

POPE JOHN XXIII AND VATICAN COUNCIL II 1958-1965

In this article, we will look at the Pope who calls Vatican Council II, an important event that will dramatically change the way the Church sees herself and relates to the world and to other religions, Christian and non-Christian.

John XXIII (1881-1963)

Pope (October 1958 - June 1963)

One of the most beloved popes in the Church's history is Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, the third of 13 children in a family of peasant farmers near Bergamo in Italy. He is ordained a priest in 1904. During World War I, he serves as a medic and a chaplain, experiencing firsthand the horrors of war, which most likely influenced his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth). He also writes a five-volume study of his hero, St. Charles Borromeo, the great sixteenth-century Archbishop of Milan and a leading figure in the Church during the Counter Reformation period.

Between 1925 and 1953, the future Pope is assigned as a Papal Diplomat in Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece and France. During his time in the East, he develops a deep desire to reunite with the Eastern Orthodox Church. During World War II, he is responsible for saving the lives of large numbers of Jewish children by providing them with blank baptismal certificates. After his election, he deletes the phrase *pro perfidis Judaeis* (faithless Jews) from the Good Friday Liturgy. In 1953, he is made a cardinal and the Patriarch of Venice. During his years in Venice, he is very popular with the people and is well known for his wit, cordiality and approachable pastoral style.

Election as Pope. When Cardinal Roncalli leaves Venice to attend the funeral of Pius XII and the Conclave, he promises to be back in 15 days. (We know now that God had other plans for the Cardinal who was one month short of his 77th birthday. It is said that speeches given by a Cardinal prior to a Conclave often greatly influence the Cardinals' choice.) Prior to the 1958 Conclave, Cardinal Bacci, in his address to the Cardinals, advocated that the Church needed "a pope gifted with great spiritual strength and ardent charity," a man who can "embrace the Eastern and the Western Church," a man who "will belong to all peoples," especially

those living under oppression or in poverty, a man capable of building "a bridge spanning all levels of society and among all nations, even those that reject and persecute the Christian religion." In other words, someone unlike Pius XII, who was often seen as aloof and autocratic.

When Roncalli is elected Pope on the twelfth ballot, he is regarded as a compromise candidate acceptable to the different factions in the College of Cardinals—one who would not reign for long or accomplish much. But the newly elected Pope proves to be full of surprises. When he takes possession of the Pope's Cathedral in Rome (St. John Lateran), he tells the people that he does not see himself as a prince but as a priest, a father and shepherd. Very soon he endears himself to the whole world as they hear stories of his visits to hospitals and prisons and his ability to joke with people. John also extends his hospitality to non-Catholics, Jews, and even non-believers.

Decision to call a Council

Ninety days after his election on January 25, 1959, the new pope totally surprises Church leaders, especially the Curia (papal cabinet), when he declares to a small group of Cardinals that, as a result of a sudden inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he has decided to convoke a worldwide General Council of the Church. This is going to be the twenty-first General Council in the Church's history and only the second one to be held in Rome, hence, the title Vatican II. In some ways, it is seen as a council called to continue the unfinished business of Vatican Council I (1869-1870) which ended abruptly because of the Italian Revolution of 1870. Vatican I only spoke of the Church in terms of the hierarchy, and its main achievement was defining the infallibility of the Pope. Because of its abrupt ending, the Council never got to address the role of bishops in relationship to the Pope or the role of the laity in the Church. Nor had it said anything concerning the Church's relationship to other Christians or to the world.

When John reveals his decision to the Curia to convene a council, they are shocked because in 1959, the state of the Church worldwide is pretty good: large numbers of Catholics attend Mass every Sunday

and seminaries are full or nearly full. Also, the Cardinals know that Church councils are only called when there is a crisis of some kind, as, for instance, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) which was called to deal with Luther's rebellion. So why does Pope John suddenly decide to call a worldwide council of Church leaders when the Church is in relatively good shape? What is going on in his mind? Several things.

