

# **The Church's Third Phase of Existence: The Age of Great Bishops? A Pauline Boldness and Johannine Hopefulness**

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## Preliminaries

The Catholic Church will not maintain its essential character as a universal faith tradition unless it becomes a truly global expression of Christianity's truth claims; it cannot maintain itself as a Western, Roman transplant. The Roman culture was terrifically successful in transmitting Christian teaching and practice in the recent past. That pattern fit the global situation of its time. That time has past. While the Church does need to shed its Roman trappings, the underlying practice of identifying the effective cultural forms of its times and situations is a characteristically Catholic practice. If the Church endures, it will do so because it will once again apply that flexible, durable practice to its new truly global, culturally pluralistic situation.

There are those who would argue that this practice is nothing more than an early form of marketing or a way to prepare new groups for the infiltration of the imperial culture as it spreads and dominates. While I recognize the sorry consequences of the Catholic practice of conjoining itself to the prevailing culture, the Church has endured and at times flourished because it makes truth claims about reality that serve the human community; in other words, theology redeems any marketing campaign. The Church was indeed "selling" something when it decided that the Roman system would serve its purposes. What it was "selling" was a new way of thinking about the human person and about God's relationship with and for the human community. One of the flagship forms that the Church adapted from Roman culture is what we now understand as the Natural Law Tradition. That framework was highly effective in translating and applying

Christianity's central truth claim: that there is a unity between the human and the divine that is fully and finally disclosed in Christ Jesus' mission, suffering, death and resurrection. However, we have arrived at a cultural moment where that essentially Western, Roman thought-form is unable to meet the conceptual challenges of the present situation. Roman culture that is ultimately an accident of history, a happy accident but no less an "accident" in that Christianity does not depend upon any specific culture as a feature of its essence. So while there are of course, sociological anchors for the emergence of the bishop, the role of the bishop emerges for theological reasons that are essential to Christianity. We need a new ways of expressing and applying what Christianity has to say about God's relationship to the human community. This is an ecclesiological task and my hope is that it will be driven by the world's bishops in the coming decades.

Of course, I am very aware that my starting point is vast and invites reflections from every theological discipline. Noting this immodest starting point, I would like to focus on a more narrow and modest category: leadership in the establishing the translation and application of the Church's truth claims. There are many doorways through which we could enter in order to de-construct and then re-imagine the Natural Law system. The doorway I would like to suggest is the role of the bishop as missionary, pastor, theologian. Paul, the Apostle is the signal model for episcopal leadership. I shall trace that claim and then describe how centuries later, Pope John XXIII, the Bishop of Rome displayed similar features of Paul's leadership for the Church in his time. I will then suggest ways that our own time could become the Age of the Great Bishops. A significant feature of their "greatness" as bishops lies in the robust relationship between

their understanding of the human person in relationship to God and the character of the church. Both maintained that strong bond by reading the signs of their own times.

### The Bishop as Missionary to a New Culture

In the fashion of both Paul, the Apostle and Pope John XXIII, let us begin by reading the signs of our times. In 2002 when the Boston Globe reported on the widespread abuse in the Archdiocese, several practicing Catholics asked for a meeting with Cardinal Law in order to "offer their help" as they later described.<sup>1</sup> When this small group arrived they were met not by the Cardinal but by an assistant who told them that they could not actually help because they did not have the supernatural powers that belong only to the ordained. They respectfully protested that they could indeed help because among them were a skilled nurse practitioner who had decades experience in dealing with victims of abuse, a former college chaplain who had been encouraged towards that work by the Cardinal himself and a professor of management with skills in helping organizations deal with crises. They came with these skills because they were committed, practicing Catholics. They were told to go home; they were not needed. Indeed, they were actually told that because they were not ordained, they did not have could not contribute any spiritual power to the situation. They did not go home they went instead to their parish hall. *The Voice of the Faithful* was born in that parish hall. This essay is not directly about the emergence of lay groups in response to the abuse of minors. That said, that incident does provides a lucid picture of the Church that many Catholics experience today: a church where they are not valued and not included and for many, where they remain invisible and voiceless. And for me, as an ecclesialogist, it provides a nearly crystalline view of what happens when poor and even inaccurate

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<sup>1</sup> James E. Muller and Charles Kenney *Keep the Faith; Change the Church* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2013).

theology becomes the center of theological gravity for ecclesiology. The understanding of the human person that was voiced to those Catholics is incompatible with the essential teachings of Christianity. Placed inside the theology of the Church, as that truncated theological anthropology was, it provided theological justification for placing the stability of institutional forms ahead of the deep consequences to the victims of the abuse and to the entire Church.

