Seven Factors That Gave Rise to Vatican II
by Bill Huebsch

Introduction

Although the idea to call Vatican II occurred unexpectedly as a "flash of heavenly light" to Pope John, such flashes do not occur outside of an historical context. Every great saint and mystic of the Church has lived and worked in a real world situation whose demands gave rise to their own wonderful holiness.

And, indeed, Pope John lived and worked in a real world situation himself, even as pontiff. The coalescing forces of history, theology, secular thought, and personal sensitivities mixed in the first months of his papacy with his own awareness of the times and his deep desire to announce the Gospel faithfully and effectively. These factors can be identified and separated to provide a deeper insight into how the time had ripened for this council to occur and succeed in its work.

Factor 1
Pope John XXIII's Background as a Statesman

We often have an impression of Pope John XXIII that he was a simple, peasant priest raised suddenly and without preparation to the papacy. The impression continues that once he was there, he was so naive about Church politics and history that he summoned an ecumenical council of the Church, unaware of what its outcomes might be. This is most likely a terribly wrong idea. Just as we will see that the times called for this council, so we will also see that Pope John's entire life prepared him to convene, organized, and host it.

Angelo Roncalli was indeed born a peasant farmer in northern Italy, but he quickly found his way around the entire continent of Europe, as well as the Middle East, especially Turkey. He served in the Italian army and later as a chaplain in World War I. He served as assistant to his local bishop at Bergamo and travelled widely with him, meeting the theologians and bishops who would later have great influence on the Church. This bishop was a warm, wise and courageous gentleman who was a true pastor to his flock but also well travelled. He became Roncalli's teacher and friend.

Roncalli even found himself a victim of the Vatican's long post-Modernist scrutiny for attempting to update the Church's social and economic thinking in light of Leo XIII's Rerum Novarum.

In 1921 he was summoned to Rome by Benedict XV where he worked in the office which oversaw the finances of the Italian foreign missions. Benedict was a unique pontiff; more progressive and less fearful than others before and after him, he gave Roncalli broad and
sweeping authority to restructure this office and bring together the jealous national mission societies to make them more effective. Roncalli rose to the task, visiting all of Europe once again and succeeding in handling devout but proudly nationalistic churchmen.

Four years later he was named archbishop and sent to Sofia where he balanced the delicate relationships between anti-Roman local leadership and the Holy See. In 1934 he was assigned to Istanbul where he was named Apostolic Delegate for Turkish and Greek Catholics. He learned the local languages and urged them to use the vernacular rather than Latin in their liturgical ceremonies.

A liturgical movement, opposed by Roman conservatives, had started as far back as the previous century, influenced by Dom Gueranger's books on the liturgical year. This movement extolled the celebration of the mass, along with the other sacraments, as essential to deepening the spiritual life of the faithful. It urged active and intelligent participation of the faithful in the rites themselves, something forbidden since the 16th century because of its similarity to Protestant worship. Schools had been started at Benedictine abbeys in central Europe to teach Gregorian chant and thereby, assist the faithful to take an actual part in the rites of the mass. These so-called "dialogue masses" were strongly opposed by curialists so it is interesting here, and a clue about his own understanding of the Church, that Roncalli would encourage such participation on the part of the faithful under his care.

He interested himself in the entire Near East. His time in the Balkans and Near East deepened within him a desire to unite the Eastern Churches with Rome again.

He remained in Istanbul until after the war ended and was then appointed Papal Nuncio to France. There he charmed the entire nation, even the chilly de Gaulle. Here he polished his abilities to bring together separated factions diplomatically and learned first-hand how to work amid cultural anti-clericalism. In France he learned about the Church's needs in a "new world" whose political and spiritual lives had to be rebuilt in the wake of a devastating war. He witnessed the experimental "worker priest" movement in France, was aware of the "new theology" brewing in that part of Europe, and personally involved himself in the question of whether the Church there in France, or indeed, in all of modern Europe would continue to decline or experience a rebirth.

A formative experience for him in Paris was the rise of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. His vision that the Church should be involved and invested in this worldwide educational and cultural movement forced the Holy See to join forces with this much more anti-clerical organization. The experience gave Roncalli a strong sense of the Church's place in the modern world.

From France he moved to Venice as patriarch in 1954. Finally, he told the people of Venice, at age 74 he would be able to enjoy pastoral work which had been his life-long dream. Here, too, he polished his skills at administration, equipping him to deal eventually with the many complex administrative problems at the Vatican, especially those associated with the calling of a council.
In October 1958, after Pius XII suffered a fatal stroke, he was chosen by his brother cardinals as Pope. Without hesitation or pause, he brought his charm, skills, and global vision to his work. Amazingly, already by late that same year he wondered aloud to his close confidant and Secretary of State, Cardinal Tardini, what he could do to restore the lively faith of the early Church and how to give hope to the modern times. Already by that time, only a few months after his election, it had occurred to him that perhaps the answer would be a council.

Only about one month later, on the Feast of St. Paul, January 25, 1959, he celebrated a mass, (significantly, for Church unity) in the Benedictine monastery next door to the basilica of St. Paul in Rome. There were eighteen cardinals present for this feast and, after the mass, he talked with them about the state of the Church and his concerns for it. He announced his intention to hold a synod for the diocese of Rome with the purpose of re-animating the zeal and spirit of that local Church, lodged as it was in the heart of the Christian Church. Then, speaking about his hopes for the entire Church he announced that he had decided to call an ecumenical council.

