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Vatican II, Ecumenism and a Parsonian Analysis of Change

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This article provides an analysis of the setting for and the dynamics set in motion by the Second Vatican Council, with its keynotes of ecumenism, lay participation, and personal autonomy, within a Parsonian framework for understanding processes of and mechanisms for change. Vatican II is understood as an attempt to increase the adaptive capacity of the Roman Catholic Church. Central to the processes of change set in motion by the Council are ongoing processes of inclusion and value generalization which aim toward the establishment of a broad community, including Catholic, Protestant, Jew, and all "men of good will." Potential strains and conflicts, and "fundamentalist" responses to attempted transformations are discussed within this context. The capacity for varied elements of Parsonian theory to shed light on complex contemporary change is posited and, it is hoped, illustrated.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) has proved to be instrumental in shaping both the contours and the spirit of the Roman Catholic Church. While the thought emerging from the Council sessions was not totally discontinuous with what had gone before, especially since the '40s and '50s within that church and in Protestant circles, the Council provided a coherent rationale strengthened by papal legitimacy for a concerted effort to reform and renew the Church and its relation to the modern world.[1] The long-term significance of the changes it set in motion can only be surmised. Yet twenty years after the conclusion of Vatican II, a number of writers have recently undertaken to assess the meaning and significance of the Council.

In the process of reading an influential Catholic theologian's work on the future of the Church and the significance of Vatican II (Rahner, 1981), it occurred to me that the Parsonian perspective in sociology might provide useful insights into the processes of change set in motion by the Council. It might, as well, clarify the broader societal environment within which these changes have occurred, and shed light on some of the current conflicts and strains being experienced.[2]

1. O'Dea (1966) points out that segments of the Catholic Church have advocated *aggiornamento*, or updating, throughout the last 150 years.

2. I have been reminded that the Parsonian perspective is merely one perspective among many and each may differentially shed light on and blind us concerning various issues. While this is true, it seems to me that *for many purposes* the Parsonian perspective (or more broadly "action theory") is especially fruitful for understanding the contemporary scene, shedding *more* light than alternative views taken alone.

Many sociologists even today would be skeptical of an attempt to address such changes from within the Parsonian perspective; according to them, he has no theory of change. For some others, he has a theory of change—a theory of evolution of societies, ultimately tied to their increased complexity. While this may be central to Parsons' contribution in this area, he provided at various points throughout his overall published work, if not a systematic theory of change, then a consistent body of insights that prove extremely useful in attempts to analyze change processes. These processes may incorporate cultural, social, and personality components. They may be analyzed, variously, at the societal or inter-societal level (broad patterns of evolutionary trends or radical breaks), at the institutional level, at the organizational level (e.g. changes in corporate "culture"), or at the micro-level of patterned interpersonal relationships.[3] I attempt to provide in what follows an outline of selected aspects of Parsons' work that are most relevant to understanding the dynamics of recent changes in the Roman Catholic Church.

Much of what Parsons has to contribute to understanding processes of change emerges from his overall systems perspective which emphasizes the interdependence of components of the system, the system's need to adapt effectively to its environments, and the always problematic need for integration and cohesion in complex, dynamic systems (Parsons, 1951; 1961; 1966: 30-79; 1971). For Parsons, even far-reaching change can serve the overall stability and effectiveness of the broader system. Parsons rejects the view that "real" change requires discontinuity, a radical break with the past, and the emergence of an unequivocally new order; he rejects, as well, a related assumption that such changes emerge solely from "grass-roots" attacks on the status quo (Parsons, 1951: Chapter 11). In fact modern societies must institutionalize mechanisms for change at the social, cultural, and personality levels.[4]

Central to Parsons' approach is his treatment of modernity (1967). Much of his concern for social order is really talk about the complex mechanisms and adaptations required for modern societies (and collectivities within them) to change and grow without losing their identity as collective entities. In agreement with his reading of Weber, Parsons sees a basic directionality to change that brings with it an inherent dynamic—the process of rationalization, ultimately a process of rejecting uncritical acceptance of custom and a traditional ordering of life in favor of the planned, rational control of the human condition. This involves a critique of the traditional to the extent that it contradicts movement toward more efficient and effective attainment of goals. While Weber emphasized the entropic consequences of this process, a running down of the "stock of charismatic energy," Parsons emphasizes the negentropic properties of varied developments in modern societies (Parsons, 1937: Vol. 2, Ch. 18; 1978a: 15; Effrat, 1976: 663-664). Religion traditionally served such an "energizing" function and, furthermore, continues to do so in the modern context, especially when it serves to master environmental exigencies by both adapting to human culture and shaping it.

