The Second Vatican Council, which sent winds of change throughout the church, intersected with the social and cultural upheavals of the sixties. The council, held in Rome over four years, was the major event of the twentieth century for the Catholic Church. Its goal was, in one word, *aggiornamento*, to bring the church into line with the modern world. It sought to revitalize Catholic teaching and Christian living, reform certain ecclesiastical practices and structures, and promote Christian unity, social justice, and world peace. Moreover, as a result of Vatican II, a new vocabulary came into existence. Catholics would now speak of "ministry," "People of God," and "shared responsibility."

Religious communities, like the rest of the church, underwent self-examination of internal structures and of ministerial duties, resulting in sweeping changes. With these changes came tension and strife. As it did everywhere, the forces unleashed by the Second Vatican Council brought many changes to the archdiocese of Cincinnati. The ecumenical council brought about what appeared to be the virtual end of Tridentine Catholicism, the beliefs and practices of Catholics between the Council of Trent in 1545 and Vatican II, and ushered in a new Catholicism. Mass was celebrated in English, at times to the accompaniment of folk or contemporary music performed on the guitar rather than the organ. An increasing number of priests, seminarians, women religious, and brothers blended into the secular world to fulfill their mission. As the lifestyles of many clergy and religious changed in the sixties, some replaced religious habits and clerical collars with secular dress. Some, upon reexamination of their life decisions, left their respective religious orders.
Many of the changes paralleled the questioning and reexamination of values and institutions in America. Catholic individuals and families were divided over the response to such issues as Vatican II, racial justice, and Vietnam. Interest in social justice nevertheless found many avid supporters among the laity and religious. Though not everyone welcomed the changes enthusiastically or approved of the new spirit, the archdiocese was filled with activity undertaken to fulfill the ideals of Vatican II. It established a liturgical commission, an ecumenical commission, a poverty commission, a human rights commission, a senate of priests, parish councils, and a Pastoral Council. Alter was also the first in the history of the archdiocese to appoint lay persons to the archdiocesan Board of Education. His support of parish boards of education, furthermore, attracted attention throughout the country.²

There were areas of conciliar renewal in the local church well before the Second Vatican Council. The liturgical movement that originated in the nineteenth century in French Benedictine monasteries first appeared in the United States in the 1920s. Its goal was to create a better understanding of the Mass through a more active participation of the laity. Virgil Michel, a Benedictine monk at St. John's University in Collegeville, Indiana, Martin Hellringer of St. Louis, and the Jesuit Gerald Ellard spearheaded the movement. Though most Catholics still clung to devotional Catholicism, the liturgical movement, which was strong in the Midwest, began to challenge its relevance. Moreover, Pius XII's 1943 and 1947 encyclicals also encouraged the laity to participate more actively in the celebration of the Mass. Liturgical changes began occurring in the archdiocese in the 1950s. Though most bishops in the United States were raised in the novena and private rosary tradition and did not question their value, Alter was in the forefront of reform. He was instrumental in creating the climate and structures that made it possible for the priests, religious, and laity of the archdiocese to take a more active role in the life of the church.³

Over the course of the Alter years and in the decades that followed, lay leadership reemerged in the archdiocese. Alter helped reorganize the Archdiocesan Council of Catholic Men (ACCM) and the Archdiocesan Council of Catholic Women (ACCW), and entrusted to these federations a voice in planning and in implementing programs in the areas of liturgy, education, social action, legislation, decent literature, and family life. The success of Catholic Action movements over three decades doubtlessly gave rise to generations of educated, talented, and confident lay leaders. By 1957 the work of the ACCM and ACCW had developed to such a degree that a layman became assistant to the executive secretary, Monsignor Earl L. Whalen. The local church's move in this matter was to be followed later by a growing number of dioceses that employed laymen in executive positions. The
increasing emphasis on lay work was also reflected in the growth of the family life and social action apostolates. A Family Life Bureau was established in the archdiocese in 1962, and lay faculties gave many of the courses for engaged and married persons.⁴

