



# The Second Vatican Council: *What was it and why is it important today?*

*The Episcopal Commission for Doctrine of the  
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops*

1. This year the Catholic Church celebrates the 50th anniversary of a momentous event: the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Today, however, many Catholics – particularly the young – have scarcely heard of the Council, while others may know very little about it. Therefore, as Bishops, we wish to take this occasion to call to mind the joy and vitality that the Council brought to the Church through its key teachings.

## **What is a Council?**

2. During a council, Bishops from around the world gather together so that, with one voice, they can clearly proclaim the teaching of the Catholic Church. Because the Bishops are the successors of the Apostles and are united with the Pope, who is the successor of Peter, the teachings of an ecumenical council represent the highest level of the Church's teaching authority.

## **Why Vatican II?**

3. Although in the past, councils often gathered to respond to some threat to the faith, this was not really the case with Vatican II. One day, Pope (now Blessed) John XXIII surprised everyone by announcing that there would be an ecumenical council. When the Council opened almost three years later in 1962, he laid out the reason for it:

What is needed, and what everyone imbued with a truly Christian, Catholic and apostolic spirit craves today, is that this [Catholic] doctrine shall be more widely known, more deeply understood, and more penetrating in its effects on men's moral lives. What is needed is that this certain and immutable doctrine, to which the faithful owe obedience, be studied afresh and reformulated in contemporary terms. For this deposit of faith, or truths which are contained in our time-honored teaching is one thing; the manner in which these truths are set forth, with their meaning preserved intact, is something else.<sup>1</sup>

What a treasure there is, dear brothers and sisters, in the guidelines offered to us by the Second Vatican Council! . . . I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council as the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning.

Blessed John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 57.

<sup>1</sup> Blessed John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* 6.5.

Pope John's speech electrified those in attendance so that, in the words of one Canadian priest, "there was joy in the hearts of all and tears in our eyes."<sup>2</sup> The tone and direction was set for the rest of the Council. It was clear that Vatican II was not convoked in order to answer pressing threats or to change Church teaching; rather, its goal was to proclaim again the Church's unchanging faith in Christ in a way our contemporary culture could understand. This "updating" (or, in Italian, *aggiornamento*) of the way the faith is communicated, however, also reveals a certain deepening or development in the way the faith is understood. Cardinal Léger of Montreal, speaking during the Council, explained the task facing the Bishops in a similar way: "With diligence and prudence, we must distinguish established doctrines from theological opinions, taking care to never do anything to make the faith of believers needlessly difficult. On the contrary, we must know how to seek, with our priests and faithful, an ever deeper knowledge of the Gospel."<sup>3</sup>

As we now consider some of the key teachings of Vatican II, we will examine some of the ways that the Council has deepened our knowledge of the Gospel.

### The Documents

4. The teachings of a council are expressed in its documents, which are produced and agreed upon by the Bishops who attend. The Second Vatican Council produced many (see appendix for a complete list), the result of lively debate and discussion. The most important of these are the four "Constitutions," which are often known simply by the first two words of their Latin text. These are: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (on the Sacred Liturgy), *Lumen Gentium* (on the Church), *Dei Verbum* (on the Word of God), and *Gaudium et Spes* (on the Church in the Modern World). As a way of highlighting the key ideas of the Council, we will discuss some important points from these documents which are so relevant for our lives as Catholics today.

### ■ The Liturgy

5. The liturgy, or the celebration of the Mass, is "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows."<sup>4</sup> Thus, it was fitting that the first document issued by Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, was on the liturgy. Although the structure of the Mass has changed over the centuries, before Vatican II it had taken on a fairly established form for about 400 years. Yet, in practice, the way it was often celebrated before the Council was in need of a certain renewal:

2 For example, L. L. Sullivan, "Bengough priest describes opening of Vatican council," in *The Leader-Post, Regina*, Oct 18, 1962, p. 2. "Pope John spoke for 37 minutes. His voice is clear, his Latin is easily followed, and his message was blunt – he wants Catholics to live holy lives, to 'clean house', to do all they can to welcome our non-Catholic brothers and sisters back to the family of St. Peter. There was joy in the hearts of all and tears in our eyes, too, as Pope John blessed the throng of his bishops, and walked quickly to his apartments."

3 Quote from Émile Cardinal Léger, in André Naud, « Le cardinal Léger au concile et la conduite de l'intelligence chrétienne » in *L'Église canadienne et Vatican II*, ed. Gilles Routhier (Québec: Éditions Fides, 1997) 263.