The response of these cardinals was not promising: they remained in dead silence. No one spoke even a single word of response. In the following weeks and months, John would learn about their silence: they could not, in their curial imaginations, believe that such a thing was feasible, let alone desirable. They confronted him with objections, predictions of doom for the Church, and their belief that it would be impossible to prepare in less than 10 or 20 years for such an undertaking.

The result of this stonewalling was, for the pope himself, a deepening determination to hold the council within the first years of his reign.

**Factor 2**

**The State of the World in the 1950's**

Pope John was troubled by the state of the world in the late 1950's and wanted to clarify the Church's role in it. He observed that much of the world was in poverty when there was unprecedented post-war plenty. He knew that the people of the world lived under increasing threat of nuclear war, and had witness its power in Japan. The world was still stunned by the horrors of the war just past and its unimaginable genocide, combined with the unexpected success of totalitarianism and communism, atheism and materialism. He knew this caused alarm, confusion and fear for many modern people.

Where was the Christian Church in all this? Why did it remain so lacking in unity? Why were the men around him in the Vatican of such parochial vision, and why were the bishops of the world not more vocal about the world's plight?

He knew that the hopes and dreams of men and women around the world were for peace and justice. And his own noble heart was filled with compassion for the world even while his personality naturally reached out to all around him. This combination of compassion and a gregarious personality may have been the factors waiting to come together in a single man, a
single pope, in order for a modern council to be convened.

What is unique about this is that he was concerned about the world's conditions, as much as he was about the Church's. His concern was, from the beginning, a pastoral one. There was no desire here to condemn any movement or persons in the world. No desire to clarify or state any new doctrines for the Church. And this has been the business of previous councils. What he wanted for this council, rather, was to reanimate the faith of Christians in order to allow them to contribute to the well being of the world.

The council's own Constitution on the Church in the Modern World went so far as to say, "Today the human race is passing through a new age of its history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world. Triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of humans, these changes recoil upon the human race, upon people's decisions and desires both individual and collective, and upon the manner of thinking and acting with respect to things and to people. Hence we can already speak of a true social and cultural transformation, one which has repercussions on religious life as well. (article 4)

Factor 3
The Pope's Desire to Reanimate the Christian World
and the State of the Roman Church in the 1950's

Reanimate the faith of Christians. How would that be done? Certainly one place to begin would be with that point at which most Catholics come into closest contact with the Church itself: the rites of the mass and the other sacraments, especially baptism. Pope John's desire from the beginning was to renew the sacramental life of the Church, even to restore certain rites or practices of the early Church. It must have been in his mind that this would be the point at which renewal would get underway, that here is where the reanimation of the Christian spirit in the world would be launched. The liturgical movement in Europe and the Midwest of the United States was already so strong that this priority could not have escaped his attention.

The pope had proclaimed his goal for the council to be an aggiornamento, an Italian word which he used to indicate that he wanted a bringing-up-to-date of the Church's practices in many areas. Although conservative churchmen feared this and worked to be sure no major change actually occurred at Vatican II, most bishops and theologians understood this as a mandate to move forward, to undertake reforms begun so often before but thwarted by circumstance or politics.

There was an animated spirit in the very earliest Christian communities which had been lost - part of the original way of being Christian. We know from our reading of Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul, Peter, and James that the early Christians lived a lifestyle based on works of justice. They were known for their love of one another. And they gathered around the table of the Lord for the strength and grace to live this way. Of course, there'd been politics among them then, too, but their gatherings were such that they rose above politics - or made holy use of them - for the sake of their faithful lives.

Pope John longed to restore that lively faith of the first century. He himself talked publicly of a renewal for the Church that would restore "the simple and pure lines that the face of the Church
of Jesus had at its birth."

What else had Luther wanted? What else had been in the heart of many of the framers of Vatican I?

Waiting for reforms in the past, the Church had passed through some dark years, years of corruption and disarray. It had taken extreme actions against reformers, sometimes to defend the faith, other times to defend the Church - and the two weren't always identical. In the years before the Reformation in the 16th century, the Church had compromised itself to such an extent that one wonders how the deposit of faith survived. It had become a feudal power in Europe and in so doing it was more similar to other institutions of its time than to the community of Jesus of the first century. Its reformers were run out, excommunicated. The Church entrenched itself and put further reform out of its collective, Roman mind.

Yet, Pope John knew that the notion of the collegial character of the Church based on the original body of apostles was normal, everyday doctrine for many Eastern Churches, including Melchite, Greek, Syrian, Chaldean and Lebanese. He'd lived among these Rites and knew them well. Only Roman curialists frowned on it. He knew it wasn't out of reach, or a heresy, for the Roman Rite to also live according to it.

In the preparatory schema at Vatican I concerned with the nature of the Church, collegiality had actually been defined and insisted upon. It was to have been treated in connection with the definition of papal infallibility before the latter doctrine was ripped from its context by the efforts of a group of conservative cardinals and bishops, led by Cardinal Manning of England with the help of Pius IX.