That same year Alter also helped bring the Cursillo Movement to the archdiocese. In the process, he helped shape the course of the movement in the country. First presented in the United States in Texas in 1957, the Cursillo made it possible for laymen to participate fully in a course designed to awaken personal awareness of Christian ideals and a renewed commitment to Christ. Under the tutelage of the Franciscans, the first Cursillo in the archdiocese was held in February 1962 at St. Anthony Friary in Cincinnati. Shortly thereafter St. John the Baptist Church in the Over-the-Rhine section then served as the Cursillo home until 1969, when it was announced that the church would be torn down. At that time the Cursillo returned to St. Anthony. From the start, teams of lay people from Cincinnati under the direction of the Franciscan Fidelis Albrecht took the Cursillo to a number of cities in the United States.⁵

Partly in response to papal pronouncements for the establishment of diocesan liturgical commissions, Alter became “greatly interested,” he wrote to Cardinal Samuel Stritch of Chicago, in liturgical changes. He thought that priests and faithful alike had lost much of the significance of the liturgy. In January 1956 he established the Archdiocesan Liturgical Commission. Chaired by Monsignor John E. Kuhn, the Commission was charged with the responsibility of bringing about a right understanding and use of the liturgy. Before the end of the decade, the English Handbook missal at Mass and the dialogue Mass with its congregational responses were two signs of the increasing participation of the laity. More and more pastors taught their parishioners to participate actively in the Mass through the dialogue Mass. The liturgy was now seen as public worship, an act in which all the faithful were full participants. Alter did not want the faithful to be “mute onlookers.” The liturgy was no longer seen as something with which the priest alone was involved.⁶

The dialogue Mass proved a great success. It became a common practice in a growing number of churches throughout the diocese. But practices varied. Sometimes the leader stood at the Communion rail facing the people or stood at the back of the church; sometimes the leader was a woman. The leader read in English the verses read by the priest in Latin, and the leader and people recited together the Confiteor, the Gloria, the Creed, the Sanctus, the Pater Noster, and the Agnus Dei in English. Some parishes recited together the prayers of the Offertory. Others also added the Communion prayers and the Confiteor before Communion. Active participation in reciting the
responses and prayers in English helped deepen the laity’s understanding and appreciation of the Mass.²

During the next few years Alter continually showed interest in liturgical reform. In 1957 he served on the Committee of Bishops to define the function of a proposed National Liturgical Commission of the Hierarchy. The following year Cincinnati hosted the annual North American Liturgical Week, designed to promote the participation of the laity. Thousands of Greater Cincinnatians joined the thousands of visitors from many states and several nations who packed Music Hall. Following the convention Alter called for congregational singing of the Sunday High Mass in parish churches.⁸

A survey conducted by the Archdiocesan Liturgical Commission in 1959 showed that the Mass participation program had generally good results. Though there were pastors who had met with opposition from parishioners who had grown accustomed to the “silent” Mass, which was especially the case with older parishioners, the survey revealed that most parishes were taking a more active part in Sunday Masses. “It seems evident,” Monsignor Kuhn observed, “that the people are well-disposed to the idea of more active participation in the Mass. Even those who are slow to understand the reasons behind it accept it willingly as the mind of the Church. . . . Our greatest hope lies with the children.” With thousands of children learning to make the responses, the future of the program of active participation in the Mass looked promising.⁹

