Archbishop Loris Capovilla, now 96 years of age, was the personal secretary of Blessed John XXIII. When the freshly named patriarch of Venice Italy, Cardinal Angelo G. Roncalli chose 37-year-old Father Loris Capovilla as his personal secretary in 1953, a skeptical adviser told the cardinal that the priest looked too sickly to bear the strain of his new job. “Then he’ll die as my secretary,” replied the future pope, now known as Blessed John XXIII. Today, at age 96, now – Archbishop Capovilla has outlived his employer by nearly half a century but remains an indefatigable custodian of his legacy. In Blessed John’s birthplace, about 25 miles northeast of Milan, the archbishop pursues a highly active retirement that includes running a museum dedicated to the small town’s most famous native son.

While keeping up with current events, Archbishop Capovilla draws on his remarkable memory to recount vividly detailed and revealing stories of his years with one of the most consequential figures in modern Catholic history.

The archbishop was privy to some of the pope’s first remarks, only a few days after his election in 1958, about what would become the Second Vatican Council.

Cardinals and bishops had presented the new pontiff with a litany of challenges before the church – “not doctrinal but pastoral problems,” the archbishop notes – in areas that included the liturgy, diplomacy, and the education and discipline of priests.

“My desk is piling up with problems, questions, requests, hopes,” Blessed John told his secretary. “What’s really necessary is a council.”

Though the pope mentioned the idea more than once, his secretary refused to comment. Finally the pope gave his interpretation of the priest’s silence. “You think I am old,” Blessed John told him. “You think I’ll make a mess out of this enormous task, that I don’t have time . . . But that’s not how you think with faith . . . If one can only begin with the preparatory commission, that will be of great merit. If one dies, all others will come. It is a great honor even to begin.”

Whatever doubts he may have had at the outset, Archbishop Capovilla came to appreciate the council’s historic importance and to play a part in it behind the scenes.

It was the archbishop, in his own telling, who persuaded a reluctant and tired Blessed John to step to a window and bless the crowd in St. Peter’s Square on the night of October 11, 1962, following the council’s first day. In now-famous remarks, the pope went on to bid the people: “Now go back home and give your little children a kiss – tell them it is from Pope John,”

Pope John XXIII, who opened the Second Vatican Council 50 years ago this October, said that an anniversary is not only an opportunity to remember, it is also an obligation. We need, he taught, to recall important events that have had an impact on our lives. For Catholic everywhere, the Council is one of them.

Vatican II was an attempt by the Church to rediscover in its past the kernels of fresh understandings and ecclesial structures that respond more authentically and relevantly to what the Council called the modern world.”
At the Council, for example, Patriarch Maximos IV Saigh asked the bishops to rediscover in church history that collegiality was not a novelty but the way the early Church governed itself and the way the Eastern Catholic Church still operates. Bishop Fulton Sheen, then Auxiliary Bishop of New York, urged the Council Fathers to go back to the sources, noting, “Nowhere in the New Testament is any mention made of a distinction between the Church and its missionary activity.” “The distinction between ‘missionary’ and ‘non-missionary’ priests is merely geographical. Every priest and, in fact, every Christian is a missionary.” And, every one of us – lay woman, lay man, priest, bishops, has the obligation after listening to that letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians to work in ministry, from building up the Body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to the extent of the full stature of Christ.

At first glance we might wonder why Pope Benedict XVI decided to honor the fiftieth anniversary of Vatican II by calling for a Year of Faith. Why not love? Or hope? Or peace? What is it that links the Council so strongly to the virtue of faith?

But if we look at the Council closely, a “Year of Faith” makes perfect sense. That’s because faith was the central message of the Council.

On virtually every page of the Council documents, we can see the Holy Spirit calling us to a deeper faith, a faith that is at the same time as ancient as the Church and yet fresh and new. It is a faith that answers the spirit of the age we are living in. It’s a faith that goes beyond knowing the truths of our doctrine, important though that is, to encompass our hearts as well as our minds. This is not a faith that we express only within the walls of our churches and homes. It’s a faith that propels us into the world with the good news of the gospel message.

If we want to understand this faith, we have to grasp how unique Vatican II was. In many ways, it was different from any other council that the Church had ever held.

