

Vatican II Documents: Notes for Opening Lecture

This lecture is background for studying the documents, not a history.

Council: this assumes shared leadership with a head--"collegiality."

Ecumenical: does not mean in collaboration with other Christians, but worldwide.

This council is not limited to the dioceses in a limited region.

Vatican II was the 21st worldwide or general council, about one per century.

Most councils were called to deal with definite heresies or other problems in the Church; their agendas may have been long, but they were quite definite.

Vatican I and Vatican II had less definite agendas--this suggests a development.

Vatican I was announced by Pius IX in 1865; it met in 1869-70, it put out only two documents, the first, on Catholic faith (*Dei Filius*) and the other on papal primacy and infallibility (*Pastor aeternus*). Then suspended due to war to take civil authority from the popes and unify Italy. Many other projects were not finished, including one for a new catechism of the Catholic Church.

Both Pius XI and Pius XII had committees study the possibility of calling a council, but did not go ahead. In October 1958, John XXIII was elected pope after Pius XII died. A few months later the new Pope, then 77 years old, announced he would have a synod for the diocese of Rome, call an ecumenical council, and initiate the revision of the Code of Canon Law.

What were the popes from Pius IX on concerned about? Two things: secularized humanism and liberalized Christianity. The former resulted from the prevalence in the affluent nations of nonbelief, which led to the development of a post-Christian (not neo-pagan) worldview. The latter came about when many Protestants, who had held *sola scriptura*, gave up on the Bible as an objective criterion of faith, and compromised with secularized humanism--e.g., by denying hell, original sin, and other difficult dogmas, and eventually shifting their moral focus to political and social ends, such as peace and justice, and away from personal and family integrity and missionary activity.

The popes between Pius IX and John XXIII did their best to respond to these challenges. Leo XIII put out a tremendous body of teaching; Saint Pius X condemned liberalizing tendencies within the Catholic Church ("modernism") and tightened discipline; Pius XI and Pius XII taught vigorously. In many ways Vatican Council II consolidates the work of these popes, especially of Pius XII.

Pope John had great confidence in the Holy Spirit. He also was very optimistic about the condition of the Church: he thought the faith of most Catholics was strong and their spiritual and moral lives sound. He made a sound and important, but hard to apply,

distinction between what is essential and what is accidental. The essential is what was given by God in Christ, including its authentic development; the accidental is everything else. Pope John rightly wanted to change or get rid of anything accidental that impeded the Church's action and its effectiveness, while giving up nothing essential, but rather clarifying all the essentials and re-presenting them in a fresh way that nobody would miss or have trouble understanding. By doing this, he was convinced, the Council would renew the Church, stimulate all her members to do their part, attract non-Catholic Christians to come home to Rome, win over nonbelievers, and thus mitigate many of the evils from which the modern world has been and is suffering.

Pope John manifested this outlook in a document dated Christmas 1961, by which he formally called the Council. After recalling Jesus' promises and victory over evil, he pointed out the mess into which the modern world had got itself, contrasted that with healthy developments in the Church, and concluded: "Thus, though the world may appear profoundly changed, the Christian community is also in great part transformed and renewed. It has therefore strengthened itself socially in unity; it has been reinvigorated intellectually; it has been interiorly purified and is thus ready for trial." He went on: "In the face of this twofold spectacle--a world which reveals a grave state of spiritual poverty and the Church of Christ, which is still so vibrant with vitality" he felt it urgent to call the Council "to give the Church the possibility to contribute more effectively to the solution of the problems of the modern age." He then stated very clearly what he expected from the Council:

The forthcoming Council will meet therefore and at a moment in which the Church finds very alive the desire to fortify her faith, and to contemplate herself in her own awe-inspiring unity. In the same way, she feels more urgent the duty to give greater efficiency to her sound vitality and to promote the sanctification of her members, the diffusion of revealed truth, the consolidation of her agencies.

This will be a demonstration of the Church, always living and always young, which feels the rhythm of the times and which in every century beautifies herself with new splendor, radiates new light, achieves new conquests, while remaining identical in herself, faithful to the divine image impressed on her countenance by her Spouse, who loves her and protects her, Christ Jesus.