The historical trend is toward enhanced generalized adaptive capacity—the ability of a social system to adapt to the changing face of the environment, to adapt in the activistic sense of mastery and the more effective attainment of goals. Effectiveness presupposes *flexibility* and an *openness to change*. Parsons dedicated numerous works to analyzing those aspects of

3. For further elaboration of Parsons' contribution to understanding change see Effrat (1976); Bourricaud (1971); and Johnson (1975). In his critique of Parsons' "change theory," Alexander (1983) fails to take into account the multidimensional concerns of Parsons' work. His critique addresses, almost exclusively, Parsons' "theory of differentiation," seeing it, ultimately, as an idealist theory of history (see Alexander, 1983: 128-150, 259-276).

4. Such presuppositions about change are conducive to a thorough analysis of the dynamics of empirical changes and their consequences, regardless of whether and to what extent a particular social order or structure is viewed as legitimate or illegitimate.

modern society that provide this much needed flexibility (1967: Chapters 9-11, 15: 1969: Chapter 16).

Parsons' discussion of evolutionary universals and his treatment of the various generalized symbolic media of interchange are attempts to delineate the importance for collectivities of developing 'degrees of freedom' as a way of maximizing adaptation to a dynamically changing environment, and of providing opportunities for needed innovations which can be successfully institutionalized. Systems of prestige, leadership, and authority, including positions of moral authority (assuming their prior legitimation), stimulate the acceptance of binding decisions and the interpretation of binding norms that legitimize sometimes extensive changes in the structure of society and its institutions.[5] In the media of power, influence, and activation of value commitments, Parsons details the importance for system flexibility and innovation of a highly generalized readiness on the part of members to respond to what are judged to be legitimate decisions, interpretations, and appeals. At the core of most of these dynamic elements of modern society lies a crucial resource—trust. With "deflation" of such trust comes a weakening of the ability to arrive at adaptive innovations.[6]

As modern societies become more complex and differentiated in pursuit of greater effectiveness and efficiency, they are challenged with new problems of integration. Within this pluralistic context, a process of value generalization is a crucial component in maintaining a tenuous integration. Values and normative prescriptions are couched at higher levels of generality, leaving greater flexibility in how they may be legitimately interpreted and implemented. Such a process facilitates the minimizing of potential conflicts of a plurality of actors and collectivities by transcending particularistic prohibitions, and provides added rationales for legitimately abandoning norms that are maladaptive in the face of new conditions (Parsons, 1966: 23; 1971: 14-15; Parsons and White, 1961: 89-135).[7]

Parsons does not provide an especially sanguine view of the success of value generalization in any particular case (Parsons, 1969 439-472). While, ideally, value generalization serves an integrative function, the process is not without potentially serious divisive consequences. Increasing flexibility "in the patterning of adaptation to the shifting exigencies of the situation" may often come at the expense of the equally imperative "definiteness" of the norms defining expectations (see Parsons 1968: 324-329; 1961: 343-344; see also, Berger, 1969: 127-169; 1979). Alongside such "anomic" consequences, elements of the population may become alienated from newly justified patterns of normative behavior. Such resistance to value generalization Parsons calls fundamentalism: for the "fundamentalist," greater generality in evaluative standards is judged not as "progress" but as the abandonment of true commitment (Parsons, 1966: 23).

5. Parsons emphasizes at several points the important role played by *interpretation*, especially interpretation of "sacred texts," in providing adaptability in changing situations (see Parsons, 1978b).

