“I’m just a CCD teacher,” a 26-year-old woman at a parish in Wisconsin told me one night. “Why do I need to learn about Vatican II? And why on earth would I want to teach the kids today about it? They’re not interested.”

To many people today, young and old alike, Vatican II is ancient history. It’s seen as an event that occurred so long ago that it’s no longer relevant to ministry now. Some feel that it’s time to move on, to start talking about the next council rather than the last one. Others believe that Vatican II was the ruin of the church and they’re happy to try to put it behind us. Some even say that it’s too late, that Vatican II is now forgotten, lost in the pages of history and the bureaucracy and politics of the church.

But there is actually great value in knowing about and teaching about Vatican II. We should all understand the vision of Pope John XXIII and why he called this remarkable council. It changes our approach to ministry when we understand what happened there. Keeping the vision before us, telling this story over and over again, knowing our history well - these are all ways to help make Vatican II powerfully effective.

“Vatican II,” Pope John Paul II once remarked, “was the Advent Liturgy of the New Millennium.” It is vital for us to understand and implement this council at every level of church ministry and faith formation. And Pope Francis recently called Vatican II “a
beautiful work of the Holy Spirit.” He made his remarks in a homily at a Mass celebrated at the Santa Marta residence inside the Vatican in mid-April, 2013.

He criticized those who resist change and “wish to turn back the clock” and “to tame the Holy Spirit,” asking if, 50 years after the council, “we have we done everything the Holy Spirit was asking us to do during the council.”

The answer is “no,” Pope Francis said. “We celebrate this anniversary, we put up a monument but we don't want it to upset us,” he said. “We don't want to change and what's more there are those who wish to turn the clock back.” This, he went on, “is called stubbornness and wanting to tame the Holy Spirit.”

Everyone is affected by Vatican II
Vatican II launched a major renewal and sought to present the ancient truths of our faith in language and ritual that is more accessible and understandable for modern women and men.

The council undertook many reforms on a broad range of topics. The resulting shifts in focus were vitally important, and touched everyone involved with the church at any level. What were some of these shifts in focus? How did we re-imagine ourselves, re-describe ourselves, and re-understand ourselves as a result of Vatican II?

Grace
Remember grace? In those years on the eve of the council when everyone currently over 50 was growing up, “living in the state of grace” was the goal of Catholic life. And it goes without saying that dying in the state of grace was the only way to heaven. This
grace, we believed, was “dispensed” by the church. Only Catholics could get it. There was a popular sense that one could “earn” it. And in our thinking about it we sometimes muddled it up with indulgences as though the two were the same.

The most fundamental shift that occurred at Vatican II is right here – in our understanding of grace. Our new understanding of grace, our new horizons on it, has significantly changed how we go about the business of pastoral ministry.

Grace, we say today, is God communicating God’s own Loving Self to us. God offers God’s self to everyone, to every human, not just to Catholics. To be conceived is to be offered grace. It’s experienced as a loving, divine energy (or power) which fills our bodies and our souls. It’s free. It’s absolutely free and it cannot be earned. It comes from God alone. The church doesn’t so much “dispense” it as lead us to discover it by providing moments of grace through education, liturgy, and social teaching.

And what is the effect of grace? Put simply, it “lets us be” what we’re made to be, which is precisely how we eventually reach heaven - by being what God wants us to be.

What this means for pastoral ministry is exciting! It means we must allow ourselves and our students to wade around in the stuff of life, everyday experiences of “the joys and sorrows, the griefs and anxieties of this age,” and find in that the mystery of God’s presence. Bishop Ray Lucker said it this way: “What I came to see during the Second Vatican Council is that revelation involved God’s self-communication to us. God communicated the inner mysteries of God to us. And we can never…adequately explain or express the revelation of God.” All of us in pastoral ministry would do well to leave a little more room for mystery, to be just a little less certain about all the content that we teach.
Other Christians
The shift in thinking on grace nearly fifty years ago in Rome at Vatican II, is what made it possible for the bishops of the world, in union with the pope, to promulgate a document like the one on ecumenism. “Yes,” one of my professors at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago once told us, “even Lutherans have grace!” The idea that grace is not a Catholic commodity, that it is offered by a generous and loving God to all people, was shocking at first. But today nearly half of the marriages in the church are ecumenical. Religious education tends to remain much more sectarian than the households in which most children - and many volunteer ministers - live.

