Half a century has passed since the Second Vatican Council. In retrospect, I can appreciate the period of the council as the most challenging learning curve I have ever known. Let me explain briefly what happened to our church during the period from Pope John’s startling announcement on 25 January 1959 to the formal ratification and closing on 8 December 1965.

Nine days after the official opening of the council, the council fathers issued a message to the nations. It is of value to review the intent in that message: “Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we wish to inquire how we ought to renew ourselves, so that we may be found increasingly faithful to the gospel of Christ ... We look forward to a spiritual renewal from which will also flow a happy impulse on behalf of human values such as scientific discoveries, technological advances, and a wider diffusion of knowledge.”

Assembled from around the world, we council fathers shared our pastoral experience and reflected on the signs of the times. We realized that our previous theological methods had become obsolete. To reach out to the world, we had to reformulate our theology. We had to set aside neo-scholastic, abstract theology in favour of a more invitational style of discourse that would facilitate dialogue with contemporary society.

Nowhere was this more obvious than in the domain that concerns us in this volume: the issues of social justice and the common good. Thanks to Vatican II, growing numbers of disciples have reclaimed the Bible as their own and identified prophetically how the entire church
is to be prophetic, missionary, and directly involved in transforming the world and society. The council laid the foundation from which a theology of liberation was gradually elaborated. People suffering from marginalization and oppression rediscovered the sacred scriptures as embracing the cause of those living in poverty.

My previous experience in what we then called “specialized Catholic Action” helped me recognize the profound movement afoot, particularly among the marginalized members of society. Expressions like “the historic cause of the peasants” and “the preferential option for the poor” convey, if only partially, a sense of what I am convinced may well be the most energetic spiritual upheaval emanating from and in the aftermath of the council. Liberation theology, finally recognized as generally orthodox in teaching and juridically legitimate in its application to social structures, is increasingly finding global expression.

The creation and inspiration within the sixteen council documents are worthy in themselves as a compass for both the present and the future. At the risk of overly simplifying this vast and complex body of doctrine and pastoral guidance, I will recall some of the principal teachings of the council, under three headings, with some partial overlapping. I choose these headings not only as historical backdrop but especially as underlying themes that continue to call us to appropriate renewal every day.

Ressourcement. First, I recall the French term ressourcement. This entails a refreshing visit and reclamation of our earlier foundations – our origins or sources in tradition and scripture, within the church itself. Ressourcement reminds me of what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well: genuine disciples who worship in spirit and in truth will discover a spring of living water surging up from their hearts.

In pre-Vatican Council times, scripture – the living Word of God – had become somewhat atrophied, even neglected in favour of morality and law. With the assistance of scripture scholars and the influence of the bishops of the Eastern rite, we developed a renewed understanding of revelation. This is no longer identified primarily with the written text of the Bible and the teaching authority of the Magisterium. However vital these are, they are instruments, not ends in themselves. The fullness of revelation is found in the Person of Jesus, the Christ, the Anointed One. He is not merely the Messenger of Revelation but also its very Life. Our previous
obsession with narrow academic orthodoxy for too long obscured the fact that the early disciples were known as followers of “The Way,” more concerned with living a new lifestyle than with details of catechetics or apologetics.

_Dei Verbum (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation)_ was a direct outcome of our return to the source. It became the basis for renewal in theology, liturgy, ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, and indeed for the promotion of social justice. It will continue to provide us with guideposts for years to come.

The return to the Word of God provided a deepening of the history of salvation, a recognition of the basic need for a more elaborate theology of the Holy Trinity, further reflection on the person and mission of Jesus, and a focus on the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the people of God. With this refocusing on the Word of God, a renewed vision of the church emerged with a mission both _ad intra_ and _ad extra_. A shift beyond the former juridical and hierarchical model toward an unfolding sacramental, grace-filled, pastoral model occurred, with a redirection toward ministries of humble service to all humankind.

This return to our roots also helped me personally to appreciate more fully how the mystery of the church can be perceived as the salvation history of the pilgrim people of God en route to the Kingdom. The Reign of God has begun, but awaits completion at the end of time. We are frail humans in need of constant conversion and communal spiritual discernment. The church is in history, but history is also in the church.

_Aggioramento_. The second term is a now-familiar Italian expression, _aggiornamento_, which conveys, among other meanings, a sense of appropriate renewal, adaptation, updating, friendly dialogue with modern culture, and necessary change.