6. The emphasis here is not meant to obscure the potential of such evolutionary universals as stratification, formal law and democratic association, and of the media of power, influence, value commitments, and money to work *against* adaptive or desirable changes. As Parsons points out (1967: 500), stratification often becomes a predominantly conservative force in the transition to full modernity. Furthermore, trust in the competence and/or good will of specific holders of fiduciary positions and various "persuaders" (including charismatic figures) may be, empirically, misplaced.

7. Parsons' acknowledgement of the central importance of the generalization of value and normative systems owes much to both Weber and Durkheim. See Weber's treatment of formal rationality (Rheinstein, 1954), and in his sociology of religion, his concept of "unified personality" (Aloisi, 1983). See Durkheim's concept of organic solidarity, and his (ambivalent) treatment of "the cult of the individual" (Bellah, 1973).

Also emerging from the modern straining toward greater rational control of the human condition are the processes of adaptive upgrading and inclusion. If differentiation is to be truly adaptive, the performance of the units of the system—individuals in their roles, or collectivities—must be more productive than they were before. Parsons terms this adaptive upgrading (1966: 22). They must have both the opportunities and resources to maximize performance. At the collectivity level, Parsons suggests that while the unit may have lost certain functions, it should be more able to perform its central tasks as they have been newly refined.

The process of inclusion is characterized by both its positive adaptive and integrative contributions, and its consistency with central value principles. There is an increasing value pressure to bring all members in a society into full and equal membership in what Parsons calls the societal community. This process of inclusion breaks down traditional distinctions based on ascribed status, e.g. race and sex, in favor of equal access to participation and valued contribution toward shared goals, on the basis of achievement (Parsons, 1967: 422-465; 1971: 86-94).

Movement toward the value of equality of opportunity is achieved only in the face of conflict with those who have a vested interest in maintaining ascribed limitations to opportunities. Likewise, movement toward this goal does not insure equality of results, and indeed creates new bases for inequalities (Parsons, 1970). According to Parsons, the resolution of just what inequalities are justifiable in the face of movement toward full inclusion and equality of opportunity (acknowledging that the ideal is far from fully realized) is a center of controversy in contemporary modern societies (Parsons 1971: 86-121).

An important characteristic of the pluralistic nature of modern society is the increased prevalence of democratic associations, tied to greater levels of personal autonomy (Parsons, 1967: 514-519; 1971: 24-26, 101-106). The trend is not solely to bureaucratization, but to organizational structures that more centrally reflect the role of individual choice, responsibility, and commitment. Affiliations are, in large part, voluntary, based on shared principles and goals; i.e., membership is based on personal commitments. Association is characterized by discussion and participation in decision-making which, ultimately, serve an integrative function, as they are conducive to achieving group consensus and to maintaining high levels of motivation and solidarity. At the same time, a central ingredient of association is a hierarchy of authority, which provides the "bindingness" necessary for collective effectiveness and successful adaptation.

With the wide array of choice provided by modern society, and its increased reliance on valued participation and contributions from increasingly large sectors of the population, individual personalities become a crucial resource. Individuals must be capable of high levels of cognitive performance, responsibility, and sustained commitment. Individuals are guided, increasingly, by their personal identity, in Parsons' sense of a core meaning system that provides direction and autonomy (Parsons, 1968). One's identity is the product of a restructuring of personal attitudes and courses of action in the light of continuing experience. This mature motivational capacity provides a stable anchoring, a basic orientation to life, that as a result frees the individual from stereotyped behavior and external pressures. It is the product, at the personality level, of the process of rationalization (Parsons, 1967: 48-49; see also Aloisi, 1983: 13-20). Societal flexibility is, thus, complemented by personality flexibility. Neither level of flexibility, of course, can be assumed—there is great variation in the degree to which particular societies, collectivities or personalities embody these "trends."

One important component of Parsons' systems approach is his concept of strain (Parsons, 1951; 1961: 70-79). His treatment of strain has important yet sometimes subtle ramifications for an understanding of change. Put simply, strain is a disturbance of the expectation system. On the motivational level, discrepancy between expectation and reality leads to strain, and may lead to actions to remedy the situation. One important source of strain is the discrepancy

between accepted values, such as justice and equality, and the structure of societies that fall short of implementing them satisfactorily. Social movements resulting from such strains act further to bring to focus the discrepancies that exist, mobilizing collective action for change. In this sense, social movements are both the result of strain and the cause of further (perceived) strains.