No Condemnation

Vatican II was the first general council that did not issue any condemnations. By contrast, Vatican II did not identify any heretical doctrine. It did not single out any individuals for excommunication. It took a different approach altogether. As Pope John XXIII said in his homily at the opening of the council: “Errors vanish as quickly as they arise, like the fog before the sun. The Church has always opposed these errors. Frequently she has condemned them with the greatest severity. Nowadays however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity.”

John XXIII believed that there were already enough voices pronouncing judgment against the sins of the day. What the world wasn’t hearing enough about was the promise and hope at the heart of the gospel. And so he called the Church to speak in a whole new way – a way that sought to apply the truths of the faith to the experiences of everyday people. He wanted the council to go beyond making dogmatic statements and to talk about a merciful God who is offering salvation to everyone who turns to him.

Open the World

This was also the first general council that welcomed input from other Christian religions. Anglicans, Orthodox, Lutherans, Pentecostals, and others were invited to sit in on the sessions and offer their observations and suggestions. In a shift from the condemnations arising from the Protestant Revolution, the Council Fathers taught that groups once deemed heretics and schismatics now “have a right to be called Christian, and so are correctly accepted as brothers [and sisters] by the children of the Catholic Church” (Decree on Ecumenism, 3).

Finally, this was the first council that encouraged participation from lay members of the Church, including laywomen. It was the first time that lay people (other than heads of state) were welcomed
into the Council’s deliberations and invited to offer their perspectives. This new approach was highlighted by the fact that the Council’s document on the Church emphasized the crucial role that lay people play in the work of the Church. In fact, the Council Fathers went so far as to teach that everyday lay Catholics share in the priestly prophetic, and kingly ministries of Jesus – just as bishops and priests do.

These were all significant changes, both in tone and in teaching, in the Church. And they weren’t the only ones. The way the Mass was celebrated was revised dramatically. A new universal catechism was commissioned. The Council Fathers set aside previous papal statements claiming that Catholicism should be established as the official religion of every nation. And in their declaration concerning non-Christian religions, they openly condemned for the first time any form of anti-Semitism or harsh treatment of the Jewish people.

Have Faith!
All these elements of Vatican II show us the kind of faith that God is calling all of us to share. First, by choosing the “medicine of mercy” over severity. Pope John XXIII showed faith in the power of God’s love and compassion. Along with Pope Paul VI, his successor, he told us to reach out to people in love instead of condemnation. He taught us to believe in the Spirit’s ability to minister the gospel through our words and the witness of our lives.

Second, by changing the Church’s approach to non-Catholics, the Council taught us to have faith in the good intentions and noble desires of people who disagree with us. It showed us that everyone who seeks God with a good and upright heart is worthy of our respect. It told us to believe that God can work outside of the walls of our own Church. He can work through people who don’t share our faith – even people who claim to have no faith at all!

Mountain-Moving Faith
Brothers and sisters, God is calling us during this special year to exercise our faith. He wants us to take hold of our faith with all the confidence and hope that the Fathers of Vatican II had. He wants to see us take the “medicine of mercy” to everyone we meet – not with words of condemnation or suspicion or judgment but with words of promise, solidarity, and fellowship. He wants us to see everyone around us as brothers and sisters, all equally loved by Jesus, all equally redeemed by his cross.

This is the kind of faith that can move mountains in people’s lives!
Answering Jesus’ charge to proclaim the Gospel to all creation, the Council Fathers reached out to people from every culture and every walk of life. They made it clear that the Church is more than its institutions, its hierarchy, and its liturgies. The Church is part of the world. It is made up of everyday men and women who are deeply committed to the common good of all people, not just those who share their faith.

With this new, outward-looking perspective, the Council Fathers made it clear that they wanted the Church to serve the world, not just preach to it. They wanted to offer to everyone “the honest assistance of the Church in fostering that brotherhood of all men” that everyone inwardly years for (Gaudium et spes, 3). And so they produced a document that was meant to lift up the whole world, inviting everyone to receive the light and grace of the Lord.