CHANGES IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

In 1959 John XXIII announced the establishment of the Second Vatican Council, scheduled to open three years later. By virtue of Alter’s stature in the American hierarchy and his chairmanship of the Administrative Board of the National Catholic Welfare Conference since 1958, he was one of four American prelates among the sixty-two members of the hierarchy appointed to the Central Preparatory Commission in 1961. Alter had also earlier served as chairman of the Administrative Board of the NCWC from 1952 to 1955. Meeting for ten days in June, the Commission acted as a clearinghouse for agenda material submitted for the Vatican Council. The following year Alter participated in two more series of preparatory meetings. When the Second Vatican Council finally opened in October 1962, Alter was elected to the Commission on Bishops and Government of Dioceses, one of ten specialized working commissions formed by the worldwide assembly of 2,700 prelates. On this Commission he helped produce the schema “Pastoral Function of Bishops in the Church.” After participating in two-month work sessions in the falls of 1962 and 1963, his views toward liturgy, the laity, ecumenism, and
religious freedom expanded. He returned from Rome enthused about the prospects of renewal. Anticipating less dependence on Rome and a movement away from the centralizing tendency that had, he stated, “perhaps been carried as far as is helpful in the Church,” he looked at the council as focusing mainly on the inner renewal of the church. He stressed the need for greater use of the vernacular in worship, for more emphasis on Scripture, and for more lay participation in the liturgy. The call for lay responsibility was not new to the many men and women who had worked resolutely to make the Archdiocesan Councils of Men and Women with their parish counterparts vital organizations.\textsuperscript{10}

Liturgical renewal was the first fruit of Vatican II. Before the third session of the council began in the fall of 1964, Alter had implemented some of the liturgical changes. He was among the first ordinaries in the nation to begin the gradual implementation of the council decrees. Earlier that year Alter had expanded the Archdiocesan Liturgical Commission to thirteen priests and five laymen. Serving as a council of advisers for the archbishop, the Commission helped organize in the parishes study groups for better understanding of Sacred Scripture. In August Alter authorized the use of the vernacular in all sacramental rites and directed Father Paul Leibold, chair of the Liturgical Commission, to instruct the clergy to encourage active participation by the laity in the liturgy through songs and prayers in their own language. In a number of parishes, liturgy committees worked with the pastor and lectors and musicians received special training. On the first Sunday of Advent, November 29, 1964, English was used in the Mass in the archdiocese for the first time. That day Alter gave the sermon at a special televised Mass he offered in St. Peter in Chains Cathedral.\textsuperscript{11}

The most visible changes in the postconciliar period took place in the Mass. Before Vatican II, Mass was said in Latin, the priest faced the wall and prayed the prayers of the Mass silently and alone, and the parishioners prayed the rosary and recited prayers. No one except the priest was supposed to talk in church. The revised rite stressed the importance of community celebration and of enlightened lay participation. The laity were now visibly and audibly involved in the liturgy. Though using English, saying Mass facing the people, and distributing Holy Communion to people who were standing instead of kneeling constituted a distinct departure from the past, they did not in any way “affect the substance of the Mass. That,” Alter said, “remains forever the same.” The archbishop always insisted that in the midst of change in the outward forms, “the integrity of the faith must be maintained. . . . Customs can change; but the substance of faith, never.” The archdiocese began using English in the High Mass on March 7, 1965, the first Sunday of Lent. It also introduced that spring the first
use of concelebration and communion under both species. Two years later the local church authorized Sunday afternoon or evening Masses in any parish within the archdiocese, as long as the Mass was not scheduled after 8 P.M. The first evening Mass in the history of the archdiocese had been celebrated, with special permission from Rome, fourteen years earlier by Archbishop Alter at the opening of the Marian Year. By the year 1969 the Mass was said entirely in the vernacular.12

Overall, the pastors and laity responded well to the liturgical changes. A survey conducted by the Archdiocesan Synod Committee on Worship in 1970 revealed that the Catholics in the archdiocese approved of the liturgy renewal. But in some parishes, such as St. John the Evangelist's at Deer Park in Cincinnati, controversy arose regarding the pace of liturgical reforms. Because of some parishioners' dissatisfaction, there was a decline in weekly collections. In St. Philomena parish at Stonelick, Catholics at first resented the replacement of the handcrafted, white wooden altar with what seemed to be an austere, steel-legged table.13