Furthermore, as strain leads to change, change also leads to strain, due to the disruption of earlier patterns of reward. Such a disruption of what Parsons called vested interests is a basic source of resistance to change, including what was earlier described as a "fundamentalist" resistance to value generalization. Parsons means vested interests to imply *not only* economic interests, but also relational rewards of love, approval, esteem and prestige; these interests also include moral interests tied to a sense of personal integrity. In order to overcome inherent sources of resistance to desired change, ways of developing "coping" strategies and of providing legitimation for new and innovative patterns must be found. Parsons addresses such processes at various points in discussions of the mechanisms of social control—the "therapeutic" procedures necessary to, on the one hand, forestall deviance, and on the other, to help overcome resistance to change (e.g. in the child's ambivalent growth toward independence and maturity).

In essence, the situation must be redefined such that the rewards of "innovative" behavior outweigh the costs relative to continuation in earlier patterns. Thus, some degree of relative deprivation becomes attached to continued conformity with the older pattern, although there "should not be too great immediate pressure for abandoning the old ways precipitately and totally" (Parsons, 1961: 77). Further, while alienation from earlier patterns is conducive to successful change, "too much" alienation is detrimental to the long-term institutionalization of change: the push from the old ought not be stronger than the pull to the new (Parsons, 1961: 75-76). A shared vision of a vision of a future to be achieved would seem more conducive to effective change than compulsive alienation from authority figures.

A major concern for Parsons, at least since the 1960s, was to explain the changing place of religion in modern societies that is often termed secularization. While he shares the terminology with other social theorists, Parsons' emphasis differs from most. Parsons rejects the portrayal of secularization as a displacement of religion's significance. While he admits that the process of structural differentiation has led to a change in the functions of religion, Parsons argues that its impact, through its broad cultural values, remains highly significant. Modern secular society is more adequately seen as undergoing the institutionalization of Judeo-Christian values, while religious organizations continue to exert influence on individuals through the exercise of moral authority.

One aspect of the secularization process is the increased secularization of religious beliefs, notably in the western world. As Parsons puts it:

> What was new in the Western church was the idea that the church was not only ordained for the salvation of souls for eternity, but it also had a mission for this world, to establish the kingdom of God on earth (1978a: 188).

Accordingly, secular worldly activity took on added significance as every person was to contribute to achieving this worldly transformation in their everyday lives, and their secular "vocations." Thus the secularization process is a movement to upgrade secular society to the highest religious level through the efforts of all who share in these values. Parsons sees this process continuing and evolving in recent developments in the Catholic Church (Vatican II, especially in its ecumenical impact), as well as in the broader, but related, phenomenon of a religion of love and solidarity that attempts both to transcend denominational and even strictly religious/secular boundaries, and the limits and biases inherent in our instrumental individu-

alistic tradition (see Parsons, 1978a: 199-209; 1971: 207-245).

VATICAN II AND THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD

The Second Vatican Council can be understood as an attempt to increase the adaptive capacity of the Roman Catholic Church. The problem set up by Vatican II was this: how does the Church adapt, in the face of an evolving unfavorable environment, more effectively to achieve its goals, fulfill its mission on earth, and at the same time not lose its identity as a collectivity and a long-lived cultural force? Many of the Council fathers saw clearly the need for extensive change and growth in the Church—both in terms of effectively defining the focus of its mission, and in arriving at workable, effective strategies for achieving desired change.

