

Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 13 in a series

2014

Holy Family continues to observe the 50th anniversary of Vatican II, which began on October 11, 1962, and closed on December 8, 1965. We are marking this milestone anniversary by celebrating the council, and exploring its teachings through special bulletin covers and inserts, newsletter articles, videos and other materials.

The Council and Christian Unity

Christian unity was one of the primary themes of the Second Vatican Council. Pope John XXIII announced the council on January 25, 1959, following a service marking the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and his opening address to the council was called *Toward Christian Unity*. Pope John XXIII spoke of his desire for unity among Catholics, unity with non-Catholic Christians, and “unity of esteem” among Catholics and non-Christians.

Pope John was building on more than half a century of slow but sure progress in this area. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity had begun in 1908, and had soon spread around the world. But Catholics were wary. In the Catholic view, Protestants were thought of as schismatics (the Orthodox or Anglican) or heretics (other Protestants). Catholics were forbidden to enter a non-Catholic church, even to attend a funeral, and weddings between Catholics and non-Catholics, while permitted, could not take place in the church – they usually happened in the rectory or the priest’s office.

In 1927, Catholic theologians were invited to participate in an ecumenical gathering at Lausanne in Switzerland, but were forbidden to do so. “The union of Christians cannot be fostered otherwise than by promoting the return of the dissidents to the one true Church of Christ, which in the past they unfortunately abandoned,” wrote Pope Pius XI in 1928 (quoted in *Keys to the Council*, p. 150). This severe approach began to thaw under Pope Pius XII, who allowed Catholics to participate in ecumenical meetings, where they learned from their non-Catholic colleagues, and formed friendships that would bear fruit at the council.

While the Council did produce one document, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, which dealt specifically with relations with non-Catholic Christians, ecumenical themes emerged again and again in the various constitutions, declarations and decrees. *Dei Verbum*, for example, the Constitution on Divine Revelation, encourages the joint preparation of Biblical texts and translations “by a common effort shared by our separated brethren... the resulting works can be used by all Christians” (22). And *Lumen Gentium*, the Constitution on the Church, paved the way for genuine



In 1960, Pope John XXIII appointed Cardinal Augustin Bea as the first leader of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, a newly-established office in the Roman Curia. Cardinal Bea had a profound impact on the council’s teachings in the areas of ecumenism and interfaith rela-

ecumenical efforts in its acknowledgment of the good that exists outside the Catholic Church.

The Decree on Ecumenism builds on the teachings of *Lumen Gentium*. Christ established one church, and we believe that one church to “subsist” in the Catholic Church. But, “some, even very many, of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements. All of these, which come from Christ and lead back to him, belong by right to the one Church of Christ” (3).

In other words, in spite of “defects,” especially around acknowledgment of the See of Peter, the Eucharist, and the other sacraments, especially Holy Orders, we acknowledge that “the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation.” Having made this important acknowledgment – which was unthinkable only a decade earlier! – the

decree goes on to speak of the practice of ecumenism, recommending shared prayer, though that sharing cannot yet be sacramental; thorough study of each other’s traditions; joint missionary work; and clear exposition of Catholic teaching as means towards achieving Christian unity.

A careful distinction is made in the document between separated churches in the East and in the West. The Eastern (Orthodox) Christians, having retained the apostolic succession and the sacraments, are to be considered as “sisters” (14), and points to the beauty of their worship, and the great tradition of the Eastern Fathers, as sources of enrichment for the church in the west as well.

Before the end of the council, Pope Paul VI showed how seriously he took the call to ecumenism. On December 7, 1965, at the solemn closing of the council, he and Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople simultaneously lifted the bans of excommunication which each church had imposed on the other, a first step towards understanding. As a Protestant observer remarked, “if the church is able to express its regret for the past with such ease and humility, anything is possible.”

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