The theology of the human person functions; it is with regard to the Church where it functions most effectively, for good or for ill. So while the events that became so public early this century in the United States are important for many reasons, we miss the most critical features of those events when we fail to describe and inspect the theology that supported and enabled them. At the root of the leadership crisis there is a distorted and essentially un-Christian theological anthropology.

The seeds for this claim were planted for me long before the Boston Globe reporting. I first encountered them in Karl Rahner's seminal article in the 20th Volume of *Theological Investigations: Concern for the Church*. In Chapter 6, "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," Rahner makes what could seem like an offhanded remark as he builds his case for three "theological" periods in the history of the Church. About the second period, "the period of the Church in a particular group, that of Hellenism and European culture and civilization," he says:

The first period of Judaeo-Christianity... derives its peculiarity and singularity from the fact that its mental climate is that of the fundamental Christian salvation-event as such-- the death and resurrection of Jesus himself-- and the proclamation of this event *within* its *own* historical situation (not in any other situation) is in fact proclamation in Israel to Israel. Precisely because something like a mission to the Gentiles had become completely conceivable on this basis, it is clear that what Paul inaugurated-- the transition from a Judaeo-Christianity to a Christianity of the Gentiles as such-- is not something theologically obvious, but introduces a radically new period of church history, a Christianity that was not an export of Judaeo-Christianity to the

Diaspora, but-- despite its relatedness to the historical Jesus-- a Christianity that grew out of the soil of paganism. I know that all this is vague and not very clear. But I think this is due in the last resort to the fact that the theological problems involved in this transition from Judaeo-Christianity to Gentile Christianity are not at all as simple as people think and that the difficulties have never been properly cleared up. *Hence it is not by any means completely clear what Paul "started" when he declared that circumcision and all that it involved was superfluous for non-Jews (and perhaps only for them).*<sup>2</sup> However this may be, if we want a more precise and truly theological division of church history up to now, it seems to me that the suggested tripartite division is the only right one. It means that the transition from one historical and theological situation into an essentially new one happened only once before in the history of Christianity and is now set to occur for the second time in the transition from the Christianity of Europe (with its American appendages) to an actual world-religion.<sup>3</sup>

Rahner makes this comment in the middle of a discourse about the Church but because his own thinking always returns to the Christian notion of the human person, I am convinced that he just cannot help himself from nodding in that direction. And so it is with great minds, sometimes what seems like an off-hand remark signals the beginning of a rich vein of discourse. The implementation of the Council's reforms was moving at such a pace in the 70's and 80's that some areas of theology were over-emphasized. And that is the neuralgic ecclesiological challenge: the mystery of the Church is secondary to the mystery of God and so to Christology and Sacramental Theology let alone theological reflection on Scripture. The Church is the place where all that reflection is played-out so while it is not foundational, Ecclesiology does provide the axis where all these theologies intersect. Rahner understood this and I am convinced another reason for this nod to "what Paul started" was own commitment and practice in the whole system of Catholic theology. As Aquinas and others before him, he understood pulling on a thread in the theology of God would tug at the rest of the fabric. I think that Rahner was warning us not to forget the challenges raised by widening the circle of

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<sup>2</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Rahner *Theological Investigations*, Vol. XX, "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 83-84.

salvation the way Paul did. He issues a caution that while it is very important to craft what he calls a "theological history" of the Church, while doing so, we must attend to the entire Catholic system.<sup>4</sup> As important as Rahner's theological anthropology is, ecclesiological reflection is just as important and sadly is often neglected. As a case in point, so much of the discussion during this 50th anniversary of the The Second Vatican Council was historical and not ecclesiological. The mystery of the Church is axial; the other mysteries of Christian existence are held together in the theology of the Church. (Even though this is the case, ecclesiology is often ignored or undervalued.)