All Other Religions of the World
The shift in our understanding of grace also made it possible for those bishops to promulgate the document on the church’s relationship with non-Christians: Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus, and all the many native peoples of the world. Grace, after all, is offered, not only to Christians but to all peoples. But even though we believe this is true, and we can see in today’s world how important it is to understand one another, pastoral ministry still has not really begun to grapple with how to teach about the world’s many religions.

How We See Ourselves
Surely one of the most significant shifts in thinking came in the Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium). There are many remarkable shifts in focus about how we view ourselves as church contained within this document, but I’m going to mention only three.

First, we have that beautiful description of ourselves in chapter two of the Constitution on the Church where we are called by a new name: the People of God. What a major change in thinking! And yet, when we teach about the church and the church’s teachings, most of the time we refer to the church as something outside ourselves, normally meaning “the people in Rome who run the church’s central office.” When we say, “the
church teaches this or that,” we mean “the magisterium in Rome teaches this or that…” It’s them, but not us. We don’t want to think the church is “them.” We want to think it’s us - but after so many centuries of having it the other way around it’s difficult to think of ourselves as the church. We forget that we are the church.

Again, Pope Francis recently added to this thinking. During his morning homily May 25, 2013, the pope spoke about the importance of priests, parish workers and parishioners being open and welcoming to those who come to the parish asking for something. He used several examples, including that of a couple who goes to a parish to arrange their wedding but, before being congratulated, are told how much it will cost and asked for their baptismal certificates.

Too many times, the pope said, “we are faith-checkers instead of facilitators of the people's faith.”

Pope Francis also used the example of an unmarried mother who goes to a parish asking that her baby be baptized only to hear, “No, you aren't married.”

“This young woman had the courage” to carry her baby to term and not have an abortion, he said, and “what does she find? A closed door. And this happens to a lot of people. This is not good pastoral zeal. This pushes people away from the Lord.”

“Jesus instituted seven sacraments and we, with this kind of attitude, institute an eighth: the sacrament of pastoral control,” he said.

Second, in chapter four of the Constitution on the Church (as well as in the documents on the Liturgy and the Laity) we see another shift: Baptism is raised in status to a par with Eucharist. In the early years of the church, baptism was a major sacrament that, along with Eucharist, initiated the Christian into a life of faith. But on the eve of the council, baptism held a much more minor place in most parishes. Vatican II tried to correct this.
We still teach about baptism as though it’s “just one of the seven sacraments.” In fact, though, baptism is on a par with Eucharist and we should teach about it with more enthusiasm than we do.

Third, in chapter five of the Constitution on the Church we find that lovely section calling everyone to holiness - a major shift in Catholic thinking. And the greatest way to live in holiness, the document tells us, is to live in self-giving love. This universal call to holiness has radical implications for pastoral ministry. The bottom line is this: This loving presence of God is already active and powerfully present in the lives of those parishioners we face every week. God, in other words, is acting in the lives of those people. God is not absent or distant. God is there and active. So no matter what else we do with those who come to learn, helping them discover the presence of God is always our first goal.

This is a change. Before the council the goal of pastoral ministry may have been to pass a body of facts and information on to the next generation of Catholics to make them loyal to the church in which we wanted them to place their faith. Then it was seen that priests and sisters were holy; the rest of us were merely lay people. But now the goal is to help these parishioners encounter Christ who is present there, to know, love and serve Christ. It isn’t so much leading them to have faith in the church, as leading them to have faith in the Lord who is beyond and above the church.