Nowhere more than in _Sacrosanctum Concilium (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy)_ is there such a clear, dynamic, and strong rationale for adaptation and renewal: “The sacred council has set out to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian lives of the faithful; to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change; to encourage whatever can promote the union of all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever serves to call all of humanity into the church’s fold. Accordingly it sees particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy” (sc 1).
Updating the relationship between faith and culture makes manifest how they are intimately linked, as they mutually permeate one another. Biblical revelation and theology require evolution in language and interpretation so as to remain faithful to the original meaning and intelligible to succeeding generations. The discussions that renewed these links created a more open attitude in which cultures honour all traditions and customs, all the way from implementing the vernacular to promoting liturgical dance. The concept of the “People of God” broadened our outlook, from west to east, from north to south.

By returning to the sources – the Word of God, tradition, and the mystery of the church itself – the council fathers were challenged by an obvious need for self-examination and self-understanding. We asked ourselves, “Who are we? What is our mission?” Responding to these queries was imperative if significant renovation was to occur. Our reflections on these questions are manifest in *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church). The updated images of the church in prayer, in relationship with other believers, of the people of God inserted into the world, resulted in the promulgation of three other constitutions: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (On the Sacred Liturgy), *Dei Verbum* (On Divine Revelation), and *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World).

The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* had not even been conceived prior to the council. Its development illustrates how the council participants were led by the Spirit to find a different style and language. It is discursive rather than inductive, inspirational rather than judgmental, seeking to remain in tune with “the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish” (*gs* 1) of a perplexed and anguished civilization. Underlying this longest of all council documents is a renewed anthropology. Its biblical foundation rests on the concept of the human as created in the image and likeness of God and destined beyond eternal horizons to enjoy communion with and loving embrace of its Maker.

*Development.* With a renewed understanding of the ecclesial mission in the world, concepts like dialogue, self-examination, and prophetic-priestly leadership by all Christians emerged under a third and final term, *development.* This very idea was formerly rejected as tendentious, if not dangerous. Today it is common currency. Despite entrenched and determined resistance from some influential council members, it gradually came to be seen as the normal form of growth
for a living body of teachings. The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* proclaims how the Holy Spirit guides the entire body of members through a variety of gifts and ministries, through reflection, contemplation, prayer, and apostolic initiatives, toward ever deeper and greater spiritual growth.

The development described above did not stop with the council. For example, nowhere was the issue of social justice enunciated more forcefully and clearly than at the 1971 Bishops’ Synod in Rome. Article 6 remains etched in my mind: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of society appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the proclamation of the Gospel” (JM 6). As a result, we no longer have the option of mouthing declarations of moral principles while avoiding bodily involvement in the restructuring of what have become basically dishonest and less than compassionate social structures. The gospel is not perceived as “good news” if it does not promote genuine humanization. Nor will there be lasting peace without effective justice for all. Structural sin is now to be denounced just as firmly as individual sin. “Prophetic mourning” is the order of the day, as Walter Brueggemann taught us; it is indispensable, absolutely required if we are to lay bare the darkness of evil to the redeeming light of truth.²

There are, however, many reasons for hope and rejoicing. Just think of the council’s recognition of the universal and foundational baptismal priesthood. Note how we are beginning to move from a “morality of prescriptions to an ethic of co-responsibility,” to recall an expression attributed to the late Bernard Häring. See the swelling wave of increasingly mature lay leadership emerging in many parishes and faith communities. Remember key issues like decentralization, subsidiarity, synodality, collegiality, and others. These terms, rarely heard in yesterday’s faith communities, are now the objects of serious discussion. Notice the increase in consultations and invitations to communal spiritual discernment.

Many of the above insights stood me in good stead in over thirty-seven years of ministry to the people in the Diocese of Victoria. Several pastoral surveys and a diocesan synod inspired by Vatican II helped greatly to develop the spirit of the council and to strengthen the believing community into a faith family with a clearer sense of purpose.

Many of you rejoice with me at the change of atmosphere and even some structural adjustments brought about by the promising
new style of papal governance made manifest by Pope Francis. His fresh approach to church teaching and governance brings back to me memories of hearing Saint John XXIII confidently anticipating the dawning of a New Pentecost. Recall the “medicine of mercy” and the open-arms policies that he advocated in his opening address to the assembled council fathers. Neglected aspects of council teachings are again coming to the fore. I hear widespread rejoicing and a renewed awakening of hope as directives promulgated by Vatican II are increasingly gaining ascendancy.

This volume reflects for me a promising array of essays and studies illustrating how the people of God in this part of the church universal are living up to the prophetic calling emanating from Vatican II. I join all of you in prayer and hopeful anticipation of further achievements as we wend our pilgrim way forward to ever-expanding and promising horizons.

NOTES
2 Brueggemann, Prophetic Imagination; Brueggemann, Reality, Grief, Hope.