Characterizations of the Church will necessarily reflect all the other Christian mysteries because the life and practice of the Church is where they all converge, where they are all displayed and acted out. The Council members often pointed out in their debates over individual documents that the ecclesiology of the Council required them to re-think and re-imagine their reflections on liturgy, revelation, salvation among other topics. Ecclesiology is where all the mysteries (theological sub-disciplines) intersect.

That said, a robust, coherent ecclesiology, an ecclesiology both strong and flexible enough to provide the stabilizing force that will actually bind all the others, will be saturated with theological anthropology. Without a coherent theological anthropology, ecclesiology becomes mere institutional analysis. And reciprocally, without a coherent ecclesiology, the notion of the human person's spiritual character can become idiosyncratic and individualistic; or overly conceptual and rational.

After describing the move from a reform movement within Judaism into a mission to the Gentile world that becomes Western European (Roman) Christianity

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

which is in turn, now moving into a global Church, Rahner poses this challenging two-part question:

...firstly, in what precisely does the theological and not merely cultural-historical singularity of such a transition or caesura, consist? and secondly, what follows if we apply the theology of this transition to the transition in which we are living today for which Vatican II was a kind of official ecclesiastical beginning?<sup>5</sup>

I would like to suggest that we have not yet achieved an "official ecclesiastical beginning." Pope Paul attempted to continue the institutional "caesura" as did many bishops when they returned home after the Council. But the official new beginning, that is, the application of the theological anthropology that the global situation demands to the institutional forms in the Church has been stalled. Marcos McGrath in Latin America, John Dearden here in the United States are just two examples of bishops who began to shape new spaces for the local Church.

It is important to trace this theology otherwise we remain stuck in the weeds of what looks like a re-distribution of power in the Church. Certainly institutional power plays a part. But if we are to actually make progress in moving Christianity deeper into what Karl Rahner calls "the third phase" of its existence, we must attend to theology with a keen eye and relentless focus. Over the past several decades Catholics have become far too comfortable with weak theological reflection. For example, we hear things like "of course women are full human persons but...; of course the Eucharist is the Table of Jesus the Lord and not the Roman Church but..; of course celibacy is a discipline that does not rise to the level of a creedal teaching but..." There are many reasons for this; perhaps the main reason is leadership style and length of Pope John Paul II's pontificate. That 26 years was the second longest in history and during that

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

long time Pope John Paul II appointed bishops who would function for the sake of the centralized Church. The Pope himself was masterful at transmitting Catholic culture to the global community; he was not masterful at encouraging the growth and development of the Christian message out of what Rahner called "global soil."

Lest I be accused of being disrespectful to Pope John Paul II, let me note that through the sacramental tradition of penance and reconciliation, the Catholic tradition has long experience and practice with the power of naming trouble in order to overcome it. My purpose here is to make a case for the new period in the Church; for that to happen it is necessary to name and recognize the negative effects of the way Pope John Paul II understood the role of the local bishop. This is very much in keeping with Vatican II's method of teaching where a failed or worn out teaching was identified and then very deliberately superseded by the Council's own teaching. Rahner also provides an effective description of the style of theological leadership that Vatican II affirmed: "It was convinced that it is possible to say something that is theologically important without solemnly proclaiming it as dogma."<sup>6</sup> Too often the role of the bishop is exercised as though the essential truth claims of Christianity are under threat, mistaking practice with the essentials. It is worth repeating Pope John XXII's most important and enduring line "The ancient deposit of the faith is one thing, the ways in which it expressed is another." It equally worth noting that Pope Francis returns to this signal statement at the Council's opening in his *Evangelii Gaudium* as he traces his own understanding of the Church's "missionary" character.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner *Theological Investigations*, Vol. XX, "the Abiding Significance of Vatican II," p. 95

<sup>7</sup> Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, (November 24, 2013), 42.