Despite this, collegiality was given scant recognition by Vatican II's preparatory commission which prepared the document on the nature of the Church.

There'd been a "creeping infallibility" in the Church, almost since the time of the French Revolution, where curialists thought their decisions on doctrine and morals bore the same weight as an actual infallible decree. They believed that for all practical purposes, they were the Church, all other members of the faithful merely an appendage.

They exerted absolute control of the Church. They controlled episcopal appointments all over the world, as well as the creation and sizing of dioceses. They kept watch over all matters of faith and morals. They controlled religious orders, the dispensing of Church funds, and the safeguarding of tradition and orthodoxy affecting every aspect of Catholic life from the bedroom to the kitchen. In all matters Catholic, they gradually came to have the final say.

Their was a very legalistic nature. It was more important to be "right" than to be loving. They knew that Christ was the Truth, but they forgot that he was also the Way and the Life. Skepticism about innovation of any kind dominated their approach, especially in areas of doctrine, Scripture, and morals. Anyone suspected of breaking rank was punished.
They used a gentle but continual intimidation of bishops as their weapon by delaying the granting of special faculties, permission to ordain their priests or newly appointed bishops. They restricted the governing of their people, and sometimes refused to allow a "disobedient" bishop even to discipline his own priests. They paid very close scrutiny to what was said and written by clerics all over the world. Indeed, they were in constant control.

Of course, a local priest, bishop or layperson may error in teaching or practice - and certainly have. But caution and care about these things are not the same as rigidity and control.

In this century, the reformers calling for more collegiality and an end to Roman domination of Catholic life simply and finally prevailed, giving rise to this ecumenical council. Unlike previous councils, Vatican II was not called to condemn anyone or any group, not even atheist communists. It was not called to announce new doctrine. It was called to refresh the Church. Purely and simply that.

**Factor 4**

**Vatican I's Unfinished Business**

Maybe it was the unfinished business of Vatican I that was on Pope John's mind when he announced his intention to convene Vatican II.

Vatican I had been convened in 1869 by Pius IX mainly as a conservative effort within the Church of the 19th century. His cardinal advisors suggested an agenda for Vatican I that included many matters which would reassert the control of the Church over the thinking of those times. They wanted, for example, a clear statement of Catholic doctrine on points disputed by the public or by other Christians. They also wanted clear condemnations of what they understood to be theological errors of the day.

Vatican I planners also wanted to consider whether the changed conditions of the Church did not call for changes in discipline, and whether certain relaxations of ecclesiastical laws would not secure a better observance. There was need, too, they observed, for improvements in the education and instruction of the clergy, and of a general raising of the level of clerical life among both diocesan clergy and members of religious orders. On a note sounding at first blush more like a call for reform, several advisors thought that the Vatican I might pave the way for the return to Catholic unity of those separated, either in doctrine or in communion, and also for renewed vigor in the Church's missionary activity. Only two of his advising cardinals suggested anything at all about infallibility, a matter that, in the end, dominated the outcome of this council.

Wider consultation around the world about the agenda for Vatican I turned up similar results: principal errors should be dealt with and condemned: pantheism, naturalism, rationalism, socialism, communism, spiritism, and religious indifference. Also the modern Protestant and rationalist teachings in regard to the inspiration of the Scriptures, their authority and interpretation ought to be rejected. Other suggestions included drawing up a universal catechism and promotion of the Christian life through retreats, spiritual exercises, and sodalities. The
reform of the canon law was called for. Some wanted to examine the relations of Church and state and some even urged open tolerance for liberty of worship and the press, and called for a pronouncement that the needs of the Church are not incompatible with the political needs of the present time.

The stage was set for the council to occur. Vatican I occurred in the age before telephones, FAX machines, copiers, and electric lights. There were no sound systems, no translation equipment, nor rapid air travel. Council speeches were delivered from a podium and the council fathers strained to hear. News about world events around them - which played a crucial role in the council itself - came slowly, first as rumors and then through the press. No news wires came into Vatican City in the 19th century.

Credentials were clarified carefully for the council: cardinals, archbishops, bishops, certain abbots, and others from around the world were invited to Rome. A central commission of cardinals decided the final agenda. There would be five sub-commissions dealing with

- faith and dogma
- ecclesiastical discipline and canon law
- religious orders
- Eastern churches and foreign missions
- politico-ecclesiastical affairs and relations of church and state

Select theologians and canonists from around the world were also invited as advisors during the council itself. Fully three-fifths of the bishops who would attend would come from Europe. Even those coming from South America, Africa, and Asia were mainly Europeans assigned to those dioceses. There were few native Asians present - and few native Africans.

One hope for Vatican I was that unity might be restored between the Orthodox Eastern Churches and the Holy See and even the return of Protestants to Catholic unity.

In September 1868 an Apostolic Letter was issued "to all Bishops of Churches of the Eastern Rite not in communion with the Apostolic See." It was carried by the pope's messenger known as a Vicar Apostolic, to the Patriarch of Constantinople. In his letter, Pope Pius first strongly reasserted the primacy of the papacy and then proceeded to invite the patriarch and all others among the Eastern Rite Churches to the council, expressing his strong desire that the schism of West and East would be healed. Of course, by "healing" Pope Pius meant that they would all agree once again to give their allegiance to him.

