

Speakers say Vatican II's impact on church still being fiercely debated

NEW YORK - Almost 50 years after the Second Vatican Council initiated widespread changes in the Catholic Church, there is still fierce debate among scholars and theologians about how the council should be interpreted, according to speakers at a forum on "Searching for Vatican II: Why a Transformative Moment Remains so Elusive."

The Sept. 14 event was sponsored by the Center on Religion and Culture at Jesuit-run Fordham University in New York.

During the sessions of Vatican II, which took place from 1962 to 1965, the world's bishops issued 16 documents on the Catholic Church and its role in the world. The purpose of the council was to stimulate spiritual renewal in the church, update its pastoral attitudes, behaviors and institutions, and promote unity among Christians.

Father Joseph A. Komonchak, a New York archdiocesan priest and co-editor of the English language edition of the five-volume "History of Vatican II," said some people understand the phrase "Vatican II" as only the documents produced by the council.

Others use it to refer to what occurred in Rome and throughout the Catholic Church from Jan. 25, 1959, when Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convoke a council, until Dec. 8, 1965, when Pope Paul VI brought the council to a solemn close after four sessions. He said some people put the council in the context of the larger history of the Catholic Church and many consider "Vatican II" to include the reforms implemented in its aftermath.

Father Komonchak said historians judge "that the council was the most important religious event since the Protestant Reformation and that the Catholic Church changed more in 10 years than it had in the previous hundred."

He said there are three competing interpretations of the council's historic significance. The progressive and the traditionalist "draw a sharp contrast between the church as it was before Vatican II and the church as it was after it," with the

traditionalist favoring the earlier time and both interpretations focusing on breaks, ruptures and discontinuities.

“The reformists downplay the elements of discontinuity that the other two accentuate,” Father Komonchak said. The council participants “did not intend revolutionary breaks in the church’s life but rather reform and renewal in the light of, and continuous with, its broad and deep tradition.

“This is the true ‘spirit of Vatican II,’ ” he said, and Pope Benedict XVI has been the chief representative of the reformist interpretation for 25 years.

Father Komonchak said Vatican II did not discard any dogma of the church or promulgate new dogma, but recovered important doctrines that had been neglected, including the collegiality of bishops, the priesthood of all the baptized, the theology of the local church and the importance of Scripture.

Peter Steinfels, co-director of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture, said the transformative effect of Vatican II remains elusive because people in the church continue to argue about the authority of Vatican II.

He said that some are uncomfortable with the redistribution of power it called for; that advocates of change urge that issues which arose in the wake of the council be interpreted in light of the council; and that there is disagreement about whether the texts should be interpreted literally and there were many items left unresolved at the end of the council.

Father Komonchak said some texts were deliberately left open-ended.

Melissa Wilde, associate professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, said most of the post-Vatican II conflict has been in areas where the council texts are ambiguous or open-ended. “Where clear statements were made, such as the Declaration on Religious Freedom, they were listened to.”

Religious liberty, the document said, is a right found in the dignity of each person and no one should be forced to act in a way contrary to his or her beliefs.

She said the biggest problem for people trying to understand the reforms of the

council is that “it eliminated things they liked” but “didn’t give them the things that mattered, like birth control.”

Wilde said the council reforms were not evenly instituted across the world.

Father Komonchak said some of the reported resistance to the reforms of Vatican II is exaggerated. “Vatican II has not been repealed. By and large, the positive changes it brought about are here to stay and the typical parish is still living them. There is a fundamental core.

“The answer to what Vatican II was is still being determined by how Catholics are living today,” he said.