What was this environment that was perceived as unfavorable and problematic? It was the structures and attitudes of a pluralistic world, characterized by rationality, planning, and a high valuation of personal choice and responsibility, that assumed humanity's control over increasing aspects of the human condition. Influential leaders within the Church recognized that it needed to overcome its anti-modernist mentality, and to re-evaluate and transform various aspects of its institutional structure. Yet this was not merely a passive accommodation to the pressures exerted by the secular world. Nor was it seen, primarily, as a defense against an increasingly neo-pagan world, as Karl Rahner and others have at times suggested (Rahner, 1983: 29-34). Rather, the Church had to find more adequate ways to address itself to and serve its new audience, and to define more effectively its special place in a (differentiated) world that, in many ways, reflected an increased realization of basic religious and ethical values in its institutions and its aspirations. This long-term trend toward sacralization of the world is reflected (arguably) in the fervor with which large segments of the world community show increasing unwillingness to accept the degree to which all societies continue to fall short of full implementation of the values of human dignity and justice.

A rapprochement with the modern, secular world was at the core of Vatican II; it is reflected in the call, still ringing clearly today, to recognize the "signs of the times" (Flannery, 1981: 905).[8] The Council documents had much to applaud in their depictions of the modern world: through its advances in technology, growth of knowledge in the human sciences and widening networks of communication, humanity was increasingly capable of mastering its environment and planning its future. The Church saw humanity evolving—toward its emancipation and maturity—with a growing sense of human dignity and personal freedom, alongside the development of a universal culture. Yet at the same time the Council recognized the dangers and serious difficulties these changes had brought with them. Human beings with their increased mastery had lost their direction and a sense of balance; new conflicts and contradictions had emerged, not the least of which was continued poverty in the face of technological wizardry and its accompanying opulence (Flannery, 1981: 903-948). In the face of such great opportunity and spiritual crisis, the Church's mission was to be one of service to humankind—to serve as an instrument for the unity of all humanity, and for the realization of a more humane and just society. This is clearly an ecumenical stance. It depicts the universal mission of the Church in the world; a mission to be participated in not alone by all Catholics, but by all Christians, non-Christians, and by all "men of good will," including non-believers (Flannery, 1981: 350-369).

This is a radical call for what Parsons termed inclusion. According to Rahner, Vatican II was a historic beginning of the full actualization of a world church; not a western church, nor a

8. References to Vatican II documents are to the relevant pages in the Flannery edition.

Roman church, but a world church "with all its parts exercising a reciprocal influence on one another." (Rahner, 1981: 79). The twenty years since the conclusion of the Council have witnessed meaningful progress toward this goal, notwithstanding occasional warnings from Roman authorities of the potential dangers of regional pluralism (see Dulles, 1985: 400-403).

Such an ecumenical stance required a clear redirection of the Church's efforts. To become a truly world church, to bind the wounds of separation with other Christian churches, and to acknowledge the world as an important focus of eschatological hope and activity, required a degree of adaptive capacity and flexibility that the Church structure did not seem to possess.

A singularly important contribution of Vatican II was its introduction of a new dynamic of flexibility and openness to change. Key theologians such as Rahner and Schillebeeckx have been instrumental both before and since the Council in developing the theologically relevant insights (Rahner, 1981; 1983; Schillebeeckx, 1967; 1977; 1984). Significantly, the Council documents depict a Church in a situation of strain and crisis, fostering a sense of urgency to achieve the dual and complementary goals of renewal and unity, and thus justifying the necessary disturbances that would surely arise. A clear distinction was drawn between the Church of Christ, as symbol and ideal, and the Roman Catholic Church in its historical form. The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* speaks of the Church as a pilgrim church, in need of continued renewal and reformation as it slowly grows to maturity (Flannery, 1981: 350-369). The structures of the Church needed to be, in the spirit of modernity, open to reflection and critical examination. Further, the *Decree on Ecumenism* spoke of the scandal of the Catholic Church's continued separation from its brethren that "openly contradicts the will of Christ" (Flannery, 1981: 452). All Catholics were called to make an appraisal of what needed to be renewed in the Church, and in themselves, so that the Church would more faithfully, and more clearly, witness to the teachings of Christ (Flannery, 1981: 456-459).