By witnessing to the “healing and elevating impact” of the gospel, the Church shows people their true dignity in Christ (Gaudium et spes, 40). And when people feel lifted up by the Lord, they begin to treat other people with greater respect and dignity. The way they treat their families, their co-workers, and their neighbors changes as they draw closer to the Lord. And so, radiating out from the words and witness of the Church, the whole world is changed. As the Fathers put it, the Church’s role is not only to “communicate divine life” but to “cast the reflected light of that life over the entire earth” (Gaudium et spes, 40).
The Fathers of Vatican II saw this loss of political power as a true blessing. They were no longer under obligation to any government or limited by political considerations. Now they were able to reach out to all people regardless of the political landscape. So with gratitude, they announced that the Church’s mission is not one of politics or economics (*Gaudium et spes*, 42).

The vision of the church’s new role in the world applies even more so to lay people. After all, it is the lay members of the Church who engage the world every day. They are the ones who touch people who may never enter a church or read a papal encyclical. And so it is lay people – each and every one of us – who are called to be agents of unity, reconciliation, and peace in this world. It’s a calling to treat all people with respect and dignity regardless of their political convictions or economic situation. And in this Year of Faith, it’s a calling to live our faith and share our faith with humility, conviction, and love.

**The Challenge of Vatican II**

Year after year, our world grows more polarized. Conservatives mistrust liberals, and liberals are wary of conservatives. The gap between rich and poor continues to widen. Christian denominations remain deeply divided. Even within our Church, there are those who call themselves “authentic Catholics” in contrast to people they disagree with.

It is tempting to join in this divisive way of thinking. It is tempting to try to identify ourselves with one side or another. But this is not the way of the Gospel. No, the way of the Gospel is the way of service and love. It’s the way of Jesus, who laid down his life for all people. As he spoke through the Fathers of Vatican II, the Spirit now wants to send each of us into the world, ready to raise up anyone who is suffering or marginalized in any way. He wants us to shine the light of the gospel in our homes, at work, and in our communities.

In this call to serve, we cannot afford to look at people only through the lenses of economics or politics or religion or ideology. We cannot afford to reduce people to their opinions, because such an approach robs them of their dignity as beloved children of God.

**Change the World**

Jesus promised: “‘Whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these’” (John 14:12). These “greater works” can flow out of us as we take the message of the gospel into the world and apply it to every aspect of our lives. By our love for Jesus and for the whole human family, we can change the world! THE IDEA OF SERVICE HAS BEEN CENTRAL. Never before perhaps, so much as on this occasion, has the Church felt the need to know, to draw near to, to understand, to penetrate, serve and evangelize the society in which she lives; and to get to grips with it, almost to run after it, in its rapid and continuous change.

The Church of the council has been concerned with man and woman as they really are today: living, all wrapped up in self, who makes self not only the center of every interest but dares to claim that self is the principle and explanation of all reality. Every perceptible element in man . . . has, in a sense, been displayed in full view of the Council Fathers, who, in their turn, are mere men, and yet all of them are pastors and brothers.

This council has dwelt upon humanity’s ever twofold facet, namely, man’s wretchedness and his greatness, his profound weakness – which is undeniable and cannot be cured by himself – and the good that survives in him which is ever marked by a hidden beauty and an invincible serenity. Instead of depressing diagnoses, encouraging remedies; instead of direful prognostics, messages of trust issued from the council to the present-day-world. The modern world’s values were not only respected but honored, its efforts approved, its aspirations purified and blessed.

All this rich teaching is channeled in one direction, the service of mankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need. The Church has, so to speak, declared herself the servant of humanity, at the
very time when her teaching role and her pastoral government have, by reason of the council’s solemnity, assumed greater splendor and vigor: the idea of serve has been central.

_Loving the Church_

In the preface of his great _The Splendor of the Church_, Father Henri de Lubac speaks of his love, and I quote: “I love it with an ever-growing affection. So, since that is where my heart lies, and since heart speaks to heart, my hope is that others — especially my fellow priests — will find helpful what has been of help to me. It may be that some of the reflections I put before them will seem out of date already; today situations change quickly, as do mental attitudes and key problems, particularly among those who are more hotly engaged than the present writer in the world of action. But I was not really aiming at topical application. We live in a particularly turbulent period, and it is impossible that its troubles should be altogether without repercussions in our souls. And if at such a time anything I have to say can help anyone to a clearer sight of the Bride of the Lamb, in all her radiant motherhood, my object will have been achieved and I shall be well satisfied.”