- ***Dialog with the world.*** Ever since Pope Pius IX in the 1870's declared himself "a prisoner of the Vatican," popes have more or less cut themselves off from the world. John XXIII sees that the world he is living in is fast changing and the Church needs to be in dialog with it and not just be seen as issuing condemnations about what is wrong with the world. One of the main documents to come out of the council is called *The Church in the Modern World* which speaks to the joys and hopes of modern humanity. Vatican II is the first council that steers clear of condemnations.

- ***Renewal of the inner life of the Church.*** While John fully realizes that Catholics are generally not questioning the main doctrines and practices of the Church, he feels a strong need to present ancient truths in a fresh way. In his opening address to the Council Fathers, John says that the Church "*must not engage in sterile academic controversies, but must find meaningful positive and fresh ways of stating the Church's age-old doctrine.*" He uses the Italian word *aggiornamento* (updating) to speak of the inner renewal in the Church that he desires. He likes to use the metaphor of "opening the windows of the Vatican to let in fresh air." Decades after the Council when people witness the huge changes occurring in the Church, they often say that a hurricane, and not just fresh air, blows into the windows of the Vatican.

John calls Vatican II a *pastoral* council—not a council that focuses on doctrines, but rather one that looks at the Church's definition of herself and her approach to the world and other Christian and non-Christian religions.

- ***Unity amongst Christian churches.*** Since the beginning of the 1900's, Protestant churches have started to gather together to find ways to deal with the scandalous divisions among them. This is especially obvious in the mission fields where different churches are competing for the same converts. Popes previous to John expressed no desire to get involved in a growing ecumenical movement.

Rome's stance is that the Catholic Church is the one true Church founded by Christ, and all other Christian churches need to see this and come home to Rome. Without denying the uniqueness of the Catholic Church, John believes that it is essential for the Church to dialog with the leaders of other Christian churches and to celebrate what they have in common without denying beliefs and practices that separate them. One of the very important documents of Vatican II is the *Decree on Ecumenism*. The Council actually goes beyond discussions about unity with other Christian churches. It issues a separate document on *The Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*.

A worldwide council. Vatican Council I had about 700 bishops in attendance, the vast majority of whom were European and Italian. When Vatican Council II convenes in October 1962, over 2,500 bishops from all over the world participate.

Hundreds of bishops arrive from America, Africa, Asia and Latin America. In addition, there are a large number of superiors of male religious orders (sadly, only one woman attends—Sr. Mary Luke Tobin from the United States—representing women religious). Also in attendance is a large number of *periti* (theological experts who advise their bishops). "Official observers" from 18 non-Catholic Christian churches are present for the opening of the Council. Lay men and women attend later sessions.

Movers and shakers at the Council; the battle to control the agenda

At Vatican Council I, Pope Pius IX handed the bishops an agenda he wanted them to rubberstamp—which was more or less what happened. At the beginning of Vatican II, the Curia Cardinals try to do the same thing by dictating who will sit on various commissions and by controlling the drafts of the topics that are to be discussed. But strong influential Cardinals, mainly from Western Europe (Alfrink, Suenens, Doepfner, Fringe and Koenig), refuse to allow the Curia to control the proceedings. These progressive Cardinals are greatly helped and influenced by the most accomplished theologians of the time—Jesuits Henri De Lubac, Jean Danielou and Karl Rahner; Dominicans Yves Congar and Edward Schillebeeckx; Redemptorist Bernard Haring; and diocesan priest Joseph Ratzinger (the future Benedict XVI). It is interesting to note that some of the above theologians had, for a period in the 40's and 50's,

been silenced by the Vatican and not allowed to teach or publish. Open resistance to the prevailing conciliar spirit comes mainly from some diocesan bishops and especially from Curia Cardinal Alfred Ottaviani, prefect of the Congregation of the Faith, whose primary responsibility is to safeguard doctrinal orthodoxy. In the end, most of the Council documents are consciously balanced, often by a very careful choice of words.

