This fall, scholars at The Catholic University of America will be commemorating the opening of the Second Vatican Council (see page 10) — ancient history for most of today’s Catholics born into another era long after the time when most Masses were in Latin, lay participation in the liturgy was limited to altar servers, and attending the weddings of non-Catholics was generally not encouraged.

The Council reshaped all phases of our Church’s life with a powerful articulation of the essence and mission of “Church.” The Council’s achievements reverberate to the present day and leave no aspect of Catholic living untouched.

Vatican II set out with an ambitious task to energize Catholics for the life of faith, update Church institutions, encourage unity among all Christians, and motivate all Catholics to reach out in service to the whole world. It sought to build an understanding of “Church” where everyone’s gifts and voices are valued in the noble mission of making Christ present to our world.

As one of the first lay graduates in theology at CUA during the 1960s, I, like so many Catholics of my generation, was captivated by headlines generated over the years of the Council’s convening from 1962 to 1965. It was exciting and challenging to try to absorb the Council’s revolutionary framework and a new notion of Catholicism, not as an institution, but as the “People of God” — connected, interdependent members of the Body of Christ.

The Council’s newly issued constitution in 1963, Lumen Gentium, claimed that the laity share fully in the life of the Church. This would eventually foster an explosion of lay involvement in all aspects of the Church’s life.

For me, as a lay student at CUA, it meant an invitation from the dean of the School of Theology, the late Father Walter J. Schmitz, S.S., to pursue a degree in theology and enter a field of study at the time peopled almost entirely by clergy and religious. In time, I would complete a doctorate and go on to work for the Church at the national level and then later for an association of Catholic philanthropists.

What drew me to CUA’s generous invitation to study theology was the excitement the Council had generated. Two areas of its work stand out.

First, the self-understanding of the Church articulated by the Council placed it squarely in this world, setting aside centuries of practice that involved denouncing what the Church found wrong about the world. Henceforth, it would commit itself to the hard work of sharing responsibility for the world’s well-being.

Surrounded by the growing strife of the war in Vietnam, racial discord and violence, and the superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union threatening mutual nuclear annihilation, the Council summoned us to Christian engagement in peace making and advocacy on behalf of human dignity that touched deep chords in my young heart.

Second, the Council made it clear that laity would no longer be seen as mere helpers of the clergy. By virtue of their baptism they were to be fully empowered to participate in the Christian work of transforming the world.

I concluded that theology would be the ticket to help make this happen, and so I gladly took advantage of this providential and pioneering offer.

The abundant clergy and religious of the 1960s and the expanding number of educated, culturally assimilated, wealthier Catholic laity who populated parishes in the American suburbs following their graduations from CUA helped usher in a half century of discussion, conflict, and collaboration about what it means to be Catholic.

CUA’s role as an incubator of leaders who were inspired to make the Council’s vision live in our Church is a treasured and distinguished legacy of which all alumni can be very proud.

— Francis J. Butler retired in February from the Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, where he served as president for more than three decades. Prior to that, he was domestic policy director at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.