Then, at a time of generous and growing efforts that are being made in different parts for the purpose of rebuilding that visible unity of all Christians which corresponds to the wishes of the divine Redeemer, it is very natural that the forthcoming Council should provide premises of doctrinal clarity and of mutual charity that will make still more alive in our separated brothers the wish for the hoped-for return to unity and will smooth the way.

And, finally, to a world, which is lost, confused, and anxious under the constant threat of new frightful conflicts, the forthcoming Council must offer a possibility for all men of good will to turn their thoughts and their intentions toward peace, a peace which can and must, above all, come from spiritual and supernatural realities, from human intelligence and conscience, enlightened and guided by God the creator and redeemer of humanity.

In studying the Council's documents, it is important to keep in mind that this was Pope John XXIII's actual program for it. I think the documents show that the Council tried to carry out this program, which in turn shows that the majority of bishops listened to Pope John, took what he said to heart, and followed his lead.

However, secularized humanists and liberalized Christians, who for good reasons considered the Catholic Church their chief opponent, had very different hopes for the council. They wanted a council that would reshape Catholic teaching and practice into something they could live with. And even some Catholic theologians shared those hopes. They had been chafing under the tight discipline of the Holy See that began with Pius X's condemnation of modernism. Being unable to publish their ideas, they had passed around unpublished notes and manuscripts--of course, only to people they could trust--and so developed a circle whose members received criticism from nobody who disagreed with them, and who therefore mutually reinforced one another and gradually diverged considerably from sound Catholic teaching. Between 1959 and 1962, these theologians promoted their ideas privately to an important minority of the bishops--most of them in central Europe--that is, in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, France, Belgium, and Holland. The public media of communication, mostly controlled by nonbelievers and always interested in sensational news, picked up on the more radical ideas and, in general, prepared public opinion, including that of Catholics, for a Council very different from the one Pope John had in mind.

Meanwhile, from shortly after Pope John announced the Council in 1959, through his formal convocation of it in 1961, and up to its actual gathering for its first section in the fall of 1962, a vast work of preparation was carried out. For this, the pope used mainly the people he had at hand: members of the curia and theologians residing in Rome. Ideas for the Council were gathered from all the Catholic bishops of the world, and also from Catholic universities; and all this material was catalogued, and made available to the people who were preparing draft documents for the Council. Those people were well aware of the threat posed by the underground theology and were temperamentally a lot less optimistic than Pope John. Perhaps--only God knows--their faith in Jesus' promises and his victory was less deep than the Pope's, and they definitely were less concerned about evangelizing nonbelievers and welcoming separated Christians back than John was. Their focus was in keeping the Catholic Church united on all essentials. For this reason, the draft documents they prepared tended to restate settled Catholic teachings, using insofar as possible the same language and style of the textbooks that had been used in seminaries, with the bad result that those draft documents were not well suited to carry out Pope John's program.

Aware of both of these challenges to his program, in his opening address to the Council, October 11, 1962, Pope John directed the assembled bishops as to how he wanted them to teach. First, he restated his general program. Then, he mentioned his pessimistic associates and said: “We feel we must disagree with those prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand.” He next reasserted confidence in providence and went on to try to make a case for his optimism. He then directly addressed the issue of how the Council should teach, and began by rejecting both radical reshaping of essentials and excessive conservatism in restating them: “The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously.” He explained that the doctrine is salvific, guiding people toward heaven, and that to do this today the Gospel must influence all forms of human activity and really help the present-day world. He then explained:

. . . the twenty-first Ecumenical Council, which will draw upon the effective and important wealth of juridical, liturgical, apostolic, and administrative experiences, wishes to transmit the doctrine, pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion, which throughout twenty centuries, notwithstanding difficulties and contrasts, has become the common patrimony of men. It is a patrimony not well received by all, but always a rich treasure available to men of good will.

Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us, pursuing thus the path which the Church has followed for twenty centuries.

The salient point of the Council is not, therefore, a discussion of one article of faith or another of the fundamental doctrine of the Church which has been repeatedly taught by the Fathers and by ancient and modern theologians, and which is presumed to be well known and familiar to all.