Four Council sessions produce 16 documents. The work of the Council is carried out in four sessions. The opening session runs from October 11 through December 8, 1962 and the closing session from September 14 through December 8, 1965.

John XXIII dies; Paul VI continues the Council. When the first session of the Council adjourns in December 1962, Pope John knows he would not live to see the second session reassemble because he has already been diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer. His death on June 3, 1963 is widely mourned throughout the world. Two months before his death, John publishes his highly important encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth) in which he affirms that the recognition of human rights and responsibilities is the foundation of world peace.

Paul VI

On June 21, 1963, Cardinal Montini, a clear favorite going into the Conclave, is elected Pope (1963-1978). He takes the name Paul in honor of the great evangelist St. Paul. The new Pope had worked extensively with John XXIII to prepare for the Council. Going into the Conclave, the Cardinals know that Montini will want to continue the Council if elected. Under his leadership, the Council meets three more times. In January 1964, Pope Paul visits the Holy Land, the first time in centuries that a Pope travels outside of Italy. While there, he has an historic meeting with the Patriarch of Constantinople, which eventually leads to the lifting of the mutual excommunications that have hung over both churches since the Schism of 1054.

The Council produces 16 documents. The following have had the most impact on the life of the Church:

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy is the first document to be issued. All of us who were raised in the pre-Vatican II Church know how drastically this document influenced the way we celebrated all seven

sacraments. As a result of this document, there is a huge push to move people from being “silent spectators” at Mass to being “active participants.”

Constitution on the Church and the Decree on the Laity. Vatican II is sometimes referred to as the “Council of the Laity.” Chapter Two of the document on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) is titled “The People of God.” The Church is not just the hierarchy—which was the emphasis of the unfinished Vatican Council I—but *all* the baptized.

In his introductory note on the *Decree on the Laity*, Martin Work writes: “Although a ‘lay apostolate’ has existed in the Church since the days of our Lord in Jerusalem, it was not until the Second Vatican Council that the Church’s official thinking on the matter was stated in a conciliar decree. As one layman put it pungently, ‘The lay apostolate has been simmering on the “back burner” of the Church’s apostolic life for nearly two thousand years, and finally the Fathers of this Council moved it up to the “front burner” and turned the heat up all the way.’”

This Decree should be read with the *Constitution on the Church*, which has a whole chapter on the laity, and *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World), which also speaks about the role of the laity in the marketplace. The opening paragraph of the Decree on the Laity states: “The layman’s apostolate derives from his Christian vocation and the Church can never be without it.” While we often think of the laity’s ministry in terms of its involvement in Church ministries, the Council states that the *primary* role of the laity is to bring Gospel values to the marketplace.

Constitution on Divine Revelation. One of the fruits of this document is the development of Bible studies in parishes. Prior to Vatican II, the Bible was often seen as a “Protestant book.”

Decree on Ecumenism; Decree on Eastern Catholics Churches; The Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. These three documents bring about a whole new attitude of the Catholic Church towards Eastern Catholics (not in union with Rome) and with other Christian churches, with Jews and people belonging to non-Christian religions.

Declaration on Religious Freedom. This final document of the Council, signed the day before its closing on December 7, 1965, is sometimes looked at as America’s contribution to the Council. The

American Jesuit, John Courtney Murray, has a big hand in the writing of the Declaration. Also, America has more experience with the issue of religious freedom, thereby permitting many religions to practice their beliefs without interference from the government. In paragraph 2, the Document states: *“Religious freedom means that in matters of religion no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is anyone to be constrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly....”* In his introductory statement on the Document, John Courtney Murray states: *“The Church does not deal with the secular order in terms of a double standard – freedom for the Church when Catholics are a minority, privilege for the Church and intolerance for others when Catholics are a majority. The Declaration has opened the way toward new confidence in ecumenical relationship, and a new straightforwardness in relationships between the Church and the world.”* For example, prior to Vatican II in Catholic Ireland, Church leaders sometimes dictated to the government on policies.