

Review: JAR2361

AN EVALUATION OF THE “EVOLUTION” OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

a book review of
*Vatican II: Fifty Years of Evolution
and Revolution in the Catholic Church*
by Margaret Lavin

(Toronto: Novalis, 2012)

This review first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 36, number 01 (2013). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

Margaret Lavin is a professor of theology at Regis College in Toronto. Roman Catholicism in Canada tends to be generally progressive as opposed to the Catholic Church in the United States, which has a more traditional stance. The first thing that should be said about the Second Vatican Council is that it was not concerned primarily with *dogma*; that was the task of the Council of Trent (1545–63) and Vatican I (1869–1870). Vatican II was *pastoral*, concerned with addressing contemporary issues in the Church.

Since the Second Vatican Council, two schools of interpretation exist that address the purpose of the council. One holds a progressive reading, including theologians such as Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx. Their agenda includes dialogue with world religions (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam) and taking a new look at issues such as abortion and human sexuality.

The other school is comprised of thinkers such as Joseph Ratzinger (the current Pope Benedict XVI), Cardinal Christoph Schönborn (the general editor of the Catechism of the Catholic Church), and the majority of the American Catholic bishops. This group, while in no way denying that the church should minister to the social needs of people, does not think it therefore follows that classic doctrines held for two thousand years should be jettisoned. Professor Lavin seems to be in the first group. We will address this as we make our way through her book.

In the introduction, Lavin quotes: “Christ summons the church as she goes her pilgrim way to that continual reformation of which she always has need” (Decree on Ecumenism 1). This is a good start. “Vatican II took as axiomatic that Catholicism must be adaptive to the modern world” (p. 7). How? Lavin claims that the church was in error rejecting “anything stemming from the Enlightenment and the French

Revolution” (7). Most evangelical historians would not find many positive ideas coming from these two sources.

Lavin speaks well of Léon Joseph Cardinal Suenens (16, 17), whom I will mention again in due course. Vatican II “begins by attempting to capture the reality of the church’s relationship with Christ in the understanding of mystery.” She continues, “A mystery is not something we can never know, but the knowledge of it is something we can never exhaust” (19).

A New View of Salvation? Lavin discusses the people of God in chapter one, titled *Lumen Gentium* (LG). “Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are also related to the people of God. The Jewish people, once and forever chosen, remain dear to God.” Yes, we are related to God by being made in his image (Gen. 1:20, 27), but Lavin continues: “This outward movement from the catholic faithful to other Christians, other faiths, and other persons of good will, opens up the possibility of salvation for all who strive to live a good life” (22). This sounds to me like salvation by good works. This concept is not only rejected in Scripture, but directly in the Pauline corpus, which also makes clear that salvation history began in the Old Testament (Gal. 3:6–9).

There is confusion over this important doctrine among Catholics as well as evangelicals. Evangelicals hold to three components of salvation: (1) Justification: we are saved from the *penalty* of sin—a once-for-all act. (2) Sanctification: we are saved from the *power* of sin—an ongoing process. (3) Glorification: we will be saved from the *presence* of sin—this is the future completion of salvation in the afterlife.

Roman Catholics use different terminology. They speak of *initial* justification, which corresponds to our term justification, and progressive justification, which corresponds to our term *sanctification*. In this second stage, God’s grace produces in us good works, which cooperate with God’s grace to advance the process. They understand glorification as the end, or goal, of justification. However, one may lose one’s salvation if one falls into unconfessed sin.

The Virgin Mary. Lavin, commenting on the Virgin Mary, writes, “Mary’s duty toward all people in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ. There is one mediator—the man Jesus Christ” (30). Amen. Some historical background is needed here: it was at the Council of Ephesus (AD 432) that the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary received official recognition. The term *Theotokos* (Greek: “The God-bearer”; Latin: “The Mother of God”), which had been used to describe Mary by the early Greek Fathers, was formally accepted by the Council of Ephesus. The purpose of *Theotokos* was to protect the divinity of the fruit of Mary’s womb; to say more about Jesus than about the Virgin Mary. Hence, it is acceptable to all orthodox Christians regardless of affiliation.

Regrettably, things got out of hand, and for a number of reasons Mary began to attract attention. One example in the fourth century was the rise of a cult, the Collyridians, who worshipped Mary. St. Epiphanius (AD 315–403) condemned the practice of the group: “Mary should be honored, but the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost should be adored. Nobody should adore Mary.”¹

Currently, there is a renewed interest in the person and work of the Virgin Mary. In spite of statements from official Roman Catholic sources that deny that Mary needs additional honors, a group of enthusiastic Marianists has petitioned Rome to declare the Virgin Mary to share with her Son the title of *Coredemptrix* as well as the roles of *Mediatrix* and *Advocate* for the people of God. While committed to Marian devotion, many Catholic leaders (including the pope) are reluctant to embrace the new dogmas. Doing so would curtail ecumenical progress toward Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestant groups. Lavin is correct on this issue.