In the spring of 1968 the parish councils and their liturgical commissions began to consider ways of involving all the people of the parish in the Prayer of the Faithful, prayers offered during Mass in which the celebrant and congregation pray for a series of intentions. They promoted, moreover, greater participation of the parish in wedding and funeral ceremonies. Dan Shannon and Mrs. Frederick R. Bohlen, who headed the liturgical program of the archdiocesan councils, also called attention to Alter’s decree on Masses in homes and for small groups. “We urge parish liturgical commissions to study this decree,” they said, “and work to promote” Masses in the home. St. Antoninus parish at Covedale in Cincinnati was the first congregation in the archdiocese to begin the program of home Masses. The Liturgical Commission also recommended that spouses of members of the parish commission should participate in parish activities, pointing out there were too many local organizations that tended to divide the family.14

During the interim sessions of Vatican II Alter also prepared religious groups for upcoming changes. In the summer of 1963 he spoke to more than three hundred religious superiors representing more than two hundred communities at the Conference of Major Superiors of Women's Institutes in the United States at the College of Mount St. Joseph. He urged sisters' communities to review their purposes and methods and to “set aside traditions and customs that are out of touch with the world.” At midcentury the sisters had largely been limited in mobility to convent, church, and school. He urged them to take those practices that were “obsolete and no longer being practiced out of [their] rules.” In particular, he cited the hardship imposed upon all members of a family by a rule that prohibited a sister to visit her home. “I
know from 30 years as a Bishop,” he said, “what it means to families to be
denied the comfort of a visit from a daughter they’ve given to religion.”

Moreover, Vatican II helped bring church teaching into closer conformi-
ty with dominant American values. Whereas there were some who were
more comfortable with the absolutist claims of the church, there were those
who had high expectations of continued change and a more democratic
Church. The pre–Vatican II Church forbade eating meat on Friday and
receiving communion without absolutely fasting. Though Pius XII modified
practices of fasting and abstinence, by November 1966 Paul VI dropped al-
together the prohibition against eating meat on Fridays. The Lenten rules,
likewise, were lightened. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday were now the
only days of fast and abstinence from meat. A change that occurred rather
inadvertently in the 1960s was the decline of the practice of women covering
their heads with hats or handkerchiefs pinned in their hair when entering
church. The change took place without any directives or assistance from
church leaders.

When the Second Vatican Council had completed its work in 1965, Alter
encouraged Catholics to give practical application to the principles it had
enunciated. The questions that particularly concerned the archdiocese were
those affecting the liturgy, ecumenical relations, the ministry of the laity, and
a better distribution of the church’s resources in personnel and in finances.
As a consequence, Alter and his staff felt obliged to rethink the organization
of the archdiocese and of its parishes. Like many of his episcopal colleagues
the Cincinnati ordinary eventually convoked parish councils, a diocesan
priests’ senate, and a diocesan pastoral council. The archdiocese responded to
the Council Fathers’ call for dialogue and shared responsibility by taking
into account much more than ever the voices of priests, religious, and laity on
ecclesiastical matters.

In 1965 the Archdiocesan Councils of Catholic Men and Women began
self-studies of their operations with particular emphasis on the parish organ-
izations. The following January the executive boards of the two groups held
their first joint meeting since the reorganization of the archdiocesan councils
nearly fifteen years earlier. They adopted a new program that enabled them
to unite their efforts at the parish level. That same year Alter took a major
step toward greater lay involvement when he issued a decree in September,
establishing the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council (APC). The archbishop also
gave evidence of his commitment to the development of lay leadership when
he appointed twenty-five lay men and twenty-five lay women from the
ACCM-ACCW boards to the Council, along with ten deans and representa-
tives of religious orders of men and women in the archdiocese. A chief advis-
sory group to the archbishop, the APC’s purpose was to investigate pastoral
problems and propose solutions. Responding to the demands of a new generation of lay persons, parish councils were also established as the new parochial structure. Cincinnati was one of the first dioceses in the American church to establish the APC and parish councils.18