4 *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 10. The text continues: "For the aim and object of apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in the sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's supper."

many laypeople did not understand the Latin prayers used in the liturgy; some priests celebrated Mass in a hurried manner not in keeping with the dignity of the Eucharist (since they may not have understood the Latin either); and there was often a general lack of participation by the laity. Vatican II's Constitution on the Liturgy, however, called for the "fully conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations" of all the faithful.<sup>5</sup> The Council Fathers also decided on something that had an immediate and direct impact on all Catholics: the increased use in the Mass of the language of the people.<sup>6</sup> This move toward the use of the vernacular has opened up the richness of the prayers of the Church's liturgy to those who do not know Latin. In English, we have recently been blessed with a new translation of the Mass which faithfully captures the beauty of the Latin prayers.

## ■ The Church and the World

6. When Vatican II is discussed today, this discussion usually centers on the Church, particularly the documents *Lumen Gentium* (on the Church) and *Gaudium et Spes* (on the Church in the Modern World). As another Canadian participant in the Council, the Archbishop of Halifax James Hayes pointed out, "the whole purpose of the Council was to help us realize and understand what the Church really is." Vatican II has given us a fresh understanding of what the Church is, how we become holy, how we can be saved, and how we see other Christians, and we will consider each of these points in turn.

### Images of the Church

7. First of all, what is the Church? While recognizing the numerous traditional images and metaphors for the Church, Vatican II gave new emphasis to that of the Church as the *People of God*.<sup>8</sup> By emphasizing this image, the Council wanted to bring out more clearly the fact that, while the Church is united with Christ, it is not identical with him; it is also composed of people who "belong to or are related to it in various ways"<sup>9</sup> (e.g., Catholics, other Christians, etc.). It also exists in history, as a pilgrim on the way to the kingdom of God. The advantage of speaking of the Church as a people is that it highlights the fact that the Church is not Christ and is not yet perfect. The opening line of the Constitution on the Church sums this up perfectly: "Christ is the light of nations. . . . a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church."<sup>10</sup> In other words, the Church is not itself the light, but its mission is to *reflect* the light of Christ. This vision helps the Church remain humble, avoiding arrogant triumphalism.

5 *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14.

6 *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 36.2: "But since the use of the mother tongue, whether in the Mass, the administration of the sacraments, or other parts of the liturgy, frequently may be of great advantage to the people, the limits of its employment may be extended."

7 Interview with Archbishop James M. Hayes of Halifax from 2003, in *Voices from the Council*, ed. Michael Prendergast and M. D. Ridge (Portland, OR: Pastoral Press, 2004) 30.

8 *Lumen Gentium* 9.

9 *Lumen Gentium* 13.

10 *Lumen Gentium* 1.

## The Universal Call to Holiness

8. Before Vatican II, many of the Catholic faithful had the idea that the call to holiness was basically reserved to priests, nuns, and other consecrated persons. The Council made crystal clear, however, that *all* are called to sanctity.<sup>11</sup> Lay people, Bishops, priests, nuns, etc.: each is called, in a different way, to live out God's universal call to holiness. We see this truth manifested in the Church's choice, since the Council, to declare "Blessed" and "Saint" Catholics from all walks of life and vocations. Examples of such lay people include St. Gianna Molla (2004), St. Kateri Tekakwitha (2012), Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati (1990), as well as married couples such as Blesseds Luigi Quattrocchi and Maria Corsini (2001). Clergy and religious include the Canadians Blessed François de Laval (1980), St. Marguerite Bourgeoys (1982), St. Marguerite d'Youville (1990), and St. André Bessette (2010).

## Salvation

9. The Second Vatican Council strongly reiterated that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of everyone. Since in him God has entered the world in order to redeem it, all salvation comes from Christ. And while this unique offer of eternal life is given first of all through the Church,<sup>12</sup> which is Christ's Body, it does not necessarily stop with those who have been baptized. "For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery."<sup>13</sup> This means that even non-Christians can be saved.<sup>14</sup> Yet this salvation always comes from Christ, the Saviour of all, through his paschal mystery (i.e., his suffering, death, and resurrection).

This means that when the Church proclaims Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life (cf. Jn 14.6), it is not imposing something from outside, but rather proposing to all that which corresponds to their innermost being:

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of him who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.<sup>15</sup>

11 Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 40: "Thus it is evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society. . . . In this way, the holiness of the People of God will grow into an abundant harvest of good, as is admirably shown by the life of so many saints in Church history."

12 Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 14: "Christ, present to us in His Body, which is the Church, is the one Mediator and the unique way of salvation. In explicit terms He Himself affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church, for through baptism as through a door men enter the Church."

13 *Gaudium et Spes* 22.

14 *Lumen Gentium* 16: "Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience."

15 *Gaudium et Spes* 22.