This effort was thwarted from its inception, however, because his letter got to the press before it got to the Patriarch of Constantinople who returned it unopened via the Vicar Apostolic who had delivered it. He said in his reply to the pope that he had already seen the contents of the letter because he'd read it in the press and that, "if his Holiness the Pope of Rome has respect for apostolic equality and brotherhood," he should have sent a letter to each of the Patriarchs and Synods of the East..."as a brother to brethren, equal in honor and degree, to ask them how, where, and in what conditions they would agree to the assembling of a Holy Council. This, the Patriarch argued, would have been better than dictating the time and location. He would not, he said, attend. The others in the Eastern Churches followed his cue.
The Anglican bishops were not invited on the grounds that their orders were not valid and the pope's letter of September 1868 to all Protestants and other non-Catholics exhorted Protestants to reconsider their position in the face of the innumerable sects into which Protestantism was broken up and to return to the fullness of the Catholic Faith and to allegiance with Rome. They responded with a statement showing why they could not comply with the exhortation of the pope. Naturally, they also did not attend.

The hopes for reunion with Rome, held by some of Vatican I's planners, were thus lost. By the time of Vatican II a hundred years later, a much different approach was taken to both the Eastern Rite churches as well as Protestants.

So, despite the foibles in invitations and the naive goals regarding other Christians, Vatican I got underway. During the course of the council's work, which ran from December 1869 to August, 1870, leadership emerged which was mainly from non-Romans, such as Cardinal Manning of England, but who clearly had a very Roman point of view. The conservatives would dominate Vatican I.

One of the bishops who was present for the opening session on December 8, 1869, wrote of his experience, saying that they had just returned from the great ceremony of opening the council, which lasted from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.. It was magnificent, he said, beyond description, and well worth a little fatigue. There were about 660 cardinals, bishops, and abbots present and the effect of all those prelates, clad in their official robes, was quite stunning to this observer.

Once assembled and opened, the council got down to work on its prepared agenda as political unrest brewed among the nations of Europe. And there was also political unrest within the council fathers as a movement unfolded to include a strongly worded definition of papal infallibility separated from their statement on the nature of the Church.

There were, at the time of Vatican I, two strongly formed anti-Roman movements within the Church, allied to secular rulers. They were known as Gallicanism in France and Josephism in Prussia and central Europe. These anti-Roman movements were mainly reactions to the absolutist and tyrannical behavior of those who worked inside the Vatican governing the daily life of the Church.

In opposition to these anti-Roman movements, there emerged equally strong conservative groups, and it was these groups who lobbied at Vatican I for the definition of infallibility. The conservative leaders worked in the background, without an official word being spoken in the council itself. They circulated petitions calling for such a definition. Counter-petitions were likewise circulated and on March 6, 1870, the pope announced that the matter of infallibility would indeed come before the council for debate.

Led by Cardinal Manning of England, the debate was intense. On May 25th that year, Manning spoke to the council appealing to them to act! "The shelving of this question at Trent had disastrous results," he said, "worse would follow should the Vatican Council, after facing it, fail
to speak with decisive voice."

A trial vote on infallibility and papal primacy was held on July 13th. The majority favored passage and the minority, numbering perhaps 200, was dwindling, as minorities do when standing for evidently losing causes. On July 18th a final vote was taken on the matter and the majority was 533 with only 2 opposed. Ironically, the voting occurred amidst a great and violent rain storm with lightening flashing into the aula and thunder rolling overhead. As the final votes came in, a glass window nearly directly above the pontifical throne broke and its shards fell to the floor.

The vote was announced, applause followed, and the council bishops fled Rome as rapidly as they could. Rumors of war were everywhere. The council had not adjourned but its members were.

The council had also passed only one other document, Dei Filius, in English, "The Son of God." It was a mainly theological document discussing the nature of God, the need for revelation, and nature of faith, and the relationship of faith to reason.

On the very next day, war was actually declared between France and Prussia. By early August, French troops which had served as the pope's army, left Rome to defend France against the warring armies of the Prussians. The papal states then included nearly two-thirds of modern Italy and, with the pope's army out of the way, the Italian nationalist armies wasted no time. By early September, they had invaded the pope's territory and advanced on Rome. On September 20th a siege of Rome began and, after a few hours, local loyalist forces capitulated and Rome was occupied. The pope was a prisoner of the Vatican. One month later the pope issued an Apostolic Letter suspending Vatican I indefinitely, apparently until more propitious times would allow it to continue.

The council adjourned having taken only one major action: an attempt to strengthen the papacy against the times by this edict. This was an unfortunate misdevelopment of thinking about the nature of the Church. Many churchmen became triumphalistic in its wake; clericalism dominated the Church; a period of unprecedented legalism descended upon the Church.

No doubt acting in good faith, Church leaders saw this declaration of infallibility as a continuation of the laying down of the law in the Church. Only 5 years before this, Pius IX had issued a Syllabus of Errors which listed modern errors, taking aim at every field of 19th century development: social thought, science, theology, and politics. Defining the doctrine of infallibility as the papal states fell in the midst of that thunderstorm in the summer of 1870, with all its epic drama, must have seemed like a final, secure nail in the coffin of progressive thought within the Church.