By the end of 1966 more than one hundred parishes in the archdiocese had formed parish councils. A year later there were 215. The parish council was seen as a new structure for shared responsibility and parish renewal. Membership in the council included all the priests of the parish, the parish school principal, at least one lay teacher, the lay heads or representatives of parish organizations, and five to ten members-at-large. The council shared with the pastor responsibility for the quality of parish life, for policies and programs of the parish, and for securing financial resources. In 1969 Alter also encouraged and gave approval to the formation of the Archdiocesan Council of the Laity (ACL), governed by a 42-member board of directors. The new organization replaced the Archdiocesan Councils of Catholic Men and Women. Mrs. Andrew Hellmuth of Springfield, who formerly presided over the ACCW, headed the new Council. The members of the ACCM and ACCW drew up the constitution and bylaws. The Archdiocesan Council of the Laity, along with the APC and parish councils, enabled the laity to become more involved in making decisions about pastoral and financial priorities. The decision to establish the ACL helped lay the seed to the establishment in 1971 of the National Council of Catholic Laity.19

In May 1966 a special committee of the archdiocesan school board recommended, with Alter's support, that every parish have a board of education "broadly representative" of the parish membership. The committee pointed out that pastors who consented to the establishment of a parish board of education needed to recognize that they were accepting "a limitation of their autonomy," but one that reflected what Vatican II had said concerning the increasing role of laity in the church. A few weeks later Alter called for equal representation of laity and priests on the boards of interparochial high schools of the archdiocese as a way to help meet the schools' growing financial needs of higher salaries for lay teachers and increasing operating costs. By the end of the decade Catholic colleges in the archdiocese also began inviting lay people to serve on their boards of trustees.20

In the summer of 1966, in direct response to the Vatican II Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, Alter established a Senate of Priests. Ballots were distributed to all the clergy serving in parishes, and each priest was asked to submit three names for the Senate. From these the thirty priests with the highest number of votes were elected, and ten additional priests were appointed by Alter to insure a representation of all areas and all ranks. As a consultative body, the new priests' council helped improve communication
between priests and the archbishop on pastoral concerns. It addressed some of the tensions and morale problems among the local clergy and provided a greater forum for clerical expression. It held its first meeting on October 3 at St. Peter in Chains Cathedral. The group elected Monsignor August J. Kramer, pastor of St. Cecilia’s Church in Cincinnati and former director of Catholic Charities, chair.\textsuperscript{21}

That fall seminary reform was also under way at Mount St. Mary’s of the West Seminary. Under the direction of Monsignor Joseph Schneider, the rector, the seminary allowed for greater personal freedom among the seminarians in their academic studies and in the selection of mentors from the faculty. Though appreciative of the relaxation of internal rules, in May 1967 three-fourths of the students signed an open letter calling for more open discussion of the issues. The letter was sent not only to Alter but to the students’ respective bishops in other dioceses. Feeling “humiliated . . . before his suffragans,” the archbishop informed the students that their action had caused “serious harm” to the seminary. During the next two years other changes occurred. The most significant change took place in July 1969. Students were now free to come and go as they pleased at the seminary, provided that they attended classes and were in their rooms by midnight.\textsuperscript{22}

During implementation of Vatican II reforms, the Liturgical Commission had to contend with both resistance to change and overzealous innovation. At the same time that there were priests who went along very slowly without educating people or providing meaningful celebrations with full lay participation, there were those who did “their own thing” without authorization, resulting in questionable theology or liturgy. The archdiocese found it difficult to get everyone to comply with its many directives. This challenge to authority in itself was perhaps one of the most unexpected consequences of the Second Vatican Council.\textsuperscript{23}

