

[Opinion](#)



by Ken Briggs

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

May 8, 2018

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

You could say that the sheer size and scope of the Second Vatican Council made the National Catholic Reporter necessary. It was an enormous institutional and personal upheaval that cried out for the kind of response and analysis that NCR rose up to provide in crucial measure. From Kansas City came a beckoning to read the council's signs with heart and mind.

The significance of that contribution cannot be overstated. Without NCR's reporting and interpretation of what this staggering turn of events would mean, the burst of enthusiasm, anxiety and curiosity that the council incited would have dissipated. The council's leaders had stood the church on its head, it appeared, redefining it from a "perfect society" overseen by hierarchs to a "people of God" whose origins and, just maybe its actual function, resided primarily in the baptized base. Could it be true?

The implied liberty to redo the landscape of holy ground stirred hopes and threatened the top-down status quo. Out of that exuberance for reform and pushback for restraint emerged a struggle that continues to this day. NCR, a paper that dared to operate independent of any institutional support, has tracked that oft-painful history of the conflict between those who strive to fulfill what they see as the council's unfinished potential and those who think change has gone too far in a misguided yearning to become worldly.

So much of the tension has centered on whether change is warranted and, if so, how it is accomplished. The council didn't change the power structure, but its central teaching documents were widely seen as implying greater sharing of authority and, by extension, a downshifting of decision-making to lay people and regions of the world.

Advertisement

Through this, NCR has reported fairly on the actors in this drama even as it has sided editorially with Catholics who embrace an expanding egalitarianism and justice in its modern definition both inside and outside the church. This publication's talents and energies have been endlessly devoted to keeping alive the most consuming debate in the church's life, a debate from which all other debates flow. This is a particularly crucial time, as the major contestants for the church's future vie with each other over the fate of that Vatican II legacy under a pope who signals affinity with change but has yet to boldly take steps to further it. Meanwhile, the laity appears far less interested in getting involved in church policy, preferring to dissent from church by leaving it or having less concern over official church doctrine.

That energy could revive, as indicated by recent suggestions that certain teachings could change — the pope's hinting at greater acceptance of gay people and Communion for divorced/remarried Catholics, for example. Meanwhile, the church declines in this part of the world and others, and it would be unimaginable that a revivalist spirit could be achieved without a consensus around Vatican II, which would require powerful participation by laity. Stand by NCR to stay tuned.

If you are reading this, you are most likely someone who cares deeply about this struggle and for NCR's vigilance in covering it. A revitalized Washington press corps shows how much difference good journalism can make. The NCR staff displays principles of honesty, faith, tolerance and fairness, and it shows. As a contributor for several decades, I'm a grateful recipient of this journalistic integrity and the open-minded spirit that readily welcomes non-Catholics like me.

I'm confident that [you'll help NCR stay on the case](#).

[Ken Briggs reported on religion for Newsday and The New York Times, has contributed articles to many publications, written four books, and is an instructor at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania.]

This story appears in the **Spring Fund Drive 2018** feature series. [View the full series.](#)