

**Farhad Manjoo recently explained why it is so difficult today to have reasonable (civil) discussions.**

"Because we can now get our news from sources that reflect our political views--and we can avoid sources that we find suspect--lies and misinformation tend to proliferate and linger. I examined several case studies--the Swift Boaters, the conspiracy theories surrounding 9/11, and claims that George W. Bush stole the 2004 election--and concluded that it's now easier than ever before for people to live in worlds built entirely of their own facts. We're becoming impervious to rational opposition. Once a substantial minority of the population believes a lie, it achieves the sheen of truth and becomes nearly impossible to debunk. "

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**This first article is available in its entirety at [Commonweal](#).**

**February 27, 2009**

**Why I Became Catholic: A Witness to Vatican II**

**John Wilkins**

I am a child of Vatican II. Without it, I doubt I would be a Catholic today. Brought up as an Anglican, I would surely never have found my way into the church that in a special way stands in the tradition of St. Peter and St. Paul. To me, knowing little about the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council was a revelation. But today, I feel too much like an orphaned child.

Just at the fiftieth anniversary of Pope John XXIII's announcement that he was calling a council, Pope Benedict XVI lifted the excommunications of four bishops ordained illicitly by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre in 1988, bishops whose central conviction is that the council distorted the "true Tradition." Consequently they spurn its liturgical reforms and its teachings on collegiality, ecumenism, the Jews, world religions, and religious freedom. The excommunication of these bishops has been lifted, the pope says, as a gesture of "pastoral concern and fatherly mercy," and is to be seen as a first step in an extended dialogue in which it is hoped the Lefebvrists will come to accept Vatican II's teachings. But how can they do that? Their whole reason for existence is the opposite. At best, the pope's actions have confused most Catholics while outraging Jews and disquieting even the German chancellor, Angela Merkel. As is now widely known, one of the bishops is a Holocaust denier (the chimneys of the crematoria were too short, he explains, and the doors not airtight enough to have had the reported effect), and the Lefebvrist movement has a well-documented history of anti-Semitism. Their leader in Germany, Fr. Franz Schmidberger, sent a letter to the German bishops before Christmas that included the assertion-in direct defiance of Vatican II's declaration to the contrary-that every Jew who was not baptized was guilty of deicide.

What does all this mean, and where is it leading? No one is quite sure, especially those of us who entered the Catholic Church because of what the council did. I vividly remember how excitement about what was happening in Rome gripped not just the Catholic world, but the wider Christian community and others beyond it as well. Other Christians, long regarded by Catholics as "heretics" and "schismatics," had suddenly become "separated brothers and sisters." This was truly startling.

Just after the council, in 1966, the greatest Calvinist theologian of the time, Karl Barth, visited Rome and had an audience with Pope Paul VI. Though fascinated by the potential of the papacy, Barth had been used to saying before the advent of Pope John: "I cannot hear the voice of the Good Shepherd from this chair of Peter." But now his tone changed. A year after his visit he published his reflections. "How would things look," he asked in his book *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, if Rome (without ceasing to be Rome) were one day simply to overtake us and place us in the shadows, so far as the renewing of the church through the word and the spirit of the gospel is concerned? What if we should discover that the last are first and the first last, that the voice of the Good Shepherd should find a clearer echo over there than among us?

That was what I, as a young journalist still in my twenties, had started to think as well... Suddenly the Catholic Church was making news everywhere. Secular papers that previously might have had the same journalist to cover religion and sports now reported the council in depth. Thrust and counterthrust on the floor of the council hall-the nave of St. Peter's-made good copy. It was this very public debate that perturbed the future Pope John Paul II, then Archbishop Karol Wojtyla, when he attended the council with his colleagues in the episcopate. In Poland they did things differently, discussing behind closed doors so that a front of unity was maintained against the Communist regime. I followed the media accounts with astonishment. This church was not as I had imagined. It was a church of personalities. It was not like General Motors, a multinational organized from headquarters according to a blueprint for all the branches. The pope and the bishops were not above and outside the rest, as if on the top of a pyramid, but rather at the center of the circle constituted by the whole body. This was a communion of the servants of God, and the pope was the servant of the servants. Looking at Pope John, you saw that in action.

I was struck by the boldness of the proceedings in Rome. Here was a church, I saw, that felt itself to be intimately connected with the Upper Room where the first Christians received their calling, as if by an umbilical cord. It was as though it owned the tradition and safeguarded it, as well as being subject to it. So it felt able to develop that tradition and correct past interpretations of it and deductions from it, with a freedom that I found astonishing. It looked to me like a Reformation, Roman style. "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," was the apostles' formula at the first council in the church's history, held in Jerusalem about AD 49, according to the biblical account in Acts 15:28. The Catholic Church could still say that two thousand years later. It did, and change snowballed.

Of course the church did not become something different. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. But the river flowing from the source in the Upper Room toward the sea of the Omega Point took a series of turns. Some of them were U-turns.

This church now announced that it understood itself to be traveling with all men and women of goodwill. It was reaching out to people like me. It no longer defined itself as a lighted castle on a hill, set above the murky flux of history, from which Christian knights would sally out to save whomever they could from secular evils and errors. It was a pilgrim with us on the road, ready to learn as well as teach. It had turned its back, said Pope John in his opening speech, on "those prophets of doom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand." After a period when it had seemed afraid of the modern world, it had regained its confidence, secure in the

faith, as Pope John put it, that “Christ is ever resplendent as the center of history and of life.”