Central to an increased level of flexibility within the Church is a process of value generalization set in motion by the Council. The basis of this process is the Council's announcement (echoed many times since) of the existence of a *hierarchy of truths* (Flannery, 1981: 462). The Council pointed out that the truths of Catholic doctrine varied in their relationship to and significance for the foundation of the Christian faith. The goal was to safeguard the core of the faith (the "deposit of faith") while leaving socio-historically created norms for behavior, as well as institutional forms, open for critical analysis in an ecumenical dialogue.[9] *The Decree of Ecumenism states*:

> While preserving unity in essentials, let everyone in the Church, according to the office entrusted to him, preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites, and even in the theological elaborations of revealed truth (458).

This approach left a greater degree of freedom for an open and authentic dialogue for ecumenical discussions. It also helped provide greater openness to the accommodations to cultural pluralism required by the institutionalization of a world church. By emphasizing the socio-historical origins of traditional Church structures, dogma, and even sacred scripture, and by attempting to reduce "the Christian message to its ultimate basic substance," the Church's capacity for growth and change were dramatically increased (Rahner, 1981: 87).

9. While the rational critique of traditional norms and structures, and the role of discussion or dialogue in this critique and ultimate consensual agreement was an important element in Parsons' thinking (and in the works of the classical sociologists), it is a much more explicit concern of the critical theorists. In fact, such theologians as Rahner, Schillebeeckx and Gregory Baum appear to have been much influenced by Habermas and the other proponents of critical theory.

The pronouncement of a hierarchy of truths along with the renewed sensitivity to socio-historical relativity, put on center stage the increased reliance on *interpretation*, interpretation of the "signs of the times," of norms and their relative significance, and also, the importance of the interpretation of the Bible, biblical exegesis (Flannery, 1981: 762-765). The last twenty years have witnessed widespread attempts on the part of Catholic theologians to provide a hermeneutical, or interpretational, understanding of the Word of God, that is both authentic and at the same time, in the words of Schillebeeckx, "brings the evangelical message home to twentieth century man" (1977: 3). Various emphases have developed, including what might be called a "hermeneutic of domination" that is shared in various ways by proponents of liberation theology, black theology, and feminist theology.

The Second Vatican Council, in addition to initiating a process of value generalization, sanctioned within the Catholic Church movements toward adaptive upgrading and inclusion. Traditionally, key roles in administration and management, as well as performance of liturgical functions, were reserved for clergy, foremost those at the highest levels of the hierarchy locally and otherwise, with the pinnacle of power in Rome. While insisting on the singular place of the Pope, the Council emphasized the collegial character and structure of the episcopal order, the authority of regional assemblies of bishops and that of the individual bishop. Each, together with the local priest, notwithstanding their clear hierarchical ordering, was to be united by bonds of intimate brotherhood. Even the local priest (in part through new structures such as pastoral councils), in union with the bishops, was to work "efficaciously towards building up the whole body of Christ" (Flannery, 1981: 369-387).

The Council's call to active sharing in the mission of the Church, re-emphasized in the recent revision of the Code of Canon Law, has led, not without conflict and uncertainty, to notable changes at the parish level, changes that are, clearly, still evolving. In many parishes throughout the United States, there has been a loosening of traditional authority relationships and a widening array of positions of responsible participation in the name of a policy of "shared responsibility." Clergy and religious are sharing in decision-making alongside the pastor, with the (primarily) consultative input of increasing numbers of lay members of the parish, in new church structures.[10]

An important contribution of the Council was that it promulgated the first official attempt to provide a theological definition of a Christian laity (Schillebeeckx, 1967: 41; Flannery, 1981: 766-798). There was to be no radical contrast between laity, religious, and clergy; all were the recipients of their own special gifts, charisms, which readied them for the task of renewal (Flannery, 1981: 388-413). The laity were to contribute to the sanctification of the world in two ways. First, they were to take a more active part in the Church community, filling new roles (liturgical and non-liturgical) and playing a greater consultative role along with clergy and religious. Secondly, the Council recognized the crucial part to be played by the laity through the witness of their everyday lives, in their work, their relationships and their individual and collective activities to transform the existing state of the world. In the last twenty years the Church has gone far in implementing the call to greater "lay participation" within the parish community; more difficult, it seems, is the institutionalization (and specification) of just what would be entailed for adequate performance and witness in the secular world.