Catholicism in Contemporary Culture. Continuing in *LG*, Lavin writes: “If the church is to maintain its true identity, it must have a tradition that is able to continually develop in a way that engages contemporary culture” (33). The problem occurs with the use of “develop” or “development.” The Catholic understanding of the Development of Doctrine does not mean that revealed truth, which cannot be added to or increased, may be canceled or changed. Unfortunately, progressive Catholic scholars (with whom Dr. Lavin seems to be comfortable) frequently ignore this dogma and come up with modern notions that change Catholic theological and moral teachings. Closing in *LG*, she states Vatican II opens the door to Christians outside of Roman Catholicism – another positive statement from the good doctor.

Chapter two addresses *Gaudium et Spes* (*GS*), the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. *GS* lays the foundation for an understanding of the human person based on Christian principles. Lavin is not clear in distinguishing between when we must extend Christian compassion and when we should speak out against unbiblical cultural practices. The last portion of *GS* deals with economic issues and evaluating pacifism and just war. The current trend in Catholicism and the wider Christian community seems to favor the pacifistic position. However, the issue is not resolved and certainly not a *De fide* doctrine for Catholics.

We are now in chapter three, *Nostra Aetate* (*NA*), the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. Pope John XXIII gave the Council as its first mandate the task of addressing the topic of Catholic-Jewish relations. Catholics are not the only Christians to be perplexed over how to consider Jews in relation to Christianity. The Jerusalem Council in the book of Acts made it clear that Jews did not need to cease being Jews when they received the gospel. The question of the place of Jews in salvation history was argued at length and finally not decided at Vatican II.

In chapter four, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (*SC*), the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, among the major topics was the participation by Catholic laity in the liturgy, which was instituted to lead to renewal. Also, John Allen, a Vatican researcher on the future of the Catholic Church, comments on the methodology employed when translating Scripture used in the liturgy and preaching. Concerning this task, “All relied on an approach to translation known as ‘dynamic equivalency’ premised on trying to make texts accessible to modern ears. As part of that effort, dynamic equivalency is favorably inclined to ‘inclusive language’ meaning avoiding gender specific terms where possible. The Vatican prefers a more literal, word for word translation, described

as a 'sacral' translation, or a 'liturgical vernacular.' Years of hard work on the part of the ICEL [International Commission on English in the Liturgy] were dismissed."² The progressives lost and the traditionalists prevailed.

Chapter five, *Apostolicam Actuositatem (AA)*, the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, discusses the change that does away with the differences between clergy and the laity that developed in the Catholic Church from around the fourth century until the twentieth century (115). The overturned system was called clericalism, power held by the clergy over the laity. By doing this, the Council made possible the participation of the laity in the guidance and the direction of the Church.

We are now at the last chapter of this work: chapter six, *Dei Verbum (DV)*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. This section encourages the use of the Bible in the liturgy and exhorts the clergy to preach from the Word of God in the homily and the laity to declare it everywhere. This approach is welcomed by every Christian, Roman Catholic as well as evangelical Protestant.

Unfortunately, Lavin expands on the above by writing, "Biblical fundamentalism is a complex phenomenon that has historical, social, political, and religious aspects. The topic invites much controversy. *Most Catholic scholars believe that biblical fundamentalism goes against an authentic Catholic approach to the Bible*" (162, emphasis added). Lavin needs to add some traditional Catholic scholars to her reading list, which seems to be loaded with progressives. The volume ends with endnotes, a bibliography, and an index, the last two rather limited. (In total, Vatican II produced sixteen documents.)

This work would be helpful to readers who are unaware of how thoroughly Bultmannian higher criticism has infiltrated Catholic exegesis. Protestantism was not the only branch of Christendom to be affected by the Enlightenment. At the beginning of the twentieth century, notions that had infiltrated many Protestant churches began to appear in Roman Catholicism. Among the modernist tendencies, the most destructive was the rejection of the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. The Council of Trent, while reacting vigorously against the Reformation's formal principle of *Sola Scriptura*, held in no uncertain terms to the full inspiration of the Bible. We are pleased to note that there is an emerging and vibrant new movement across Christian communities: evangelical, mainline, Orthodox, and Catholic. Catholics as well as evangelical Protestants are joining the battle to restore classical orthodoxy. May their tribes increase.

—Ralph MacKenzie

Ralph MacKenzie has a Master of Arts in Theological Studies from Bethel Seminary. He co-authored with Norman Geisler, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences*.

NOTES

1 St. Epiphanius (Haer. 79, 7), in Ludwig Ott, *The Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, IL: Tan

Books, 1960), 216.

- 2 John Allen, *Vatican II* (Toronto: Novalis Publishing, 2012), 107–8.