Since the meaning and goal of human existence is only fully revealed in Jesus Christ, the Church has the responsibility to proclaim the Good News about him to the whole world.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, many of the world religions can be seen as a kind of preparation for the Gospel, since they “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”<sup>17</sup> This teaching represents a significant doctrinal development, since up to that

No Council [Vatican II] has ever spoken so clearly about Christian Unity, about dialogue with non-Christian religions, about the specific meaning of the Old Covenant and of Israel, about the dignity of each person’s conscience, about the principle of religious liberty, about the different cultural traditions within which the Church carries out her missionary mandate, and about the means of social communication.

Blessed John Paul II,  
*Tertio Millennio Adveniente* 19.

point other religions were often held to have no value at all. Vatican II, however, provided a profoundly positive basis for relations and dialogue with non-Christians. The Council’s teaching in this area is chiefly found in its Declarations *Nostra Aetate* (on non-Christian Religions) and *Dignitatis Humanae* (on Religious Freedom) which declares that “the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Towards Christian Unity**

10. Although “the one Church of Christ . . . subsists in the Catholic Church,”<sup>19</sup> it is also true that “many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.”<sup>20</sup> This is the reason behind the Catholic Church’s commitment to ecumenism: these “elements of sanctification and truth” that Catholics share with other Christians impel us toward unity. We dialogue with other Christians because that is Christ’s will for us, “that they may all be one” (Jn 17.21). According to Vatican II, other Christians are seen not simply as “non-Catholics”; they are “separated brethren”<sup>21</sup> and “fol-

lowers of Christ.”<sup>22</sup> This recognition of the faith in Christ we share with other Christians is the basis for ongoing ecumenical dialogues that continue today between the Catholic Church and many other Christian communities.

### **Our World Today**

11. One of the most anticipated documents of the Council was the great Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. Published at the very end of the Council, it is a reflection on the modern world and its need for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It can thus be

15 *Gaudium et Spes* 22.

16 Cf. *Ad Gentes* 8: “Missionary activity is closely bound up even with human nature itself and its aspirations. For by manifesting Christ the Church reveals to men the real truth about their condition and their whole calling, since Christ is the source and model of that redeemed humanity, imbued with brotherly love, sincerity and a peaceful spirit, to which they all aspire. Christ and the Church, which bears witness to Him by preaching the Gospel, transcend every peculiarity of race or nation and therefore cannot be considered foreign anywhere or to anybody.”

17 *Nostra Aetate* 2.

18 *Dignitatis Humanae* 2.

19 *Lumen Gentium* 8.

20 *Lumen Gentium* 8.

21 *Unitatis Redintegratio* 3.

22 *Unitatis Redintegratio* 1.

considered the best expression of the hopes of John XXIII since it seeks to show the relevancy of Christ for people of our time. Benedict XVI states:

In light of the centrality of Christ, *Gaudium et Spes* interprets the condition of contemporary men and women, their vocation and their dignity, and also the milieus in which they live: the family, culture, the economy, politics, the international community. This is the Church's mission, yesterday, today and for ever: to proclaim and witness to Christ so that the human being, every human being, may totally fulfill his or her vocation.<sup>23</sup>

The message of *Gaudium et Spes* is clear: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (cf. Heb 13.8), and he remains just as relevant and necessary today as he was 2000 years ago.

### ■ The Centrality of the word of God

12. Vatican II re-focused the Church on the centrality of the scriptures in every area of the Church's life. Before the Council, Bible reading by Catholics was in general not strongly encouraged. But at Vatican II, the Bible occupied a central place. As the Canadian Bishop (later Cardinal) G. Emmett Carter declared during the Council, "everyone has remarked upon the inspiration derived from seeing the Holy Bible carried daily by a bishop the length of St. Peter's and placed upon the altar, open, in full view of the assembled Fathers, so that everyone would know that the word of God presided in our deliberations."<sup>24</sup> The Council strongly recommended the reading of the Bible in various translations, emphasizing that the study of scripture is "the soul of sacred theology,"<sup>25</sup> and thus belongs at the centre of every aspect of the Church's life. This Biblical renewal has already borne great fruit in the Catholic Church since the Council. We can see this clearly in the new ecclesial movements whose spirituality is closely centered upon the word of God, in the growing desire of Catholics to know, study, and discuss the Bible, and in the Church's renewed emphasis on proclaiming, sharing, and praying with, the word of God.

### ■ What Effect has the Council had?

13. The Catholic Church is over 2000 years old. The 50 years that have passed since Vatican II began represent a relatively short time in terms of the Church's life. For this reason, it can be difficult to determine what the "effects" or "fruit" of the Council are, since the process is still unfolding before us.

