the text came to the bishops for debate, it became clear that it would have to be rewritten. The bishops were seeking to articulate a new ecclesiology.

The first two chapters of *Lumen Gentium* lay the foundation of membership of the Church in which all are equal by reason of their baptism. The first chapter focuses on the mystery of the Church; Chapter Two, “The People of God”, signals that the building up of the Church and the fulfilment of its mission is the work of the whole community of believers. Joseph Komonchak identifies this as one of the main contributions of Vatican II to ecclesiology.¹⁰ During the drafting process, the bishops rearranged the order of chapters and placed the chapter on the people of God before a chapter on the Church as hierarchical. Jan Grootaers observed that this restructuring represented ‘a fundamental reorientation of ecclesiology that

⁸ John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* [Pope John’s Opening Speech to the Council], trans. Joseph Komonchak, <https://jakomonchak.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/john-xxiii-opening-speech.pdf>.

⁹ Komonchak, “Significance of Vatican II”, 72.

¹⁰ Komonchak, 83.

would put an end to the pyramidal vision of Church. It showed that bishops, laity and religious were all part of the people of God [...] all members are equal by reason of their baptism, prior to any differentiation by the functions described in the next two chapters [on the hierarchy and the laity].¹¹

Chapter Two states that the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood, ‘each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ’.¹² It also states that the faithful share in Christ’s prophetic office: ‘The whole body of the faithful [...] cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people, when, “from the bishops to the last of the faithful” they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals’.¹³

As Komonchak notes, this new understanding of Church meant that the laity, ‘much neglected in preconciliar textbooks’, would have to be ‘rehabilitated’.¹⁴

Rehabilitation proved to be a difficult process. *Lumen Gentium* defines lay people in contrast to clergy and emphasises their unique responsibility for the world. Edward Schillebeeckx observed that this approach starts from largely ‘hierarchological’ premises:

Here it was often forgotten that this positive content [of a theology of the laity] is already provided by the Christian content of the word *christifidelis* [Christ’s faithful people]. The characteristic feature of the laity began to be explained as their relation to the world, while the characteristic of the clergy was their relationship to the church.

¹¹ Jan Grootaers, “The Drama Continues Between the Acts: The ‘Second Preparation’ and Its Opponents” in *History of Vatican II, Vol. 2: The Formation of the Council’s Identity, First Period and Intersession, October 1962–September 1963* ed. Giuseppe Alberigo; English version edited by Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 359–514. English version, 411.

¹² Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, sec. 10, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co, 1988), 361.

¹³ *Lumen Gentium*, sec. 12, 363. A translator’s footnote on this page explains that ‘*sensus fidei* refers to the instinctive sensitivity and discrimination which the members of the Church possess in matters of faith’.

¹⁴ Komonchak, “Significance of Vatican II”, 83.

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Here both sides failed to do justice to the ecclesial dimension of any *christifidelis* and his or her relationship to the world. The clergy become the apolitical men of the church; the laity are the less ecclesially committed, politically involved ‘men of the world.’ In this view, the ontological status of the ‘new humanity’ reborn with the baptism of the Spirit was not recognized in his or her own individual worth, but only from the standpoint or status of the clergy.¹⁵

Like much of the Council’s teaching, its emerging theology of the laity, which was widely debated at the Council, remained to be developed in the years that followed. But as Paul Lakeland states,

When we understand Vatican II in the light of all that its documents say and imply, the understanding of the lay role in the Church is implicitly revolutionized. [...] The laity and clergy together [...] come to be understood as a missionary body in history, called into dialogue with the world that is not the Church; at the same time, this world, in virtue of its being loved by God, exists in relation to the Church, the People of God.¹⁶



The challenge of implementation

Lumen Gentium speaks of the obligation of lay people to share their opinions on issues which affect the good of the church. This, it says, should be done ‘through the institutions established by the Church for that purpose’.¹⁷ Many of the structures to which Council documents refer, however, were not mandatory and in many cases the hierarchy retained control over who served on them.

It was not until 1983 that a revised Code of Canon Law was published which gave legal expression to the conciliar vision of lay participation in the life and ministry of the church. It made provision for a range of roles

¹⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry* (London: SCM, 1985), 157.