Happily, Pope Francis has lately displayed a rich understanding of the difference between historically conditioned practices and the essential features of the Church; the features that make the Church that preserve, protect and proclaim the truth claims of Jesus' Gospel. Let us turn now to Paul, the Apostle and John XXIII who exercised leadership during the great transitions of Christianity's first and second "caesura." Describing their ministry theologically could provide the footings for new local Churches to emerge as robust expressions of the Gospel. The over-arching intention is the return to the balance between the local and the universal Church that is an essential, not accidental feature of Christianity.

### A Pauline Boldness

For biblical scholar James D. G. Dunn, the key to the theological anthropology of Rahner's first transition period is to return to Paul's attempts to describe how human persons experience the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Paul's theology is practical and not merely speculative. Paul wrote as a missionary and pastor, and not as an academic theologian.; or to be precise, he wrote as a missionary-pastor theologian. Paul spoke of God and Christ because the reality of God and Christ impinged directly on himself and his Churches.<sup>8</sup>

A robust bond between our notion of the human person and our notion of the Church protects both sides from becoming overly doctrinal or overly institutional. Paul the Apostle was the first to forge such a bond and he did so by reflecting of the character of the personal presence of God's Spirit that was particularly disclosed to the Church.

Richard P. McBrien's description of the Church echoes Paul's: "God is present to history in Jesus Christ and in a special way in the Church, where the human community has

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<sup>8</sup> James. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, U. K.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 53.

become explicitly conscious of itself in its ultimate relationship with God."<sup>9</sup> "The reality of God and Christ" impinged upon Paul's personal understanding of the human person. His translation of that understanding into categories that made sense of the communitarian experience of God in the Church sees the Church as the special location where the community works out the implications of its "ultimate relationship with God." Paul is concerned first and foremost with God's on-going presence and not first with doctrines or legal structures. At the same time, he is acutely aware that his theological reflection will require institutional changes. It was no small matter, as Rahner argued in his theological interpretation of the Council, to abrogate the ritual, communitarian, moral and scriptural matters necessary to build a Gentile Christianity.<sup>10</sup> The theology of the first caesura is shaped by Paul's solutions; he exercised a bold, creative willingness to follow the theology where it necessarily took him: into entirely new thought forms. And in forging the bonds with many of those new cultural forms required him to re-imagine his own Judaism and to even shed features of that cultural moment.

### A Johannine Openness

Pope John also returned to explore the role of God's indwelling presence as Holy Spirit as the theological center of gravity for the Council. Pope John's notion of the human person cannot be circumscribed by the Natural Law's tendency to place too much emphasis on physical realities of human personhood. For Pope John the "nature" of the human person is the unity of the human and divine described as our participation in the life of the Spirit. Such an expansive notion opens up points of contact with any and all human cultures. While Pope John, of course, did not use Rahner's language that

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<sup>9</sup> Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism: Completely Revised and Updated* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 314.

<sup>10</sup> Rahner, "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council, 84-85. See note 3 above.

characterizes Catholicism as a "Western export," he did consistently use language that indicated his intention to shape a more universal Church, a world-Church. His outlook was already global in the middle of the 20th century. In his announcement of the Council, Pope John began the "official ecclesiastical" process of functioning as the world's bishop, not the Roman Pontiff. This announcement, like Paul's abrogation of Jewish legal structures, was one of Rahner's qualitative leaps.

The majority of the world's bishops responded positively to Pope John's invitation. Rahner characterizes their response this way:

These bishops did not come as individual, simple visitors, *ad limina* to give an account of their dioceses and to take missionary alms. Vatican II was really a first assembly of the world-episcopate, not acting as an advisory body to the Pope, but with him and under him as itself the supreme teaching and decision making authority in the Church. There really was a world-council with a world-episcopate such as had not hitherto existed and with its own autonomous function....<sup>11</sup>