I began to feel personally challenged by the council's work. Shortly before the council ended, one Christmastide, I happened to be passing Westminster Cathedral in London. The Byzantine style adopted by the cathedral's architect, J. F. Bentley, harks back to the era before the schism between Catholic West and Orthodox East. It also predates, therefore, the further schism between Catholics and Protestants. Another coincidence? I stepped inside.

It was the first time I had ever witnessed a Roman Catholic Mass in full flow, and I was held spellbound by the drama. I had had an idea that Catholics, like the Orthodox, did not frequently take Communion, but as the Mass drew to its conclusion, the whole congregation went forward to receive the sacrament. I remember to this day the thought that came to me unbidden: “This is the real thing.” I did not thereby spurn the Anglican Eucharist as unreal, for no one who knows the loving devotion with which Anglicans participate could imagine such a thing. But it struck me that here, in the Mass, was an action with a guaranteed validity that the Church of England did not have. I knew now why I had felt that there was a hole at the center of my Christian faith. I had been sensing the absence of sheer physical Christian reality: the here and now of the Catholic Church. When I left the cathedral, I was already a Catholic by desire.

Before I was received, there was a hiccup. The Catholic priests were anxious to repeat the baptismal ceremony, in case the words had not been said correctly the first time, they nervously explained, or the actions had not been performed accurately according to the rubrics. But refusing to have myself dispossessed of my Anglican baptism in this way, I defended my position by arguing from the principles now being promulgated by the Second Vatican Council, and in the end, with a good grace, they desisted. On August 3, 1965, just before the end of the council, at the age of twenty-eight, I was received into the Roman Catholic Church in St. Patrick's, Soho Square. Would it have happened if there had never been a Pope John or a Vatican II? Humanly speaking, the answer must be no.

So what am I to feel now when Pope Benedict XVI unconditionally lifts the excommunications of the four bishops ordained illicitly by Archbishop Lefebvre? Lefebvre held that after fighting the principles of the French Revolution tooth and nail, the church had succumbed to liberalism and modernism at Vatican II and had let all these enemies in: liberty (religious freedom), equality (collegiality of pope and bishops, and the church as the people of God), and fraternity (ecumenism). Such a marriage with the French Revolution was an “adulterous union,” he declared, from which could only come “bastards” such as the new rite of the Mass.

The pope has asserted that the Lefebvrist bishops, who remain suspended from celebrating the sacraments licitly, must now show true acceptance of Vatican II. But how could they ever do that? The only practical possibility would be an ambiguous formula that would allow them to sign while continuing in the same belief and practice as before. It would not matter so much if this brought these bishops back within the embrace of the church universal. It would matter a great deal if it brought the church universal closer to them.

Were those like me deceived when we saw a vision of what the church truly was at Vatican II and followed it? Was the council a flash in the pan, a hiccup in the church's life, as it were, before the Catholic organism, challenged, closed back in on itself? I could never believe that. The currents of renewal have affected the river of Catholic belief too deeply and strongly to be denied. But what has happened to the wholehearted affirmation of the council that Joseph Ratzinger memorably expressed in his brilliant little book *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, published in 1966 just after the bishops had finished their work?

I do not want to feel an orphan. And there are so many like me.

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**My wife has been devoted to now-Saint Damien since she was a child, hearing in his life a call to minister to the abandoned. This editorial can be accessed at [America magazine](#).**



### **Find Your Molokai**

The church has a new saint. On Oct. 11, Pope Benedict XVI canonized Damien of Molokai. The Belgian-born Joseph de Veuster (he took the religious name Damien after joining the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary) was missioned to the Hawaiian Islands in 1864 and a few years later began his work among people suffering from Hansen's disease (then called leprosy), who were banished to the island of Molokai to limit contagion. The priest spent the rest of his life ministering to the sick until he too contracted the disease. He died in 1889 at the age of 49.

It is a stirring story. But what can the almost impossibly heroic life of St. Damien of Molokai say to everyday believers? Like that of many saints, Damien's life may seem undeniably noble, but difficult to emulate in our own workaday lives. Still, powerful resonances can be heard if we listen carefully. What parent is not called upon to minister to a child who falls ill, even at the risk of contracting the same illness? Who is not called to stand with the outcast, with those whom polite society shuns either literally or

metaphorically? Who is not called to do works of charity and love that remain hidden from the rest of the world? Damien's Molokai is not so far away as many might think. When the faithful used to visit Mother Teresa and ask to work alongside her, she would often say, "Find your own Calcutta"—that is, care for the poor and forgotten where you are. Perhaps the story of St. Damien says to us, "Find your own Molokai."  
America magazine

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**The following article is presented without comment.**

LONDON (AFP) — The global rate of abortions and unwanted pregnancies has fallen, a study said Tuesday but warned that unsafe terminations, specially in developing nations, was killing 70,000 women a year.

Abortions decreased from an estimated 45.5 million in 1995 to 41.6 million in 2003, said the US-based Guttmacher Institute sexual health organisation, which launched its report in London.

However, too many women were undergoing unsafe abortions, particularly in the developing world, said the study, entitled "Abortion Worldwide: a Decade of Uneven Progress".

It calculated that unsafe terminations caused some 70,000 deaths per year and five million women were treated annually for complications resulting from such procedures.

Another three million women with complications went untreated, the study claimed.

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**To submit an article or a comment, please email [tony@tonyercolano.com](mailto:tony@tonyercolano.com)**