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Witnesses of Vatican II tell their stories in new book

Robert McClory | Oct. 3, 2013 NCR Today

In September 1962, 70 seminarians handpicked from dioceses all over the United States boarded the ocean liner Leonardo Da Vinci bound for Rome. They would spend their next four years studying at the Pontifical Gregorian University. These were the best and brightest the church had to offer, expected to distinguish themselves throughout their careers as priests, some as bishops. It so happened that the four years of their study in Rome coincided with the four years of the Second Vatican Council.

In a highly readable new book, *Unfinished Pentecost: Vatican II and the Altered Lives of Those Who Witnessed It* [1], veteran columnist and editor Ken Trainor has compiled interviews with many of these men. The result is a kind of oral history of their experiences during the council, what they have done with their lives in the last 50 years and how they view the church today. Of the 70 who sailed, 55 were ordained priests. Some have died and some have left the priesthood, leaving 19 still in active or retired ministry. Oddly enough, only one of those ordained became a bishop.

The interviews reflect the energy and enthusiasm that swept through the Vatican during those exciting days. The seminarians did not attend the sessions of the council, but they heard talks and had access to leading figures of the day like Hans Küng, Karl Rahner, John Courtney Murray, and Edward Schillebeeckx.

"Most of us felt a great sense of pride in the Church that had come of age," said Msgr. Chester Borski of the Houston diocese. "We witnessed the shift from an approach of defending the Church by carefully reasoned apologetics to a missionary thrust of reaching out to Christians and others in a joint effort to shape a better world."

Fr. Donald Klein of the Dubuque, Iowa, archdiocese tells how he "flourished" as a campus pastor at the University of Northern Iowa, implementing Vatican II and being "led by a bishop who was Vatican II despite being a bishop."

Fr. Donald Nesti of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost said: "All this brought about in me a radical transformation in my world view, first and foremost about being a human being and subsequently about being a priest, a religious missionary."

But even while the council was proceeding, some began to have doubts about the long-range effects. "It was thrilling to see Pope John XXIII," said Joseph McCool, who would in time leave the priesthood. "Little did we know how unrepeatable he was. After his death in 1963, aggiornamento began to unravel."

"One of the things I know now that I didn't know then is that a view without a strategic plan is mostly wishful thinking," said Jim Purcell, who served as vice president for university relations at Santa Clara University, among other positions, after leaving the institutional priesthood in 1972. "The council laid out a brilliant vision of the church but neither the bishops nor we as young priests understood the importance of 'owning' that together and translating that vision into a coherent plan."

Trainor also interviewed a number of priests and sisters who were in Rome during Vatican II, including Jesuit Fr. Ladislas Orsy, Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza and Dominican Sr. Joan O'Shea. They, too, sensed the power of the Spirit at the council, and they, too, expressed concern and sadness about the reform of the reform that was steadily underway under Blessed John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.

Unfortunately, *Unfinished Pentecost* was researched and written before the arrival of Pope Francis. Final assessments of those interviewed might be quite different today. One person, Dominican Sr. Monice Kavanaugh, gave voice to the longings of so many who saw the church moving backward:

"I can't imagine a pope who is going to say, 'It is time. We are done with this. Let's get rid of some of the trappings and get to what's authentic and judge everything by justice and see where we are.' The process of winnowing away and scraping it away will unleash some of the thinking and spirituality ... that's necessary for the next push. Right now, who could have enough influence as good as they might be, to just make this happen?"

Who, indeed? Trainor's book is aptly titled *Unfinished Pentecost*.

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[1] http://www.amazon.com/Unfinished-Pentecost-Vatican-Altered-Witnessed/dp/1484809297