This council had, however, asked many other questions. What is the power of bishops? What is the place of collegiality? How shall the unity of Christians be approached? What is the nature and Catholic definition of religious liberty? These questions and others asked by the preparatory commissions of Vatican I would now remain unresolved by a council for 100 years.
Outside the venue of a council, however, there was plenty going on in the Church between Vatican I and Vatican II, mainly due to a movement of theologians and Church leaders which was named Modernism.

**Factor 5**

**The Influence of Modernism, Despite Its Rout**

Modernism is a term which describes a particular theological and spiritual movement among many Catholics in the 19th and 20th centuries. Broadly speaking, Modernists believed that the modern mind is entitled to judge what is true or right in accordance with its own experience, regardless of whether or not its conclusions run counter to tradition and custom. It is the attempt to synthesize the basic truths of religion and the methods and assumptions of modern thought, accepting as valid the scientific and philosophical methods of the times. Hence a Modernist interpretation of Catholicism is one which seeks to reconcile the essentials of doctrine with the scientific outlook characteristic of the modern world.

It goes without saying, however, that reconciling theological positions with the modern times was a particular threat to the Roman Catholic Church since it had been held concretely in place by the provisions of the Council of Trent since the 16th century.

Modernism, as it is being treated here, is specifically the movement of thought within Catholicism which began about 1890, during the reign of Leo XIII, a liberal pope and which was suppressed some 20 years later under the reign of Pius X.

It would be an oversimplification to suggest that even this limited understanding of Modernism defines a single coherent doctrine. The eventual papal condemnation of the movement deliberately attempted to frame Modernism as a thoroughly consistent system of thought - a position vigorously denied by its most famous proponents. (Alfred Loisy, a leading Modernist, once argued that there are as many theories of modernism as there are modernists. Loisy refused to accept any description of the movement's adherents as "a homogeneous and united group.")

The Modernists themselves, including many priests and at least one archbishop (Archbishop Mignot of Albi in the south of France, sometimes called "the Erasmus of Modernism") represented many theological fields: biblical critics, historians, social and political theorists, systematicians. If they agreed with one another, according to Alfred Loisy, it was because of their common commitment to reform Catholic teaching. They sought an intellectual renewal of Catholicism which would equip it for the task of confronting the 20th century world, not with suspicion or hostility - as was evident in the 1864 Syllabus of Errors - but with genuine understanding.

The Syllabus expressed the idea, for example, that "the Roman Pontiff can(not) and should (not) reconcile himself with, and accommodate himself to, progress, liberalism, and modern civilization."
Modernists generally held that Catholicism was too firmly committed to the attitudes of the Counter-Reformation. They were troubled because they were unable to reconcile these attitudes with their own times. They could not bring themselves to abandon their religious heritage but they were also unable to ignore the cultural conditions which were present in the late 19th century, with which the Church refused to deal.

The challenge to this official intransigence came as well from Protestant quarters during this time as biblical scholarship advanced there. The old dispute as to the relationship of tradition and scripture was given a new aspect by this scholarship. This, in turn, undermined the Roman Church's position declared by the Council of Trent that these are the twin sources of divine revelation. The 19th century, with its scientific advances, was a less friendly environment in which the Church could simply declare this to be so without allowing further discussion.

The apparently more liberal reign of Leo XIII provided a new spirit of adventurous thinking within the Church, however, and the growth of Modernism would not have been possible without it. Leo XIII was more politically astute than his predecessor had been and sought to improve the reputation of the papacy in an increasingly hostile climate. Hence, while the substance of policy remained the same under Leo, the tactics of its application were adjusted. His encyclicals seemed progressive and he opened the Vatican archives to the world's scholars for the first time. The pope at last, so it seemed, was encouraging a break from the manuals of Trent to allow fresh scholarship to have its place.

And, indeed, Modernism had its flaws and was, like all thinking, linked too closely to its own age. It adopted the pragmatism and 19th century notions of history with too much enthusiasm. And many modernists rejected the supernatural because it could not be tested, observed, and quantified - all important 19th century values.

While the sophisticated and urbane Leo XIII tolerated this movement, despite its flaws, it's easy to see how his more conservative, non-theologically trained successor reacted with firm condemnation. In two papal acts Modernism was denounced as based on "agnostic" and "immanentist" philosophy. The Modernists themselves were repudiated as traitors to the Church, "thoroughly imbued with the poisonous doctrines taught by her enemies."

The papal acts were the decree Lamentabili sane exitu, July 3, 1907 and the encyclical Pascendi dominici gregis, September 8, 1907, both under Pius X. The latter in part says this: "...these latter days have witnessed a notable increase in the number of enemies of the Cross of Christ, who, by arts entirely new and full of deceit, are striving to destroy the vital energy of the Church, and, as far as in them lies, utterly to subvert the very Kingdom of Christ...We allude to many...who put themselves forward as reformers of the Church [referring to the Modernists]."

Not only that. Elaborate ecclesial machinery was established, including secret "vigilance" committees in all dioceses. Reports were sent to Rome. No teacher suspected of Modernism was to be allowed to retain his or her post in any Catholic university or seminary. Censorship was tightened for textbooks and periodicals. But even these steps were not sufficient. In 1910
the pope imposed a stringently anti-Modernist oath upon the clergy. Heresy-hunting was common and private denunciation encouraged. And only when Benedict XV came to the Chair of Peter in 1914 was this obstinately repressive policy relaxed.