For this a Council was not necessary. But from the renewed, serene, and tranquil adherence to all the teaching of the Church in its entirety and preciseness, as it still shines forth in the Acts of the Council of Trent and First Vatican Council, the Christian, Catholic, and apostolic spirit of the whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity with the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. **The deposit or the truths of faith, contained in our ancient teaching, are one thing, while the mode in which they are enunciated, keeping the same meaning and the same judgment, is another.** And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character.

This very important speech was misinterpreted and misreported at the time--and has been ever since--by ignoring and omitting what Pope John was saying about guarding and holding fast to the essentials. A key sentence, the one which begins, “The deposit or the truths of faith,” was often misquoted by omitting “keeping the same meaning and the same judgment.” Thus, in the Abbott edition of the Council documents, the passage was mistranslated and Pope John made to say: “The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.” Dissenting

theologians used this mistranslation and took it to mean that the old substance could be reshaped in accord with their opinions into new teachings, inconsistent with the old ones, much as liberalizing Protestants had done.

During the Council, there was a great deal of episcopal politicking by both the intransigent minority, led by the “prophets of gloom” who had done much of the preparatory work, and their bitter opponents: the central European, left-wing bloc. Conflict began at the first working session. Those controlling preparations had drawn up slates of council members to serve on the various committees, in which much of the real work would be done. Naturally, their nominees were bishops they thought would be safe. Their opponents from the central European bloc objected to voting immediately on these slates, and demanded that all members be given a chance to consider who should be elected. But they had their own slates ready, while most bishops did not know one another and could not begin to organize an alternative. So, the opponents of the curial bishops succeeded in getting the Council to elect to key committees majorities sympathetic to their views.

Still, though the left-wing bloc had won an important battle, the war was just beginning. Their intransigent opponents still had many resources. And the bulk of the bishops remained both anxious to safeguard essentials and determined to promote Pope John’s project for updating the formulation of the faith and outdated practices with respect to nonessentials. While this majority of the council members made clear their dissatisfaction with most of the draft documents that had been prepared in advance, they were far from prepared to accept extreme views. And they not only stated their moderate views on the floor of the council but regularly insisted on amendments to correct and tighten up the drafts prepared by theologians working for the central European bloc and brought to the floor by the conciliar committees they had managed to get elected.

Then too, the slates that had won election to those committees included some people not well known to the central Europeans whom they thought would be sympathetic to their views. And in many cases those bishops turned out to be very intelligent and energetic moderates. Among them were then Bishop John Wright of Pittsburgh (who in 1969 was made prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy and a Cardinal) and Bishop Karol Wojtyła of Krakow.

The result of all this--and the constant work of the Holy Spirit--is that the documents of Vatican II very well fulfill the intention of Pope John; the Council did, in fact, faithfully carry out *his* program, not the program of the prophets of gloom, and not the program of the central European bloc. Yet the latter group, the media with their own agenda (with the help of people like F. X. Murphy, C.Ss.R., who wrote articles for the *New Yorker* under the pseudonym of Xavier Rynne), and dissenting theologians since Vatican II propagated the

myth that the bulk of the bishops had not only rejected the conservative minority but joined with the liberalizing minority to form the overwhelming majority of the Council.

If that had happened, how could the documents' moderation be explained? The standard explanation is that the intransigent conservatives and Paul VI somehow prevented the overwhelming majority at the Council from saying what they really wanted to say and otherwise would have said. So, while dissenting theologians and deviant bishops like to quote out-of-context snippets from Vatican II documents that seem to support their views, they do not like to consider the documents as integral wholes. And when challenged by what the Council really taught, they often slide off into talk about the "spirit" of the Council or suggest that the Council was more important as an event (given their spin) than as the source of the documents it actually worked on, approved, and issued. And they suggest that the Council did not really mean what it said.

Now, no doubt the documents were accepted by different bishops and groups at the Council with somewhat different intentions and, sometimes, with different interpretations. But the Council as such acted and taught only in the documents it approved and promulgated. Individuals and groups that meet and do business in secret can have a double mind. But the mind of a collectivity that acts only in public exists only in its public words and deeds. It is not logically possible for Vatican II, or any other like collective entity that does all its official business in the open, to say something other than what it means. So, Vatican II cannot--that is, logically cannot--have meant anything but exactly what it said.

John Paul II has remained faithful to the Council and tried to implement it. So, it remains important for us to know what Vatican II really taught and to cooperate in its implementation.