I am convinced that Pope John was deliberately co-joining himself to Paul; he was following the pattern that Paul established because he understood that the Church could not simply develop its way into a world-Church. One of the warrants for this claim is Pope John's use of the Italian tradition of the *bella figura*, the beautiful, elegant, graceful gesture. There are gestures or symbolic actions that convey some important content; for Pope John, the content was theological. He announced his intention to gather a Council on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. Further, he did not make the announcement from St. Peter's Basilica. Instead he traveled to one of Rome's other basilicas, St. Paul-Outside-the-Walls. This was significant for several reasons. First, as one of the Roman basilicas, St. Paul Outside-the-Walls is directly linked to the Petrine ministry. In choosing that space, Pope John is connecting Peter and Paul's ministries; positioning

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

them in tandem not in a subordinate relationship. Secondly, the connection to Paul's conversion invites another conversion: the Church's movement towards a new understanding of its nature and mission. He looked to Paul as the model for the kind of conversion he hoped to incite. Third, St. Paul Outside-the-Walls is not in the heart of Rome but on the Ostian Way. It is part of Rome but also faces out, to the rest of the world. This signaled that, while he was speaking as the earthly head of the Catholic Church, his starting point was where the world and the Church came together. Pope John was exercising the Petrine ministry in calling the Council; he wanted to emphasize the Pauline influence upon that papal ministry as well. He explicitly links them in his announcement. After framing his announcement with Paul's conversion, he referred to himself as "a successor of St. Peter" and follows from there to describe "the double responsibility as Bishop of Rome and Shepherd of the Universal Church."<sup>12</sup> By linking his announcement of the Council with Paul's ministry, he signaled that like Paul, he was interested in the Church's relationship with wider society. By calling attention to Peter's ministry, he indicated that his actions as Bishop of Rome would involve an extension of "his watchful care to the whole world, to whose spiritual government he is made responsible through the divine mission entrusted to him in the succession of the supreme apostolate!"<sup>13</sup> Thus he connects his ministry to Paul's.

If Paul was the missionary pastor to the Gentiles, Pope John was the missionary pastor to the modern world. In both cases, their theology is rooted in their attention to pastoral application. As pastors, that is leaders of specific churches, both had revolutionary impacts on the Church's self-understanding. Ironically, Pope John's

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<sup>12</sup> Floyd Anderson, ed., *Council Daybook* (Washington D. C.: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1965), 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

personal warmth and holiness can draw attention away from the shrewdness with which he navigated his pontificate. Paul seems to have been more prickly than warm as so his intellectual heft more apparent.

### The Coming Age of the Bishop

When asked what needed to happen in order for the teachings of Vatican II to take root in the Church, Karl Rahner said, that the local Church must become as important as the central Church. A local Church requires strong leadership at the episcopal level. What would "the Age of the Bishop" look like? What would bishops do that would usher in such an age? The first step would begin by returning to fundamental theological principles in order to read and make use of the cultural riches of this new moment in the life of the church. They would start with the principle of sacramentality that states that all reality can bear or carry the presence of God. My favorite example of this principle in action is the medieval cathedral which used the best of the existing culture to convey, explain and instantiate the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even if we prescind from the religious truths expressed in these centers of community, they remain works of artistic, sociological, educational genius. They were and are highly effective examples of the best human skills of their day. While it is lovely to imagine that every person who hauled stone and moved pulleys did so for the "greater glory of God," that is neither realistic nor is it the point. The central point is theological and it invites a question for our day. Where is the work of the great cathedral in our day? Who are the craftspeople and the artisans of our day? There are surely many paths we could travel in answer to this question. I would like to follow the path of the place of the Business school in the university.

In just a few decades Business schools have become the central to the life and work of universities. More and more Business is the "impacted" major at our best universities. It was not so long ago that English and Biology majors looked down their intellectual noses at Business majors in the same way that the "humanities" land-grant schools looked down their noses at the "Ag schools" in the U. S. State university system. Not any more. The instances of the importance of critical reflection on Business as an academic discipline abound. Let us ponder just one: Bill Gates, one of the most successful business men ends the annual letter that he issues through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation this way:

"We all have the chance to create a world where extreme poverty is the exception rather than the rule, and where all children have the same chance to thrive, no matter where they're born. For those of us who believe in the value of every human life, there isn't any more inspiring work under way in the world today."

