



UNDERSTANDING THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

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“Present indications are that the human family is on the threshold of a new era. We must recognize here the hand of God, who, as the years roll by, is ever directing men's efforts, whether they realize it or not, towards the fulfillment of the inscrutable designs of His providence...”

–Pope John XXIII, Address at the Opening of Vatican II, Oct. 11, 1962

The Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) is the defining ecclesial event in modern Catholic history. Modern Catholicism universally bears the stamp of the Council, and debate about the meaning and proper implementation about the Council continues to this day. In this lesson we will examine the reasons the Council were summoned, overview the conciliar procedures, examine the highlights of the documents and look at ongoing contention about the place of the Council in the life of the Church.

Catholicism in the Early 20th Century

At the dawn of the 20th century, the doctrinal integrity of the Church was challenged by the sect of the *Modernists*, a loosely organized cadre of theologians and authors who asserted, among many other things, that religion was ultimately a subjective experience and that the doctrines of the Church were subject to the process of evolution, such that religious truth had to change as mankind progressed. These errors, widespread at the turn of the century, were condemned by Pope St. Pius X (1903-1914) and went underground for a time, but Modernist opinions continued to circulate.¹

During the pontificates of Benedict XV (1914-1922), Pius XI (1922-1939) and Pius XII (1939-1958), the Magisterium of the Church promulgated several important teachings on the ends of matrimony, the Catholic state, the rights of workers, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the nature of the Church, as well as condemnations of Modernist errors and atheistic Communism. Foreign missions were generally vibrant, Catholicism was enjoying a golden age in Great Britain, and the Catholic Church was coming into respectability in the United States. The promulgation of the Code of Canon Law in 1917 by Benedict XV led to a general renewal of Catholic life. Vocations to the priesthood and religious life were abundant. Externally, at least, the Church seemed to be thriving.

There were currents of dissent, however. A growing movement within the Church was pushing for a loosening of sexual mores, and progressive theologians like Teilhard de Chardin, Yves Congar, Edward Schilibeckx, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Henri de Lubac challenged traditional Catholic theology and attempted to infuse it with the ideas of modern psychology,

¹ See the *Syllabus of Errors* of Bl. Pius IX and *Pascendi* of St. Pius X for a summary of Modernist errors.

anthropology and evolutionary theory. Though their ideas circulated underground, they were gaining currency among seminarians and progressive minded theologians.

John XXIII Calls the Council

In 1958, Angelo Roncalli, Patriarch of Venice, was elected Pope John XXIII. Widely considered a “stop-gap” pope who would not reign for long, Pope John stunned the world by announcing the summoning of the Second Vatican Council only a year into his pontificate. This announcement stunned contemporaries; why did Pope John believe an ecumenical council was necessary?

Reasons for the Council

Unlike previous Ecumenical Councils, Vatican II was called not to condemn a heresy or issue a new dogmatic pronouncement, but to address pastoral concerns posed by the modern world. Pope John XXIII, who called the Council, described this as an *aggiornamento*, a “bringing up to date” of the Church.² John emphasized that, while the Catholic faith could never change, the manner in which it was presented to the world could and should be updated:

“[T]he whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.”³

Some of the challenges that concerned the Pope and necessitated this new presentation of faith were: The devastation wrought by two World Wars, the specter of Communism and the threat of nuclear annihilation posed by the Cold War, modern technologies that gave man increasing control over nature, the emerging environmental crises around the world, continuing problems with labor and employment, the burgeoning sexual revolution that attempted to redefine sexual mores, the collapse of colonialism in the Third World, new theological schools that attempted to apply evolutionary theory to Christian thought, and increasing advances in communication that made the world a smaller place and brought historically diverse cultures into close contact, prompting new questions about how the Church should best carry out her missionary mandate in the modern age. How could the historic Christian faith speak to these new challenges?

Pastoral Nature of the Council

This fundamental concern of the Church’s relation with the modern world gave the Council an eminently pastoral character. Hence, Pope Paul VI taught:

“There are those who ask what authority, what theological qualification, the Council intended to give to its teachings, knowing that it avoided issuing solemn dogmatic definitions backed by the

² See John XIII, Allocution, January 25, 1959, announcing the Council, and Speech to the Blessed Sacrament Fathers, 7 July 1961.

³ Pope John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, of 11 October 1962

Church's infallible teaching authority. The answer is known by those who remember the conciliar declaration of March 6, 1964, repeated on November 16, 1964. In view of the pastoral nature of the Council, it avoided proclaiming in an extraordinary manner any dogmata carrying the mark of infallibility.”⁴

This should not be construed to mean that the Council did not have anything to say about Catholic dogma, or that its teaching does not possess authority; it does mean, however, that the Council's intent was not to formulate dogmatic pronouncements but to address concerns primarily pastoral in nature. This means the pronouncements of the Council are not precise theological definitions, but rather broad statements meant to serve as means of reflecting on the Church's own identity and entering into further dialogue with the modern world.