Alongside the upgrading of responsibility of all the faithful, went the recognition of the dignity and autonomy of the individual, including the autonomy of moral decisions (Flannery,

10. It should not surprise that the heightened expectations occasioned by the Vatican II emphases on collegiality and lay participation have led many to judge such changes as have occurred as, at best, cosmetic. From an organizational point of view the extent of role transformation has been great, more notable, nevertheless, than the transmission of power.

1981: 799-812). As a result (although here as elsewhere the Council gave voice to changes in progress), there has been a change in the Church's emphasis in the areas of moral theology and moral catechesis. According to Rahner

> consciences must be formed, not primarily by way of casuistic instruction, going into more and more concrete details, but by being roused and trained for autonomous and responsible decisions in the concrete complex situations of human life which are no longer completely soluble down to the last detail, in fields never considered by the older morality. . . (1983: 68).

Mature faith and decision-making is reflected in the concept of fundamental option [11] (Rahner, 1981: 27-28, 52-53: 1975; Sullivan, 1980: 245-249). A person's moral choices and their significance are tied to a basic inner orientation to life and relationship to God rather than on a "scrupulosity" concerning obedience to particular rules and obligations. The person undergoes an ongoing learning experience, the result being (ideally) increasingly mature moral choices that reflect one's "choice of self." It is through this fundamental stance for God and Church that the individual maintains an ongoing commitment to and motivation for the task of "building up the Church." It is through the generalized nature of this commitment that the individual is prepared for personal growth ad the renewal of the Church.

STRAINS IN THE CHURCH TODAY

The Roman Catholic Church is currently experiencing several areas of strain related to the reforms set in motion by the Second Vatican Council. Two are especially relevant to the present analysis. First is the conflict between the institutional/hierarchical view of the church and the charismatic/associational view of a "people of God." Second is the related area of contention or conflict over the legitimacy of Church renewal and redefinition of its mission since Vatican II.

The Council's emphases on human autonomy, shared responsibility, and the distribution of charisms to all the faithful are seen by some within the Church as incompatible with a hierarchical, "legalistic" church which can function to inhibit the prophetic process of renewal. This democratic emphasis was in tension with the Council's insistence on the traditional role of hierarchical authority in giving direction to the Church and authentic interpretation in doctrinal matters (Dulles, 1982: 18-40, 66-102). While ideally the hierarchical and the charismatic elements in the Church were to exist in harmonious cooperation, in fact no clear structures existed or have been put into place to protect a prophetic challenge to existing practice from sanction by the ecclesiastical hierarchy (see Dulles, 1982: 18-40; Rahner, 1975: 293-296). The situation has led to notable instances in the post-conciliar period of challenges to the legitimacy of both magisterial interpretation and discipline, and what is seen as unjust squelching of dissent. Such challenges are presented as more faithfully reflecting the "spirit" of Vatican II.

While the strains are understandable, especially within a setting of high expectations of change, the fact is, as Dulles points out, that institution and charism (or as Parsons would say, association and authority of office) are both necessary aspects of the Church today, as they are

11. There is a marked resemblance here to Parsons' concept of identity. Both point to a core "guidance system," based on generalized (and internalized) cultural principles, that provides both consistency of action and motivation and flexibility.

of the modern world.[12] In sympathy with the value placed by the Council on persons' free and mature appropriation of the gospel, Dulles acknowledges the preference for mercy over severity in dealing with cases of doctrinal disagreement. Yet "strong structures of authority may be needed to protect the integrity of revealed truth" (Dulles, 1985: 403). They may, as importantly, be necessary for the Church effectively to achieve large-scale and meaningful change, successfully institutionalized at the international level. The Second Vatican Council itself, called by then Pope John XXIII, is a case in point.

A further, but related, strain concerns the effects of various reforms on some Catholics. Among clergy, religious, and laity, some respond with understandable feelings of anxiety and insecurity in the face of uncertainty presented by a Church more open to the future in its definition of right conduct, responsibility, and in its self-definitions.

> Like children entering adolescence, we are being forced out of the warm nest of our cultural past to set off towards a future which we must construct for ourselves (Schillebeeckx, 1969: 177).