The gist of his 2014 letter is that global poverty has been reduced by orders of magnitude in the last few decades and he expects that by 2035 there will be no "poor" nations. My purpose here is not to get into the weeds of his claim. It is rather to note that Bill and Melinda Gates are business people who have used business principles to use their great wealth highly effectively. I think Bill and Melinda are the Michelangelo's and Bernini's of our day. What I mean by that is the volunteer who works in public health teaching giving vaccines is doing so for humane reasons, in many cases, I hope, for religious reasons. But they choose to work for the Gates Foundation because they trust the super-structure that supports their work. So we would do well to look to the best discourse from the academic business community for applications that support the mission of the Catholic Church. One of the best examples of this move is displayed in the "National Leadership Roundtable for Church Management." That organization emerged at the same time as VOTF. Let me turn to *The Harvard Business Review* in order to

suggest a how local bishops might make use of that robust discipline following the pattern of the bishops who enlisted engineers and stonemasons to construct the European Church's great worship spaces.

In the article "Building a Collaborative Enterprise: Four Keys to Creating a Culture of Trust and Teamwork" the authors describe 4 principles: defining and building a shared purpose; cultivating an ethic of contribution; developing processes that enable people to work together with flexible but disciplined projects; creating an infrastructure in which collaboration is valued and rewarded.<sup>14</sup> If this is to become the Age of the Great Bishops, I am convinced that these are the kinds of principles that bishops must understand and implement. With regard to the first principle "defining and building a shared purpose," as it currently stands, for many bishops and pastors, this translates into a kind of lowest common-denominator doctrinal expression. And most identifying features are still rooted in Roman, Western cultural forms. How might they apply the second principle, "cultivating an ethic of contribution?" A signal challenge to this is the seminary system. The majority of people who actually work for the mission of the Catholic Church are lay people. The small number of ordained people are given the largest amount of funding. One of my colleagues who taught for several years in a Midwestern diocesan seminary calls seminarians "the million dollar men." I do not have the skills or the inclination to do the financial analysis of her figure. It is easy enough to make this point with even anecdotal evidence. Most Master of Divinity Students who are not training for ordination pay their own tuition. Even those on scholarship have to take on student loans or work part time in order to pay their living

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Adler, Charles Heckscher, and Laurence Prusak, "Building a Collaborative Enterprise: Four Keys to Creating a Culture of Trust and Teamwork," Harvard Business Review, July 1, 2011, 1-9.

expenses. And when they graduation, unlike the seminarians, they do not have a guaranteed job. In addition, most of the jobs that are available to them pay far below a living wage. The seminary system undermines an ethic of contribution. With regard to "developing processes that enable people to work together with flexible but disciplined projects," in far too many Church organizations, parishes in particular, there are few or no established processes and procedures. And finally, "creating an infrastructure in which collaboration is valued and rewarded," requires a fundamental change in the underlying understanding of the human person. An "abrogation" like Paul's is required in order to open up space for building such an infrastructure. Let me conclude by suggesting a list of suggestions for applying these principles. This list might also create a space for our conversation.

1. The bishop would hire trained managers and spend their time in parishes. Instead of primarily presiding at Confirmations, we would see them at Baptisms, on retreats, that is in the fabric of Catholic regular practice.
2. They would close their Diocesan seminaries and send candidates for the priesthood to the local colleges and universities. They would require candidates to have parish sponsorship.
3. They would "go to school" as they did in the summer during Vatican II. When the bishops discovered that they had little training to understand the issues in play in the crafting of *Dei Verbum*, they asked people like Raymond Brown to

teach them. The Great Bishops of the 21st century would go to school and learn about management, leadership, and developmental psychology.

4. A team of bishops would call for a "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" with victims of sexual abuse who were treated as enemies by diocesan lawyers from the 70's going forward.
5. They would spend more energy digging into Scripture study now that we understand the old debates have little application for today-- for example, now that we understand Paul's theology not as a polemic against sacramentality but against cult- how does that shape our self-understanding?