Nonetheless, Modernism and lines of thinking associated with it were considered "dangerous" to the Church until the opening of the Second Vatican Council which itself began a process of self-reappraisal within the Church. As late as 1950, Pius XII (in his encyclical *Humani Generis*) rejected what he called "the new theology" which it linked with Modernism because it seemed to downplay the supernatural order and the official authority of the Church. But some of these latter day Modernists eventually enjoyed the Church's approval, serving as advisors at Vatican II and even becoming Cardinals of the Church (Henri de Lubac and Jean Danielou.)

Those refuting modernist thinking, tended to equate dated Catholic routine with authentic Catholic tradition. Routine is residue, unexamined collection of historical practices, often for which no rationale any longer exists or for which one has to be invented. Tradition is vital and alive - rooted in each age and taking on the stuff of that age. Clearly recognizable as meaningful today.

Likewise, anti-Modernists often equated revealed truth with academic theory. Revealed truth is unchangeable but the academic language used to express it, the explanation of truth, is never fully adequate and always in need of refinement. Language is subjective - something feared by those opposed to Modernist thinking.

Hence by default of history, Vatican I undertook only a single major action, that being something not on its agenda to begin with at all. It declared the Roman Pontiff infallible in matters of faith and morals. The pope's temporal powers simultaneously ending, these spiritual powers were strengthened against an encroaching and hostile modern world. And only the Modernism movement, which likewise failed to reach its goals, arose late in the 19th century to counter the rigid world of the Church.

The course set for the church in the 16th century by the Council of Trent underwent, therefore, little change for 400 years except, perhaps, further entrenchment. The Council of Trent remained the last major council of the Church before Vatican II.

**Factor 6**
**The Rigid Application of the Decrees of The Council of Trent**

The Council of Trent, of course, had not been a reform council at all. It had been the opposite: a reaction to reform. The main task of Trent was to *counter* the reformers of the day: mainly Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin.

Toward this end, it entrenched the Church in practices which these reformers opposed and locked many of the rubrics of the Church into place permanently - or so it thought. It established manuals for the training of priests which were in use until Vatican II. It warned Catholics against
association and outlawed Catholic marriages with Protestants. It created an Index of forbidden books. It articulated official Catholic teaching on faith and grace and differentiated it from Protestant thought. It promoted the veneration of the saints, Marian devotions, and devotions to the Eucharist rather than participation in the liturgy. These were all practices vehemently opposed by the reformers. The Council of Trent, for the first time, also set down the number and meaning of the sacraments - confirming traditions which had been in practice since the 12th century, although not since the apostolic period.

In sum, the Council of Trent imposed a medieval, reactionary rubric on the Church which stretched through 400 years with only minor adjustments until Vatican II. But, while such firm rubrics were met with relatively little resistance throughout the 17th, 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, by the 1950's worldwide revolutionary social change was underway. Would the Church have been able to retain such tight control over the everyday life and liturgy of the worldwide Church in this new social climate? If Vatican II had not enacted its reforms, what would have happened?

Factor 7
The Advance of 19th and 20th Century Secular and Theological Thought

But there were other factors, too, other signs of the times, which influenced the decision to call this Council.

There was a new generation of theologians in the western nations who were paving the way, who were articulating a new ecclesial language even before the council itself did so: As early as 1921, R. Guardini had written, "The twentieth century will be the century of the church." It appears he was correct. A liturgical renewal had begun as early as 1909. An ecumenical movement under the leadership of such as Dom Lambert Beauduin had begun as early as 1925. And of course, the important work of the people mentioned above, along with thousands of others in Chile, Brazil, Germany, Belgium, the United States, and other nations, also helped pave the way for new thinking at this Council. In a sense, perhaps, John XXIII was only responding to what he must have felt in his well-travelled and open soul: that the time was upon us to allow the Spirit's freshness and vitality back into a Church frozen in the 16th century. The convergence of these factors found a home in the hearts of the Council participants who responded with overwhelming desire for renewal.

At the council itself, Karl Rahner's theology of the universality of grace led the way in restating our self-understanding as the Church. Yves Congar's forward looking view on the laity and Edward Schillebeeckx' understanding of sacramentality were taken up almost literally into the texts of the final documents. Hans Kung's historical view of the Church in modern times and John Courtney Murray's landmark work in religious liberty were enormously influential. Also Bernard Haring in moral theology, Henri de Lubac in history, Charles Davis in ecclesiology, George Higgins in social theology, and Gregory Baum in revelation - all of them played key roles in the development of Church thinking.
There was also a large new group of biblical scholars in the wake of Pius XII's 1943 encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu,* which encouraged the critical study of scripture. Although they did not play a vital role at the council itself, these scholars surely contributed to our modern understanding of faith and their work, taken up by the Rahners, Congars, and Kungs, certainly provided a basis for renewal in the Church.

Absent from this list of influential people and movements is, of course, feminist and liberation theologians. Among other groups and matters, these entered the public stage after the council, after 1962.