One area of concern is the role of clergy vis à vis the laity. The post-conciliar emphasis on the special importance of the universal priesthood of all baptized Christians has resulted in confusion about the unique identity of the clergy (the ordained priesthood). What this emphasis means in terms of implementing new relationships and new role definitions with the Church has proven to be unclear. In a recent address Archbishop Pilarczyk of Cincinnati put the problem this way:

> The image of the priest has changed in the church. It is almost as if priesthood is a different office now, except that nobody is too sure where the difference really lies. . . . It may well be that one of the most difficult problems of today's church lies in finding a way to affirm and maintain the real, authentic leadership role of the ordained priest without downplaying the true gifts and responsibilities of lay persons (1986: 141, 143).

It is equally problematic that in pursuit of renewal and an open dialogue with other Christian and non-Christian churches, the Church has isolated part of itself—it has alienated those who do not find its redirection or particular changes legitimate. This latter response can be described as "fundamentalist" in Parsons' sense of a negative reaction to value generalization. Naming the response, unfortunately, does not resolve the issue: *what is one person's fundamentalism is another person's protection of the faith*. In fact, judgments as to what serve as legitimate interpretations and implementations of Vatican II (and as legitimate innovation and critique) vary widely.[13] The present situation makes clear that the value generalization fostered by Vatican II is still in process; whether the process will have long-term positive integrative consequences for the Church remains to be seen.

In the face of these strains, the Church in the United States has looked increasingly to the role of religious education, with special emphasis on adult religious education and moral catechetics, as a way for Catholics to become better prepared for more active and responsible roles. Some such ongoing process of education appears to be critical for an effective institu-

12. Dulles also points out that charisms, or special gifts, are not contrary to institutional office. The college of bishops, as successors to the apostles, are seen to embody the special gifts required to lead the Church (see Dulles, 1982: 29-40).

13. Kelly (1979) and Varacalli (1983) illustrate, in varied ways, the strains and polarizations that have developed alongside conflicting notions of what the future Church should look like.

tionalization of value generalization.[14] Consistent with this approach is the concern for providing continuing education of clergy and of religious. This entails instilling a deeper understanding of post-Vatican II ecclesiology, as well as the resources required both to fulfill more specialized and professional roles within and outside the Church community (providing ministry to youth, counseling, facilitating change and self-help, religious education, etc.), and to facilitate and mobilize greater lay participation in parish activities.

While some in the Church question the fidelity of current implementations of the Vatican II call for renewal, others judge the changes that have occurred to be insignificant, and see recent actions from Rome as a clear sign of retrenchment by Vatican leadership (see Ruether, 1986: 152-158).[15] The existing strains in the Church are intensified when competing perspectives, often accompanied by polarizing rhetoric, lead to a breakdown of trust and accusations of bad faith. The outright rejection, from either side, of the authoritative decision-making bodies only compounds the problems. Further initiatives for ecumenical reunion and effective influence on the implementation of basic Judeo-Christian principles, seem to require a strong legitimized source of moral leadership and authority.

One interpretation of the recent extraordinary synod of bishops in Rome sees its most important accomplishment as an initial setting of boundaries within which a clearer sense of Church identity can emerge (see Imbelli, 1986). Clarification of such a "grammar of boundaries and identity" appears to be a much needed tool for establishing a wideranging consensus on general principles and direction of the Church, that coexist with the pluralism required of a truly world Church. The task for the Church remains: how, within a context of trust, to make peace with the modern world, and yet remain active in shaping a better world; and how to grow and change without giving up its uniqueness and identity.

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14. Adult religious education has been central to recent Church process in Latin America. There is a close connection with Bible study, especially within a community discussion and interpretation of the meaning of the Bible for their community existence (see WCFBA, 1986).

15. A notable point of conflict is that in spite of important movement toward greater inclusion in the Church, what might be seen as "full inclusion" of women in the Church is blocked by the hierarchy's insistence that ordination of women is doctrinally unacceptable. Ruether puts the conflict starkly (quoting the women's ordination movement): "Either ordain women, or stop baptizing them" (155).

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