At times the archbishop cracked down on people he thought were getting carried away by the spirit of Vatican II. There were instances when the religious were so involved in their own self-study and discussion that they did not have the time or opportunity to keep authorities in the local church fully informed of their activities. Some of the parishes, moreover, struggled to gain control of their own renewal processes and implement social justice programs. In 1965 Alter placed the 102-member order of Glenmary Sisters in the archdiocese under restrictions on the hours they kept and the books they read. They were also prohibited from attending night school outside the convent. The restrictions were imposed after a group of five to seven Glenmary sisters complained to the archbishop that they believed the order was too liberally interpreting the new role of sisters. Members of the order, one of the youngest in the United States, worked mostly in the poverty-stricken areas
of the Appalachians. They were at times unconventional in approach, sometime wearing secular clothing and going into the fields with their sleeves rolled up. To Alter their activities seemed unbecoming or too radical for sisters. He instructed them to keep proper religious spirit and reserve in their relations with the laity. The order, which had been set up as a diocesan order and not a pontifical one, was also forbidden to start new houses or accept new members in the fall’s postulant class. In the end about half of the Glenmary Sisters left the order to form a lay group.\(^{11}\)

It was not surprising to Alter that the ferment of recent changes had disturbed “somewhat,” he wrote to the religious in 1965, “the serenity of religious life.” He argued that it “is good not to be too quick to discard the past, nor too slow to make adjustments here and now. Prudence must not be an excuse for inaction.” He further contended that order could not “exist without authority, and obedience is a necessary correlative of authority. Freedom is the soil in which responsibility develops,” he wrote, “but there is no freedom from God’s law and from the legitimate authority [that] He has established.”\(^{15}\)

**UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON CONTROVERSY**

Another example of ferment within the archdiocese that allegedly defied church authority was the issue of academic freedom at the University of Dayton. In October 1966 members of the University of Dayton’s philosophy department charged that four of their colleagues in the philosophy and theology departments were advocating positions contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church. They maintained that Catholic professors dealing with moral and religious matters had an obligation to respect the magisterium in their teaching. A subsequent investigation by the university’s Ad Hoc Committee cleared the accused faculty members. But five days later, on December 8, 1966, eight faculty members termed the action of the administration a “classic whitewash.” The university’s Faculty Forum then censured the eight professors for “conduct unworthy of the University of Dayton faculty.” As a consequence, a number of pastors and lay persons in the archdiocese wrote letters to Alter. Members of the philosophy department, furthermore, submitted a formal canonical appeal from the decision of the university’s administrative committee that had cleared the faculty accused of violating the magisterium to Archbishop Alter. A letter was also sent to the apostolic delegate in Washington.\(^{20}\)

Six months earlier a Marianist priest and head of the theology department at the University of Dayton had complained to Monsignor Henry Vogelpohl of the archdiocese of Cincinnati that two faculty members, who were among the four subsequently accused, ridiculed the church and were guilty of
questionable principles and teaching.” He had further alleged that the authorities at the University were aware and “failed to do anything about it.” In December 1966 Alter, concerned about the “pastoral implications” of the “expressions of concern” in the letters, established a committee to conduct an informal, nonjuridicial, fact-finding inquiry into the doctrinal controversy. “Normally,” he later wrote, “Church authority need not take the initiative, but it cannot reject an appeal for a decision, when made from within the university or from the Catholic community.” The committee of inquiry was composed of four professors, the head of the philosophy department at Xavier University and three from Mount St. Mary’s of the West Seminary.37

During the course of a month the committee interviewed the professors accused, those who made the accusation, other professors, and members of the administration. As the investigation unfolded, the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors alleged that Alter’s investigation abridged the academic freedom of the faculty. The university’s Student Council also passed a resolution calling the intervention of the archbishop’s committee as “unnecessary seizure of power and an undesirable precedent for future intrusion.” On the other hand, the Marianist and university president Raymond A. Roesch defended the archbishop. He argued that Alter was acting completely within his rights and responsibility when he showed pastoral concern for Catholic doctrine. “Canonically speaking,” he said, “the local ordinary may under pain of excommunication forbid any faculty member, lay or religious, in a Catholic or public institution, to teach what the bishop considers an heretical position.” Though he regarded the 1918 law “antiquated,” he nevertheless acknowledged its legality. Although he affirmed the church’s right to guard against anything that would be taught in the name of the church “in opposition to faith and good morals,” he concluded that “matters which are on the academic level can be properly be debated and controlled within the halls of a university.”38

