

From the Editor

Lately, I've been thinking about Vatican II. October 2012 marks the 50th anniversary of that momentous gathering of our global Church – well, at least, a gathering of the men in our global Church – and neither our elected leadership teams around the world nor the folks associated with Mercy International Association (MIA) have had anything to say about it. At least, none of them have thus far.

Vatican II (1962–1965) marked a time when the Church took a look at where it was and where the world was – and it sought to close the gap. What makes Vatican II especially different from all the Councils that preceded it is the language used. Tom Roberts, with due acknowledgement to John O'Malley, S.J. and his book, *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?*, sums it up in *The Emerging Catholic Church* (see the review in this issue of *Mercywords*):

... the “characteristic style of discourse” of prior councils comprised “two basic elements” – the canon, or law, formulated to impose a punishment, and the vocabulary appropriate to that genre. The discourse of prior councils employed “power words,” or “words of threat and intimidation, words of surveillance and punishment, words of a superior speaking to inferiors or... to an enemy.”...

In contrast, Vatican II used “empowerment words,” words of reciprocity and persuasion... different from commands and anathemas (p. 168).

“Empowerment words” are words of encouragement, words of, “Hey, I know **you** can do it, because **you** have great insight and ability. **You** are talented and **you** can meet the challenge!”

“Empowerment words” convey respect for the other, and spoken by a “leader,” spoken by a person of vision, kindness, and knowledge, empowerment words enable people to do great things – for others.

This issue of *Mercywords* is about a project involving religious women – Sisters, nuns – in Africa who have been empowered by two Sisters of Mercy from the United States – Margaret Farley and Eileen Hogan – who created a project – the *All-Africa Conference: Sister to Sister* (AACSS) – that empowers African religious women to deal with the HIV-AIDS pandemic in their part of the world. Here's how it all started, with thanks to Jamie Mason from *National Catholic Reporter*, who interviewed Margaret and Eileen for some columns about AACSS. In November 2001, USAID, a non-governmental organization (NGO), was planning an international symposium as part of World AIDS Day. When a keynote speaker had to cancel with only a few weeks' notice, conference planners found themselves scrambling for a suitable replacement. They asked Margaret, at the time, a professor of Christian Ethics at Yale Divinity School.

After listening to Margaret, members of the USAID team were so moved that they asked if she would consider further study of the African HIV/AIDS pandemic. Along with colleagues and students at Yale Divinity, Margaret organized a consultation that brought

together African women from fifty different countries to discuss the pain and struggle they face in their battle against HIV/AIDS. Margaret met a number of Catholic women, including a few women religious. She saw an opportunity to have a concrete impact on their battle with the pandemic. “Women religious,” she said, “already have a large network in place.” A religious community could provide an ideal entry point for outreach and organization.

Margaret invited Mercy Sister Eileen Hogan to join her in the effort. Together, they created the *All-Africa Conference: Sister to Sister* (AACSS). According to Eileen, “When we started in 2002, silence reigned over sexuality and sexual behavior. Little education was provided. Now as you drive through many parts of Africa, you see information about AIDS on billboards.”

The work of *Sister to Sister* bespeaks their vision of a world church. “It demonstrates,” in Margaret’s words, “that we are all in this together and that we are all equally church.” (For the full interview, see the December 15, 2011 issue of *National Catholic Reporter*).

If the *All Africa Conference: Sister to Sister* is not a project in the spirit of Vatican II, I don’t know one that is. It’s a project that empowers, encourages, and embraces the Vatican II insight that salvation is concerned not solely with saving souls, but with saving the whole person – body and soul. I encourage you to learn more about it by visiting their website (<http://allafrica-sistertosister.org/>) and/or by downloading the PowerPoint presentation linked to this editorial.

As for Vatican II, you will be hearing a lot more about it from me, even if we don’t hear much about it from our elected Mercy leadership folks around the world, or from MIA and their people. Why? Because the momentum behind the Church’s ongoing renewal is found in the teachings of Vatican II. It is found in a Church and a religious community that is re-centered on the Gospels, in constant dialogue with the world, and celebrates the Eucharist regularly, which is why we need much better and more inclusive celebrations of the Eucharist.

As always, let me know what **you** are thinking.

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