And in secular thought, the Church, religion in general, and even the "idea of God" were coming under unprecedented challenge by social and political thinkers, philosophers, biologists, and even psychologists. The Church defended itself against voices like those of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and others. But how long could the Church expect to be meaningful in a world where plural voices now sounded, especially because of mass media.

**Freud**

Sigmund Freud, born in 1856, is often called the father of modern psychology. Raised in a Jewish home with a devoutly Catholic nanny, he was mildly religious as a child, observing Jewish customs and festivals and reading the scriptures. His nanny, on the other hand, taught him about Catholic piety and even took him along with her to Mass on occasion. He experienced serious anti-Semitism as a child which emerged from his neighbors: Catholics whose piety seemed not to produce the fruits of love which it advertised. This made Christianity utterly unbelievable to him.

But he disliked Jewish ritual as much as Christian piety and spent much of his professional life working all this out. He died in 1939 at age 83, having just published his final draft of *Moses and Monotheism*; he just couldn't say enough about religion.

Freud made his discoveries about the nature of human existence by personal observation and analysis. He concluded that most human behavior emerges from the unconscious: drives and attitudes, motivations and determinations which humans cannot well understand. We seem, in his view, to be in constant internal conflict between a strong, inner sexual urge on the one hand, and equally strong social or religious inhibition to consummate it, on the other.

His first work on religion was published in 1907 titled, *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices.* In this work he argued that the practice of religion, which he'd been observing since his Jewish/Catholic boyhood, was neurotic. Its very basis is pathological. Religious adherents, he argued, are looking for explanations for things that only science can explain. In the place of reasonable explanations, religionists seek a father figure in the heavens to make sense of the world's otherwise unexplainable madness, injustice, and arbitrariness. Throughout his career he never changed this view. (For a more detailed treatment of this, read William L. Newell's *The

Hence, those who practice religion are perpetually infantile; they never grow into real adulthood because they are forever begging their parent god for this favor or that, forever explaining difficult realities with "god answers" when science ought to have been employed instead. To these people, reason mattered little: god was not reasonable but capricious and arbitrary. This god, to Freud, was imagined by people, not real. This god was an illusion.

For centuries and continuing into today, Christians believed that our ancestors had fallen from grace in paradise, a Garden of Eden described in the book of Genesis. Humans had been created, according to this view, in one whole piece, fully and entirely human, walking upright and speaking a common language. Charles Darwin had argued that this Augustinian view was wrong. Rather, Darwin postulated, humans had evolved over centuries, slowly moving upward from the status of apes and animals to human form. There had been no paradise for Darwin.

Influenced by this new thinking, Freud concluded that humans hadn't begun their corporate existence on a lofty, paradisal plane and been reduced by a fall from grace. Rather, humans had begun on the animal plane and were now in the process of evolving to a more sophisticated level of existence in the world.

Religion, for Freud, shared the same beginnings. As primitive men and women, it served to explain the unexplainable: pain in childbirth, hunger, death, even our fear of snakes. God and religion were created, according to this view, as a protective father-god. God was, therefore, created by humans, not the other way around, and this human-made divinity continued to have influence in the world: explaining still birth, sickness, and natural destruction.

The more humans understand science and the making of the world, however, the less needed this created god would become. Their very reason for existence was slowly being replaced by human knowledge and understanding.

The god once found in nature and planets, slowly evolved to a god now more removed, no longer responsible for the winds, the waves, and the tides, this god now became only the moral guide for humans. God inhabits heaven, now, setting down a moral code, handed to Moses first, and providing another purpose for keeping a divinity around. Religionists, Freud would argue, don't deal with scientific facts and indeed, claim that "it's all a matter of faith." To Freud it isn't faith but only an illusion. Humans want to be safe, well, and eternal. Religious belief provides the illusion of all of these and more.

Freud's seminal work in psychology was followed by the work of many others but his notion of religion and the idea of god as an illusion remained a vital challenge to the mystical religious practices of the Church.
Marx

Karl Marx (b. 1818) was born into a Jewish family which had become Lutheran only one year earlier in order to avoid anti-Jewish laws enacted in Prussia. Some Jews, forced into this "conversion" became strict adherents of the new religion but Karl Marx would become the opposite, arguing that religion must be abolished. (For more on this, see Marx, Karl. Karl Marx, Early Writings. Edited by TB Bottomore. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963. 210f.)

He was no doubt influenced heavily by his humanist father's beliefs that the dying feudal nobility system and the reactionary Catholic Church were the last bastions of oppression against the common person. Both would have to be done away with, according to the senior Marx, if human progress were to continue. Removing them would allow all people to be equal in both their legal status as well as the conduct of their personal lives.

But Karl's father was a son of the Enlightenment and believed that common sense and the force of reason would bring about this newly emancipated world, free of ecclesial and noble oppression. Karl was more fiery, however, believing in the end that only class warfare would bring about such a change.

We humans live, according to Marx, in a large social order, relating to one another and expressing ourselves in work, progress, and activity, especially the production of daily needs. But when alienated from direct contact with the fruits of our labor by forced trading with an entrepreneurial class of traders and merchants, working men and women become likewise alienated from their very selves. This alienation results from workers performing only one small part of larger tasks, such as on an assembly line where a worker repeats the same activity day after day. In these situations, where labor is divided, the owners profit while the workers suffer.