On February 13, 1967, the fact-finding commission submitted its report to Alter. It confirmed the decision of the university’s Ad Hoc Committee. Though the faculty members’ teachings “may not have been contrary to defined doctrines,” the report said, “in some public lectures a lack of respect for the Magisterium of the church was manifested.” The report also acknowledged that the philosophy faculty had every right to make a canonical appeal to the archbishop for it was based on church law and on the stated objectives of the university. The University of Dayton official bulletin and faculty handbook identified the institution as “committed to the upholding of the deposit of faith and Christian morality.” The commission made no suggestion pertaining to the possible discipline or dismissal of any of the accused professors.39
Upon receipt of the report, the archbishop sent a copy to the chairman of the university’s board of trustees. Alter was hopeful that the University of Dayton would “quietly solve its own problem,” he wrote, “now that it has been exposed and the students and community are alerted to it.” Throughout the ordeal, Alter made it clear that the university was an independent corporation with its own board of trustees and administration and had no legal responsibility to pay “attention to any of the authorities in the Church.” When Alter spoke at Xavier University’s commencement exercises the following June, he addressed the issue of academic freedom. Describing it as “a two-way street,” Alter pointed out that both the institution and the faculty “have a claim on academic freedom, and both have duties as well as rights. . . . Every private institution of higher learning,” he argued, “should be free to choose its own specified goals and make its own commitment to a system of education [that] will enable it to achieve its declared and distinctive purpose.” Alter further insisted that “every member of a faculty who freely accepts a contract to teach at an institution of higher learning under these conditions thereby limits voluntarily his academic freedom so as to bring it in conformity with the purpose of the institution.” He thought that neither the institution nor any of its faculty should trespass upon one another’s rights and duties.  

When in the fall of 1968 some Catholic laymen urged Alter to intervene in the selection of questionable speakers in Xavier University’s Speakers Forum, he declined, indicating that his “authority over the academic program . . . is practically nil.” But if “it were a question of teaching in the class of Theology some doctrine contrary to the official teaching of the Church,” he said, “I might intervene.” He also pointed out that sometimes “pocketbook resistance is a much more persuasive argument than words alone.” When the Jesuit Paul O’Connor resigned as president in 1972, Alter praised him on his “steadfast devotion to the Church.” He also took the opportunity to note that “the problem of academic freedom and the safeguarding of Christian truth and Church loyalty still stand in need of a more satisfactory definition, and hopefully of true reconciliation.”

**CHRISTIAN UNITY**

As Alter and the clergy prepared the faithful for changes in the interior spiritual life of the local church, the archbishop also encouraged promotion of Christian unity. As a leader in the ecumenical movement, Alter worked with the Christian and Jewish communities in affirming common religious values. In 1961 virtually every church and school of the archdiocese sponsored an open house program to let non-Catholics know what Catholics were
Commission, participated in the discussion of the issue of religious liberty at the meeting of the Central Preparatory Commission. Cardinal Alfredo Ottovani of the Theological Commission and Cardinal Augustin Bea, S.J., a scripture scholar of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, presented divergent views on the issue. Ottovani presented the traditional view that “error has no rights.” In Alter’s opinion that “left much to be desired.” Bea, on the other hand, defended the right of freedom of conscience and religious liberty. The Preparatory Commission was evenly divided on the issue. Alter, representing America’s tradition, supported Bea’s position. To the Cincinnati ordinary religious liberty meant “immunity for individuals or groups of individuals from any outward compulsion by public authority in the area of religion.”