**The Poor and Rejected**

One of the powerful new ideas that emerged from the dialogue at the council is that, for Catholics and all Christians, working for peace and justice is essential. It is, as we say, constitutive, meaning that one cannot really say that he or she has faith in Jesus if one doesn’t also embrace the work of justice and peace. Powerful and challenging, isn’t it?
But pastoral ministry has been slow to make teaching about justice, peace, missionary work, and the preferential option for the poor as central to its work as, say, teaching about the sacraments. We have not yet adopted this new emphasis heart and soul.

For Jesus and the New Testament, the poor are not just one theme among many. The poor are the starting point where one begins to understand the Gospel as the Good News of liberation. If we have no love for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the refugee and the prisoner, we have missed the central plank of the Gospel. The Gospel is not about doctrine. It’s about changing our view of God: God is love, love for the poor. The question of the poor is so essential to the tradition of Jesus that when Paul went to verify his doctrine before the apostles in Jerusalem, these demanded of him the care of the poor (Galatians 2:10).

The Paschal Mystery

Any spirituality grounded in Vatican II must be grounded in the paschal mystery, the dying and rising to which we are called. This is a life-changing, radical posture toward the world and its people, just as Jesus also faced the world with unconditional love.

The Constitution on the Liturgy was the first major document on which the bishops worked in the very first months of Vatican II. In article six, they clearly remind us that we are all incorporated into the paschal mystery. Bishop Ray Lucker, who was present for all this, later said that when he realized what this meant, he went through a personal conversion. He shifted from thinking of faith as giving assent to a group of theological propositions, and adopted an understanding that faith is our response to the encounter with the living person of Jesus Christ.

The bishops at Vatican II go on in article six to say that the early followers of Christ were so centered on this mystery that they baptized those who experienced and believed in its saving power. Likewise, they shared in the Eucharist together, which was the full celebration of the sacrifice of Christ for us. It was both in their loving actions (living out
the paschal mystery) and in their worship that they came to know their profound call to “be church.”

We might say that the encounter with Christ and the paschal mystery is the central experience on which our faith rests. As Bishop Lucker came to realize, this is not merely some theological proposition. It is instead what connects us here and now to the very person of Christ who lives among us and is very near to us. The paschal mystery is not a theory of faith, but an actual practice. It’s what we do: We die. We are buried. We rise. And we go out to love the world.

Later in the council, as the bishops were working on the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (called in Latin, *Gaudium et Spes*), they described the dignity of the human person, proclaiming that the mystery of humanity becomes clear only in light of the paschal mystery. Christ has opened up a pathway for us to follow, the bishops wrote in article 22. This pathway is that of dying to self, enduring the uncertainty of the grave, experiencing the joy of new life, and responding to this by loving the world. “If we follow this path, life and death are made holy and acquire a new meaning,” they wrote.

**In Sum**
In sum, then, here are the some of the shifts that have occurred as a result of the Second Vatican Council:

- We understand grace to be God revealing God’s own self to us, to everyone. We understand that God is present with us right now.
- This opens the door to Christian unity; God is also present in the lives of other Christians.
- It also opens the door to what is true and good within all of the world’s religions; God is present there, too.
- But most of all, it helps us see ourselves as the People of God, a new view of the church.
• Baptism and Eucharist are the cornerstones of our community life, the source and summit of all we do. This restores the importance of initiation in the Christian life.
• Everyone is called to holiness; God is present in the lives of all people, including all of our parishioners.
• The place of the poor and rejected shifts from a forgotten corner to center stage: their welfare is on a par with our own.
• And all of this is rooted in the dying and rising of Christ – but really in our own call to die and rise in our daily lives.

Of course, I didn’t give this whole answer to that catechist in Wisconsin. I simply said to her that night, “If it weren’t for Vatican II, you probably wouldn’t even be a catechist!” She paused for a moment eyeing me, and then said, “You’re right, I guess. So what else did Vatican II do?”