Back in 1986 I described the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) as ‘a mixed blessing’ and the French historian Pierre Dentin calls it ‘an unfinished symphony.’ I believe that what’s happened since then has proved those estimates right. My comment primarily referred to Lumen gentium (LG), Vatican II’s basic document on the church. The first two chapters of LG develop dynamic images of the church as a community, the people of God on pilgrimage drawn together by God’s Spirit and gifted to minister in the church and as representatives of Christ in the world. The emphasis in these two chapters is on the Christian community. Here the church is also seen as a ‘mystery’, a profound symbolic reality like an artistic masterpiece that can be explored, but never exhausted. It is meant to serve as a sign that God is active in the world symbolized by those who hunger for justice, work for integrity and seek the meaning of human existence. This model primarily envisages a church that is built-up from below.

Chapter three of LG seemingly completely ignores the first two chapters; its as though they didn’t exist. It presents the church as a clerical hierarchy under the control of the pope whose primary task is to shepherd the sheep, the lay ‘faithful’. This is the church of the First Vatican Council of 1870. The definition of primacy at this council says that the pope has ‘the absolute fullness of supreme power’; he thus ‘owns’ the church, lock stock and barrel. Also, all teaching power (magisterium) passes through him via the definition of papal infallibility and the later insidious influence of a false ‘creeping infallibility’, that is extending infallibility to everything the pope—and his Vatican bureaucrats—say.

As a result, all of us since Vatican II have been caught-up in the disjunction in LG between a model of the church as hierarchy and an understanding of the church as the pilgrim people of God. These models are mutually exclusive and corrosive of each other. It has led to endless conflict between those who operate out of a hierarchical model and those for whom the priority is with the community. This conflict has become increasingly toxic.

Something similar has emerged from the decree Christus Dominus (CD) which enhanced the authority of local bishops. As successors of the apostles, bishops were not only responsible for their own dioceses, but the doctrine of collegiality calls them to assume responsibility for both their own dioceses, as well as the wider local church through the national conference of bishops. As members of the college of bishops they also assume responsibility with the pope for the universal church. Bishops emerged from Vatican II with their position more enhanced than any other group in the church. This was an attempt to balance the pope-centred church of Vatican I, but the problem has been that the kind of bishops appointed by John Paul II (1978-2005) and Benedict XVI (2005-2013) have never really assumed primary responsibility for their own churches, let alone the national and international church. They’ve remained tied hand and foot to Rome, dependent on the papacy for every major decision.

The Council’s Decree on the Laity says that all members of the church are called through their baptism and their sharing in the priesthood of Christ to ministry and evangelization through social action and service in the world. Lay spirituality, the Decree says, grows through
involvement in life in the world. The final chapter de-emphasizes clerical control saying that ‘in the church there are many undertakings which are established by the free choice of the laity and regulated by their prudent judgement’ (24). This is a radical departure from re-conciliar views which subjected all lay activity to the control of the clergy. But the council failed to clarify the difference between the priesthood of the laity and the clergy.

Priests are really the ‘lost souls’ of Vatican II. The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests is an unimpressive document that essentially demands that priests carry on a modern ministry in the contemporary world with a lifestyle and spirituality better geared to the post-Reformation period when the model of priesthood we still have today developed. It has also become increasingly clear that the seminary system, which is also a product of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), has nurtured a clericalist and conformist mindset that doesn’t develop the kind of emotional intelligence needed for effective leadership and ministry.

But Vatican II is also a ‘symphony’ and a ‘blessing’ and it issued some really significant decrees. The one that impacted most on Catholics was the decree on the liturgy, Sacrosanctum concilium. This initiated the most far-reaching reform of the church’s worship in two millennia. It involved translating the liturgy into local languages, but the simplified liturgy is much more expressive of Christian faith. The role of the community is stressed moving worship away from a priest-centric affair. It also gave authority to bishops’ conferences to supervise translations.

Another was the Decree on Ecumenism that not only opened Catholicism to the other Christian churches as sister communions, it also gave birth to three other important decrees: on relationships with the Jewish faith with a repudiation of our appalling history of anti-Semitism; on religious liberty which opened up Catholicism to pluralist democratic forms of government and to accepting the separation of church and state; and on the church’s relations with the non-Christian world. The decree on divine revelation not only helped Catholics find common ground with other Christians, but opened-up the church to the modern renewal of biblical studies and restored the bible to the centre of Catholic life.

Probably the most important decree of the council was Gaudium et spes (GS) on the church in the modern world. GS is the first attempt by any church council to enter into genuine dialogue with the world, a dialogue that involved both speaking and listening, implying that Catholicism had something to learn from the secular. GS clearly implied that this dialogue was to be an ongoing task with the church offering a critique of culture, but at the same time listening to it and learning from it. The notion that Catholicism had anything to learn from the secular has been anathema to many traditionalists and is at the root of the ‘culture wars’ that have divided Catholics since 1965. GS focused on several particular issues: marriage and the family, culture, socio-economic life, politics, peace and international relations including the morality of nuclear war. It was during the debate on marriage that Pope Paul VI withdrew the question of birth control from the purview of the council, resulting the later disaster of Humanae vitae in 1968. Where GS fell down was in its failure to address the role of women, ecology and population and the effects of globalization, although these have only really come to the fore in the last few decades. While Vatican II truly brought the church into the modern world, it has truly been a ‘unfinished symphony’. But Catholicism would have been in a dreadful state if it had not happened.