We see good fruit, however, where the Council is understood properly. This has been strongly emphasized by Pope Benedict XVI, who has pointed out that Vatican II, rather than being an event of "discontinuity and rupture"<sup>26</sup> with the Church before the Council, is to be viewed in continuity with the Church before it. It was not a break, but an act of

23 Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, November 20, 2005

24 Quote from G. Emmett Carter, in Walter M. Abbott, SJ, *Twelve Council Fathers* (Toronto: Collier-Macmillan Canada, 1963) 117.

25 *Dei Verbum* 24.

26 Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia (December 22, 2005).

reform. For this reason, we do not reject what came before the Council as being outdated, nor do we consider all that came after as inconsistent with the Church's Tradition. Moreover, we cannot appeal to the "spirit" of the Council as if this were opposed to the "letter" of the Council's documents. The Church that existed before Vatican II is the same Church we belong to today. Yet it is also true that things did change after the Council.

### ■ The meaning of "reform"

14. What changed then? Benedict XVI provides helpful guidance when he insists that the Council must be understood as an act of "reform."<sup>27</sup> This means that, on the one hand, there is a certain discontinuity in some externals, such as the rules regarding abstaining from meat on Fridays, the use of English in the liturgy, and other such changes which can be dependent upon historical circumstances. But on the other hand, and more importantly, there has been a deeper discovery of what is truly fundamental to the Church's identity. Rather than making the Church worldly or "modern," the Council's job was something else entirely: it was "to overcome erroneous or superfluous contradictions in order to present to our world the requirement of the Gospel in its full greatness and purity."<sup>28</sup> And this, in fact, is precisely the process referred to by Blessed John XXIII in his speech at the opening of the Council, for the "truths which are contained in our time-honored teaching is one thing; the manner in which these truths are set forth, with their meaning preserved intact, is something else."<sup>29</sup> Vatican II did find new ways of expressing the truths of the Gospel, and in doing so it helped us to understand these truths in a deeper and more authentic way. We could say, then, that the true "newness" of the Council's teaching does not lie in new doctrines, but in a new and deepened understanding of the Gospel. This new depth is the great gift of the Council.

"In the history of the Church, the 'old' and the 'new' are always closely interwoven. The 'new' grows out of the 'old', and the 'old' finds a fuller expression in the 'new'. Thus it was for the Second Vatican Council."

Blessed John Paul II,  
*Tertio Millennio Adveniente* 18.

15. Therefore with great hope, joy, and trust in the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ, let us celebrate the 50th anniversary of the opening of this great council as we look forward to the fruit that will continue to be borne. During the coming years, as we mark the anniversaries of the various conciliar documents, we wish to encourage priests, deacons, religious, and all the lay faithful – especially young people – to engage in a renewed reading and study of these documents with open minds so that we may all come to a more authentic and unified vision of God's call for his Church in our time.

<sup>27</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia (December 22, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia (December 22, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Blessed John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* 6.5.

“With the passing of the years, *the Council documents have lost nothing of their value or brilliance.*”

Blessed John Paul II,  
*Novo Millennio Ineunte* 57.

“Dear brothers and sisters, as I invite you to look at these Documents again, I encourage you, together with me, to pray to the Virgin Mary so that she may help all believers in Christ to keep the spirit of the Second Vatican Council alive, to contribute to the foundation of that universal fraternity in the world which responds to the will of God for men and women, created in his image.”

Benedict XVI, *Angelus*,  
October 30, 2005.

## ■ Appendix: The Documents of Vatican II

There were three kinds of documents produced at Vatican II. The most significant are the Constitutions. The Declarations are general statements on particular questions, whereas the Decrees are documents concerning specific activities or groups of people in the Church.

### Constitutions

*Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) –  
December 4, 1963

*Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) –  
November 21, 1964

*Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) –  
November 18, 1965

*Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) – December 7, 1965

### Declarations

*Gravissimum Educationis* (Declaration on Christian Education) –  
October 28, 1965

*Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) – October 28, 1965

*Dignitatis Humanae* (Declaration on Religious Freedom) –  
December 7, 1965

### Decrees

*Inter Mirifica* (Decree on the Media of Social Communications) –  
December 4, 1963

*Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite) – November 21, 1964

*Unitatis Redintegratio* (Decree on Ecumenism) – November 21, 1964

*Christus Dominus* (Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church) –  
October 28, 1965

*Optatam Totius* (Decree on Priestly Training) – October 28, 1965

*Perfectae Caritatis* (Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life) – October 28, 1965

*Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity) – November 18, 1965

*Ad Gentes* (Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church) – December 7, 1965

*Presbyterorum Ordinis* (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests) – December 7, 1965

All of these are widely available in printed form,  
as well as on the Vatican’s website [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

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