The Council Sessions

After three years of preparation, the Council was officially opened in the fall of 1962. The Second Vatican Council was held in four sessions each fall from 1962 to 1965. Initially, Pope John XIII had ordered a special Preparatory Commission, headed by the eminent Cardinal Ottaviani, to prepare drafts of documents to be voted on by the Council Fathers. These drafts (*schemas*) condemned the errors of the age and explained the teachings of the Church in traditional theological terms.

However, at the outset of the first session, some of the Council Fathers, led by a coalition of French and German speaking bishops, objected to the content of the schemas, as well as to certain other procedural matters, which they believed were too rigidly controlled by the Roman Curia. Pope John acceded to their objections and allowed the various conciliar commissions to be restructured with new leadership, authorizing them to draft new schemas. The result was a decentralization of the Council from the Curia to the bishops (many of whom were more progressive than the Curial cardinals), and ultimately fifteen new schemas.⁵ These would become the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

Throughout the remaining sessions of the Council, this clique which had opposed Ottaviani – led by Cardinals Suenens, Dopfner, Frings, Alrink and Konig – would dominate the commissions and discussions. Some authors, like Ralph Wiltgen of the Divine Word news service, have referred to this as a “hijacking” or a “coup” within the Council by a highly organized clique of progressive bishops from the Rhine region.

The Council Documents

The Council ultimately produced sixteen documents: In order of authority, four Constitutions, eight Decrees, and two Declarations. The documents of Vatican II are:

⁴ Pope Paul VI, General Audience of January 12, 1966. See also General Audience, August 6, 1975: “Differing from other Councils, this one was not directly dogmatic, but disciplinary and pastoral.”

⁵ For more on the procedural debates in the Council, we recommend Roberto de Mattei's book *The Second Vatican Council: An Unwritten Story* (Loreto Publications, 2010).

1. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 1963,
2. *Inter Mirifica*, Decree On the Means of Social Communication, 1963.
3. *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution On the Church, 1964.
4. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, Decree On the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite, 1964.
5. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Decree on Ecumenism, 1964.
6. *Christus Dominus*, Decree On the Pastoral Office of Bishops In the Church, 1965.
7. *Perfectae Caritatis*, Decree On Renewal of Religious Life, 1965.
8. *Optatam Totius*, Decree On Priestly Training, 1965.
9. *Gravissimum Educationis*, Declaration On Christian Education, 1965.
10. *Nostra Aetate*, On the Relation Of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, 1965.
11. *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution On Divine Revelation, 1965.
12. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree On the Apostolate of the Laity, 1965.
13. *Dignitatis Humanae*, Declaration On Religious Freedom, 1965.
14. *Ad Gentes*, Decree On the Mission Activity of the Church, 1965.
15. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree On the Ministry and Life of Priests, 1965.
16. *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution On the Church In the Modern World, 1965.

Teachings of the Council

While there were no new dogmatic formulations at the Council, the Council did have certain points it chose to emphasize.

Ecumenism: One of the most important underlying themes of the council was ecumenism, that is, the quest to bring about the unity of all Christians under the aegis of the Catholic Church. Though ecumenism was certainly an aim of the Council, it has been debated what sort of ecumenism the Council Fathers intended (see below).

Collegiality: The principle of collegiality, taught in *Lumen Gentium*, was meant to move the Church away from the “monarchical” rule of the papacy and towards a more “democratic” governance of the Church. Collegiality emphasizes the pope’s role as linked to the headship of the episcopal college (versus linked to the mandate of Christ and the giving of the keys) and led to the establishment of many regional episcopal conferences, effectively decentralizing the government of the Church.

Universal Call to Holiness: The participation of the laity in the life of the Church and their call to knowledge, sanctity and evangelization was particularly stressed, with much emphasis on the laity as the means by which the secular world is sanctified to God.

Liturgical Revision: Liturgical revision was promoted by many of the Council Fathers and called for by the document *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. The Council seemed to envision a liturgy that was a little bit simpler than the existing Roman Rite but which nevertheless preserved the Catholic liturgical tradition intact. It was commonly believed by many progressives that the existing Roman Rite was too inaccessible to modern man and was too offensive to Protestants and Jews; others, however, argued that the Roman Rite best exemplified the fullness of Catholic liturgical tradition. Debates about what sort

of liturgy the Council envisioned became more intense after the close of the Council with the institution of the *Novus Ordo Missae* in 1969.