¹⁶ Paul Lakeland, “The Laity”, in *From Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations*, ed. Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 205.

¹⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, sec. 37, 395.

for lay people which included catechists (c. 776), parish co-ordinators (c. 517 §2), and membership of parish finance committees (c. 537).¹⁸ Parish councils, however, where people might be expected to share their opinions, as *Lumen Gentium* envisaged, can be mandated by a bishop after consultation with a council of priests, but they are not required.¹⁹ This meant in practice that one parish priest could set up a parish council and his successor could disband it.



Conflicts of interpretation

Twenty years after the close of Vatican II, Pope John Paul II called an Extraordinary Synod of Bishops to celebrate the Council and consider how it had been implemented. It soon became clear that there were very different interpretations of what the Council taught. While the bishops of England and Wales were among those who welcomed the Council's renewal of ecclesiology and its emphasis on the Church as the pilgrim People of God,²⁰ Cardinal Ratzinger, Head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and later Pope Benedict XVI, made it clear in advance of the Synod that he believed the Council's opening to the world had gone too far and its ecclesiology had been wrongly interpreted. In a long interview which was widely publicised, he stressed the supernatural rather than the 'sociological' nature of the Church.²¹

The Council's great image of the Church as the people of God appeared only once in the Synod's final report, which focussed on two major theological themes around which differences of interpretation coalesced. One stressed the mystery of the Church and sought greater separation of the Church from the world, and spiritual renewal; the other stressed the

¹⁸ Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, *The Code of Canon Law in English Translation* (London: Collins, 1983), 142, 93, 97.

¹⁹ Canon 536 states: 'If, after consulting the council of priests, the diocesan Bishop considers it opportune, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish. [...] The pastoral council has only a consultative vote [...]': Canon Law Society, *The Code of Canon Law*, 97.

²⁰ "Bishops for renewal", *The Tablet*, 3 August 1985, 22.

²¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1985), 45–46.

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Church as communion, sought the development of collegial and synodal structures, and a greater involvement in justice and peace.

Avery Dulles identified two broad schools of thought. One, associated most closely with Cardinal Ratzinger, had a ‘markedly supernaturalistic point of view, tending to depict the church as an island of grace in a world given over to sin’ and for them the church had to take a sharper stance against the world and seek to arouse the sense of God’s holy mystery.²²

The second group, represented by men like Cardinal Basil Hume (1923–1999), Archbishop of Westminster, had a more humanitarian and communitarian outlook. For them, the church had ‘not yet succeeded in giving the laity an adequate sense of participation in and co-responsibility for the mission of the church’ and the urgent need was for further development of collegial and synodal structures.²³ The two points of view implied vastly different programmes for the church.



Open House

It was in this context that the first edition of *Open House*, an independent Scottish Catholic journal of comment, opinion and reflection, appeared in December 1990. Written and produced by a small group of lay people who were committed to the church of Vatican II, it noted that ‘there is no regular organ of comment, opinion and reflection whose main focus is the Catholic Church in Scotland’. The Scottish Bishops, it said, had called for a ‘Church of communication and participation, with every member sharing responsibility for what the church is and does’. This meant ‘all of us exercising the rights and responsibilities conferred by our baptism and giving visible, credible expression to the familiar post-Vatican II truism that “we are the church”’.

It also meant:

taking seriously the fundamental Christian doctrine of the indwelling of the Spirit in each individual believer, who possesses a unique range of gifts for the building up of the Christian community. This doctrine has profound implications for a Church which, since 1870

²² Avery Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism: Current Challenges in the Theology of Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 191.

²³ Dulles, *Reshaping of Catholicism*, 192.



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and the infallibility decree, has arguably overplayed the pyramid symbol in its self-image, with the result that opportunities for lay initiative and the expression of lay inspiration [...] remain limited. This limitation impoverishes the whole Church’.

Open House declared itself happy to have the support of clergy but was clear that it was an independent lay venture. ‘There is an unhealthy imbalance of power and access to the means of communication within the Church’, it said, ‘in favour of the ordained, and in seeking to correct that imbalance, [*Open House*] will be promoting unity among the People of God’.²⁴ The emphasis wherever possible was to be on identifying and recommending positive initiatives, and readers were invited to share examples of best practice in the implementation of Vatican II’s agenda.