During the next two years Alter remained active in its cause. In 1964 he and the Jesuit John Courtney Murray, a peritus at the Council and an acknowledged authority on church-state relations, exchanged views on the matter of religious liberty in proposed schemata for presentation at the fall session of the Second Vatican Council. Shortly after his arrival in Rome in mid-September, Alter spoke before the council in support of the declaration on religious liberty. Though he disclaimed the “personal right of any individual to teach error or to do harm,” he defended “the right of every human being to be free of outside force in his worship of God.” Alter was very much aware of the difference of opinion between those who interpreted “the Catholic ideal” as better than “U.S. freedom of religion” and those who did not. This difference formed the heart of the disagreement between the American bishops and some of their European counterparts. Cardinal Arribalba of Spain, where Catholicism was the state religion, was the main spokesman for the European position. He argued that only the Catholic Church could preach the Gospel and proselytize in a predominantly Catholic country. He maintained that the views and efforts of non-Catholics should be suppressed. Warning the Council against ruining Catholic countries, he urged the members not to issue a declaration on religious liberty. Rather, the matter should be left to each national conference of bishops. This was a position shared by a number of European bishops and supported by many centuries of Catholic tradition. Reminiscent of Archbishop John Purcell’s position on church-state relations at the time of the First Vatican Council, Alter and his American colleagues debated against this position and defended the American tradition of separation of church and state and freedom of conscience. The matter was finally resolved in favor of religious liberty at the fourth and final session in 1965. The efforts of Alter and the American hierarchy to frame a cogent position on religious liberty were instrumental to the final promulgation of one of the significant texts of the Second Vatican Council.
On January 31, 1969, less than four years after Vatican II, the eighty-three-year-old Alter offered his resignation to Rome. He was the oldest Catholic bishop in the United States. Having served the church for almost sixty years as a priest and for thirty-eight years as a bishop, he thought that “a young man with dynamic energy and creative initiative should assume the responsibility” of his office. In the process he complied with a Second Vatican Council decree that advised bishops reaching an advanced age to voluntarily resign. By spring his resignation had been accepted. On April 17, 1969, Alter sent a letter to the six hundred priests in the archdiocese, requesting that they submit recommendations for his successor. The ordinary asked that each priest nominate no more than three bishops or priests for the office of archbishop and no more than one priest for a possible new auxiliary bishop for Cincinnati. At the time the archdiocese had one auxiliary bishop, Edward A. McCarthy. The usual manner for the nomination of new archbishops was for all the bishops of the province to present three names to the Vatican. The pope normally selected the new ordinary from that list. On July 23, 1969, Alter called a press conference in St. Peter in Chains Cathedral and officially announced his resignation. Paul Leibold, bishop of Evansville, succeeded him. Upon his retirement Alter continued to live at his home on Belmont Avenue. Leibold occupied the former episcopal residence next to the seminary in Norwood. “I have taken this action now while still blessed with good health and strength,” Alter stated, “for fear that the wisdom of acting in time might not be as easily recognized later on.”

The former head of the archdiocese of Cincinnati remained a strong supporter of the changes stemming from Vatican II as well as an optimist about the future of the church. When he was interviewed in 1975 at the age of ninety, he argued that there was still a solid layer of belief among the church faithful. “There is always a certain element who do not accept change,” he told the interviewer. “But they will in due time accept the liturgy as it is organized. The Latin Mass was considered a novelty before the Council of Trent.” Similarly, he was critical of those who were impatient with the pace of change, calling them a “fringe element” that “run after novelties.” Upon Alter’s death, Archbishop Joseph Bernardin said: “He became archbishop of Cincinnati when one era of the history of the church was ending, and he led us with confidence into an era that was beginning.” On August 23, 1977, Alter died at the age of ninety-two. Except for poor eyesight, which had plagued him in his later years, Alter had been generally in good health. He certainly remained mentally active until his death.