Complexity has been crucial in so much of our understanding of the modern secular world. It could also provide the key to unlocking a theology that allows the Church to engage effectively with modernity and in doing so rekindle the burning issues that made Vatican II so exhilarating.

Bishop Emiel-Jozef De Smedt of Bruges declared, in the first session of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, that it was time for the Church to break free from its legacy of “Triumphalism, Clericalism and Legalism”. He received the loudest and most sustained applause of the whole session. The council Fathers were becoming progressively aware that there were features of the traditional “Roman” mindset that risked making the Church look increasingly like an anachronistic sect.

The terms used by Bishop De Smedt were carefully chosen. The Church’s style was deeply coloured by its history as a European monarchy, competing and negotiating with other monarchies, and expressing its identity through the traditional symbols of monarchy. Its administrative and decision-making structures were dominated by a powerful “clerical” caste with its own deeply entrenched juridical system.

There was another factor. The ghosts at the feast of Vatican II were Pius IX’s “Syllabus of Errors” and Pius X’s condemnation of Modernism. The legacy of these was a perception that the Church had allied itself definitively with a dogmatic tradition that was hostile not only to everything that could be dubbed “liberal” but also to the multiple facets of modernity.

The successive battles over the texts of Vatican II’s doctrinal and pastoral constitutions represented a very significant confrontation between two powerful currents of thought within the Church. The first (which was presumed by many to be the dominant one) was a way of thinking that would now be regarded as “fundamentalist”; the second was the new spirit of open and eirenic enquiry that had been quietly developed, in many fields, during the pontificate of Pius XII and that had inspired John XXIII to summon the council.

In the event, Vatican II came to represent a decisive rejection of the “fundamentalist” option. The term is appropriate in this context for several reasons. The fundamentalist cast of mind, whether in religion or in other areas of discourse, is one that prefers clarity to complexity. It likes to claim “ownership of the truth”, is distrustful of dialogue, and prefers the safety of known tradition to the risks of innovation.

When the council opened, many took it for granted that this was the way the Catholic Church did its business, and were amazed when the proposed drafts were, one after the other, thrown out. A new question was being asked: was the Church’s traditional way of formulating doctrine and making decisions a religious necessity or a cultural accident of history?

During the council, the varied responses to this question were frequently described by commentators in political terms, as a clash between Left and Right. This was inaccurate. They had to do with the Church’s response to the challenge of complexity. In every field, from global economics to genetics and from philosophy to the growth and movement of populations, there was a complexity that called for new levels of interactive thinking. The Church had to decide whether to stand apart from all this or to become engaged in it.

The council chose complexity. It started by recognising that the Church was too much influenced by a mindset that isolated it from contemporary reality. It was, of course, committed to reaffirming Catholic doctrine, but it did so in a new way. This is what all the redrafting was about; the language needed to be recast in a way that made it more widely accessible. This meant incorporating modern research and acknowledging that the Church was speaking not only to many cultures but also to an educated laity accustomed to dealing, openly and critically, with complex issues.
The dominant sense created by the council’s encounter with the complexity of these issues was one of optimism and hope. The Church, instead of opting out of the secular world, was travelling with it on its pilgrim way, helping to shape the collective conscience in a context of challenging uncertainty.

This was certainly how the generation of believers formed by Vatican II perceived things. They did not feel that their faith was “threatened” by the encounter with the complex issues of modernity, but, rather, invigorated and enriched by it. The new emphasis placed on “collegiality” and “subsidiarity”, that is, on a more open and modern way of conducting decision-making processes and pastoral strategies, went with a new perception (rooted both in Scripture and in contemporary reality) of the role of the laity in the shared priesthood of the people of God. There was a powerful convergence here between the council’s primary theological thrust (the reformulation of the doctrinal understanding of what the Church actually is) and its recognition of the role of an educated laity in modern institutional life.

Equally significant was the move away from the Church’s tendency to claim “ownership of the truth” and from its hostility towards freedom of religion. This was a step towards a new credibility in a wide range of possible dialogues. It now seemed possible that the issues facing both the Church and the world could be faced in a “modern” way, without fear and in a spirit of transparency.

The generation of Vatican II may perhaps be forgiven for feeling, 50 years on, a certain sense of disappointment. The vision seems to have become blurred. The wish to share the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish, of the world seems to be giving way to a newfound wish to reassert Catholic “identity” over and against a largely alien world.

This is understandable enough, in the light of the more aggressive aspects of modern atheism. But what seems to have been lost is something more important, namely the careful and eirenic distinction made by Pope Paul VI, in his 1975 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, between this “militant” atheism and the “just and legitimate secularisation … which is in no way incompatible with faith or religion”.

Pope Paul stressed that Vatican II “had affirmed the legitimate autonomy of culture and in particular of the sciences”. By doing so, it had made an essential distinction between “secularisation” and “ secularism”, and had situated the Church in a deliberately paradoxic relationship with the world.

It was only from within a positive relationship with “authentic” secularisation that the Church could discern, in the world that surrounded it and in which it was lovingly engaged, “a powerful and tragic appeal to be evangelised”. It is this sense of paradox, so crucial to the whole thrust of Vatican II, that seems to be threatened by the more simple and sweeping (and therefore more “fundamentalist”) emphasis on an outright rejection of “ relativism” as a whole.

This loss of a sense of complexity and paradox has also, perhaps, weakened the Church’s capacity for the sort of self-appraisal that institutions need in order to remain healthy. The questions raised by Bishop De Smedt have not gone away. The centralised preconciliar structures of power and of decision-making, the sense of clerical “caste” and the curious Catholic version of the modern cult of celebrity still seem to loom larger than the deeper underlying challenges.

It is disconcerting that so much attention has been focused recently on relatively minor matters such as the new translations of the Missal and the reintroduction of Friday abstinence. Many thinking Catholics would welcome an engagement in more substantial issues.

The Church has problems that are well known to everyone, and which echo those of society in general. Problems of family and sexual morality, the decline in Catholic practice, the incidence of sexual abuse, the shortage of candidates for the celibate priesthood, the shift in the perception of women’s role in society, the widespread “popular” protest against some aspects of global capitalism, the concern for the long-term care of our planet and the unconvincing progress in ecumenical dialogue – these are complex challenges that Catholics think and care about.

Such Catholics often wonder whether the Church, not as a top-down institution but as the prophetic people of God journeying together, might find some way of addressing these challenges more openly and with the risky confidence that made Vatican II so exhilarating.

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