The first edition welcomed the creation of Action of Churches Together in Scotland, supported the church’s opposition to war in Iraq, and asked whether ‘Just War’ criteria are applicable in a nuclear age. It welcomed National Prisoners Week, which was being marked in Scotland for the first time, addressed the issue of Scottish self-determination, and carried the first of a series of articles on women in the church.

Open House has appeared on a regular basis ever since and is run on a voluntary basis with subscriptions paying for the cost of production, first in print and now online. Contributions come from lay and ordained, from people who have never written for publication, from academics and students. They write about the church, church history and education; about ecumenism, interfaith relations and theology; about Scripture, spirituality and culture; about ecology, human rights, the environment, justice and peace. There are regular reviews of books and films.

A readers’ survey in 2020 revealed that the typical reader is over 50, has been a reader for at least five years, and lives in the central belt of Scotland. The most often repeated feedback was that subscribers appreciated reading a range of views, even if they didn’t agree with them, because the discussion was conducted in a respectful way.

One person liked the ‘open mindedness and honest approach to challenging issues’. Another said it is great to read a magazine that offers ‘a space for respectful, honest and critical reflection on what really

²⁴ This and the preceding quotations appear on page 2 of issue 1 of *Open House*.

matters'. For another, *Open House* provides a 'glimpse of hope where it seems nothing will change in the church'.



A synodal church

Open House welcomed Pope Francis' call for a synodal church and organised a conference on synodality in 2019, which was oversubscribed. The journal currently carries detailed reports and analysis of the ongoing Synod on Synodality 2021–2024.

The official handbook for listening and discernment in local churches for the first phase of the synodal process (October 2021–April 2022) set the Synod firmly in the context of Vatican II:

One of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council was the institution of the Synod of Bishops. While the Synod of Bishops has taken place up until now as a gathering of bishops with and under the authority of the Pope, the Church increasingly realizes that synodality is the path for the entire People of God. Hence the Synodal Process is no longer only an assembly of bishops but a journey for all the faithful, in which every local Church has an integral part to play.²⁵

It describes the teaching authority of the Pope and the bishops as 'in dialogue with the *sensus fidelium*' and states that synodality seeks to make pastoral decisions that reflect the will of God as far as possible, 'grounding them in the living voice of the People of God'. The fundamental question the synod asks is:

How does this "journeying together" take place today on different levels (from the local level to the universal one), allowing the Church to proclaim the Gospel? And what steps is the Spirit inviting us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?

²⁵ Synod of Bishops, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality", 2021, sec 1.3, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2021/09/07/210907b.html>.

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In this light, the objective of the current Synod is to listen, as the entire People of God, to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church. We do so by listening together to the Word of God in Scripture and the living Tradition of the Church, and then by listening to one another, and especially to those at the margins, discerning the signs of the times. In fact, the whole Synodal Process aims at fostering a lived experience of discernment, participation, and co-responsibility, where a diversity of gifts is brought together for the Church's mission in the world'.²⁶

Open House will hold a conference on synodality in Glasgow on 8 June 2024 as a contribution to the next stage of the synodal journey in Scotland. Among the speakers is the distinguished German theologian and author, Werner Jeanrond, who was Professor of Divinity at the University of Glasgow from 2008 to 2012. Details at www.openhousescotland.co.uk



Conclusion

Open House was founded as an independent Scottish Catholic journal of comment, opinion and debate at a time when the reforming agenda of Vatican II appeared to be faltering. The implications of the Council's understanding of the Church as the people of God, in which lay people as well as clergy, by virtue of their baptism, make up Christ's faithful people, had yet to be fully realised. *Open House* sought to keep alive the Council's vision and encourage Catholics in Scotland to share their commitment to a renewed understanding of the Church in the world. The papacy of Pope Francis, especially Francis' call for a synodal church, has reignited the reforming agenda of the Second Vatican Council, and with it, hopes for a renewed church.

²⁶ Synod of Bishops, "For a Synodal Church", sec 1.3.