Dialogue/Common Ground: Whereas previous Councils had condemned errors and anathematized heretics, the Second Vatican Council issued no anathemas and preferred instead to focus on areas of agreement between the Church and the world. This brought forth new initiatives to dialogue with Judaism, Islam, and many other religions, as well as other Christian groups. Since Vatican II, dialogue with a focus on similarities rather than differences has been preferred.

Distortions of Conciliar Documents

Even while the Council was still in session, certain progressive bishops and theologians began to reform Catholic faith and morals in such a way that the Council never envisioned. This trend of ignoring the documents of the Council and acting instead in its “spirit” only got worse after the Council. For example, even though *Sacrosanctum Concilium* specifically calls for the retention of Latin and Gregorian Chant, both were practically abolished after the Council. Though *Ad Gentes* maintained the traditional Catholic teaching that baptism is necessary for salvation, many theologians ignored or disputed this teaching. The existence of hell was denied by many, the texts in *Lumen Gentium* on the role of the laity were misinterpreted to mean that there was no distinction between the priesthood of all believers and the ministerial priesthood, and the Council’s silence on the topic of Communism led to the embrace of Marxist principles by many Catholic parishes, especially in Latin America. Liturgical aberrations were introduced with frightening speed, including communion in the hand, altar girls, folk masses, and other things the Council never called for. Ecumenism was distorted to mean affirming the position of non-Catholic Christians where they are without a necessity of entering into the Church, and in most places the fact of dialogue was exalted over the final end to which dialogue is ordered – arrival at truth. Traditional forms of art and architecture were also thrown out and replaced.

Within a few years, there was such chaos within the Church that Pope Paul VI famously said that the “smoke of Satan” appeared to have entered the Church through some fissure.

Rupture or Continuity?

The fundamental issue is whether one interprets the Council as a rupture with tradition or in continuity with tradition. The pastoral nature of the Council left a certain want of precision in the conciliar texts, which were afterwards interpreted in either a progressive or an orthodox manner, depending on the interpretive lens (*hermeneutic*) one chooses to utilize. This is why Pope Benedict XVI famously called for a “hermeneutic of continuity” in interpreting the Council, meaning that we should read the Council texts in light of prior Magisterial teaching and assume that they are meant to be interpreted in continuity with tradition, not in opposition to it.⁶ Benedict also criticized the tendency of some to make the Second Vatican Council into a “meta-doctrine”, as if the Church was starting over from scratch in 1962 and everything novel and progressive

⁶ See Address of Pope Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia, Dec. 22, 2005

could be justified in the name of the Council. The Council, both as theology and as an historical event, need to be seen in light of tradition, not in antagonism towards it.

Critiques of the Council

Still, even with a hermeneutic of continuity, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Council documents themselves are not free from criticism. Many bishops, liberal and conservative alike, have spoken out in recent years on this subject. For example, Archbishop Athanasius Schneider of Kazakhstan has noted that many of the conciliar documents are too optimistic about mankind and do not take sufficient account of the effects of original sin; Cardinal Walter Kasper has also mentioned intentional ambiguity in some of the documents that makes it difficult to discern their true meaning. Benedict XVI himself has stated that some documents speak too positively about other religions and that *Lumen Gentium*'s teaching on the nature of the Catholic Church was confusing – this prompted him to issue a clarification on the document in 2008.

It will fall to future popes and bishops to continue to promote an understanding of the Council that is in continuity with tradition. As for how the problematic texts of the conciliar documents themselves will be handled, only time will tell.

Hope for the Church

Though there is more clarity today than in the 1970's, many of these issues still divide Catholics. Some progressives continue to promote indifferentism and theological heterodoxy, doing so in the “spirit of Vatican II” while ignoring what the Council actually called for. Some Catholics, alarmed at the disruption of Catholic life, have tried to deny that Vatican II was a legitimate Council at all or have opined that the post-Conciliar popes were all antipopes (Sedevacantists). There is hope, however. Pope Benedict XVI devoted his pontificate to a reading of Vatican II in continuity with Tradition, and to this end his liberalization of the Traditional Latin Mass in his 2007 decree *Summorum Pontificum* aimed to restore tradition in the Church. Today, the flourishing of the Extraordinary Form of the Mass, especially among the youth, is one of the most promising signs of renewal in the Church.

For Further Reading: Roberto de Mattei, *The Second Vatican Council: An Unwritten Story* (Loreto Publications, 2010); Ralph Wiltgen, *The Rhine Flows into the Tiber*; Pope John XIII, *Humanae Salutis* (1959); Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report and Milestones*; Austin Flannery, O.P. *Documents of Vatican Council II*, vol. 1 & 2.