Marx foresaw a society of communism, in contrast, where there is no division of labor and where the capital is owned by all in common. In such a society, as Marx imagined it, each worker would contribute as he or she could and receive exactly and only what he or she needed for living in return. When everyone has what they need, then no one will need to steal. Crime will cease. And, while this sounds very much like the life described by the author of Acts of the Apostles (Acts 4: 32-35,) Marx did not imagine it would be in any way religious because religion was an enslaver, demanding submission to authority as it did.

Of course, Marx lived in the 19th century when the Catholic Church, still functioning on 16th century premises, was firm and rigid about most matters. Church-goers were humiliated and guilt-ridden. For Marx, our failure to claim our own selves, to stand up against what he saw as ecclesial and political tyranny (the pope and the king of Prussia) result in an ever deeper dependence on them. Our consciousness is religion-consciousness, not self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is required, however, if we are to revolt against this tyranny. To struggle against religion, Marx would write in his early years, is to struggle against that which imprisons us. It was at this point that he made his familiar and most telling statements:

Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a
protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. To remove religion as the people's illusory happiness is to demand real happiness for the people. (*Early Writings, p43f.*)

Had Karl Marx not been taken so seriously by so many national leaders in his time and after it, and had not entire national political and economic systems been based on his work, he would not have been such a direct threat to religion and the churches. But Marxism and Marxist thinking has been present in every hemisphere and even within the Church itself.

**Nietzsche**

For centuries, many people in Christianity have believed that the spiritual world is separated from the material world, that the body and the soul are not united, that the natural and the supernatural are essentially separate realms. In fact, much of Christian religious practice around the world depends on the distinction between these two categories. Of course, religion considers the supernatural an endlessly more important and higher realm.

Nietzsche dealt with this by abolishing the supernatural, the transcendent category and realm. He did not consider the supernatural realm our goal; life right here and now is sacred to him. His theology is this: there is a powerful, creative principle within each human being, not transcendent to life. Nietzsche's is a pantheism: this powerful forceful principle of life is present in nature as well as in human beings. God is; but god is not transcendent; god is immanent.

So for Nietzsche, atheism is understood not as denial but as radical immanence of the presence of the divine. And this atheism is necessary and helpful for humans on many levels. Being atheist in this sense provides women and men with an entirely new range of possibilities, a new freedom. It isn't the grace of some distant god that empowers humans, then, but that inner force of life, the divine principle radically present in all of existence.

For Nietzsche, then, the values imposed on humans by the Church, any church, are also to be done away with. Such externally developed values, attributed to a transcendent divinity and interpreted by human agents, are folly. The meaning of life is not in heaven but here. Humans must, therefore, create their own values by themselves. There is no place for the Church.

Nietzsche's "death of God" thinking was a direct threat, of course, to the churches and became the popular mantra of collegiates, the cafe crowd, and anti-religionists thereafter.

**Others**

These three, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche represent a much larger group of scientists who challenged the Church's corner on the market of truth. Others might well also be mentioned. Certainly, for example, Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* (1859) and *The Descent of
Man, (1871) challenged religious thinking and biblical literalism. It can't be estimated what a major influence Darwin's work had on theology, continuing into our own day.

And certainly, the rise of existentialism, with Soren Kierkegaard as its celebrated founder, stressed individuality and personal authenticity over universal and ecclesial authority. Existentialism in its many forms has now entered theological thinking in ways that are irreversible. In this century as well, the substantial contribution of Martin Heidegger cannot be overlooked. His Being and Time (1927) and a prodigious output of other works, has provided an important philosophical basis for such theologians as the Lutheran Rudolph Bultmann, the Anglican John Macquarrie, and the Roman Catholic Karl Rahner.
Summary of factors that gave rise to Vatican II

Here, then in outline form, is an index of the factors which influenced the calling of this Council by Pope John XXIII.

1. The personality and sense of compassion for the world of Pope John XXIII, combined with his well developed understanding of a Church larger than Rome, combined to make it possible for him to overcome what others may have feared in calling a council. He was prepared for the difficulties he would face in organizing it by his long diplomatic career.

2. The pope had a magnificent awareness of the world of the 1950's and wanted the church's place in the international dialogue about social life, politics, economics, and religion to be loud and clear.

3. Pope John XXIII wanted to re-animate the world with a Christian spirit, to re-form the Church for that purpose, a Church which had grown more and more rigid based on the decrees of the Council of Trent and the definition of papal infallibility of the First Vatican Council.

4. Vatican I had failed to complete its work because it adjourned early due to the invading Italian national army. In the end, this may have been propitious because Vatican I was bent on re-statement of Catholic doctrine, not on reform.

5. Following Vatican I, the Modernism movement again challenged the Church and, although silenced by papal edict, remained a factor in the life of the Church until Vatican II.

6. The rigid application of the decrees of the Council of Trent had left the Church without any paradigm for change or reform.

7. There were certain leading theologians in the 20th century whose work precipitated a reassessment of Catholic theology. Unlike others before them, these theologians avoided complete silencing before they were heard. The 19th and 20th Centuries also had a plethora of fresh secular thinkers, many of whom challenged the church and religion.