

VATICAN II: CHURCH HISTORY IN THE MAKING 1962-1965

What is Vatican II?

It's been said that when asked, students answered in unexpected ways: "Isn't that the Pope's summer residence?" and, "That's the name of the Pope's airplane!" We can smile at this, but we wonder. What do our parishioners, especially younger ones, think about Vatican II? It has been 50 years since the Council, and much has happened since then. Anniversaries are always special. And for this very special anniversary, the Church as a whole, and Pope Benedict XVI in particular, want us to both remember the Council and celebrate its legacy. Hopefully, this brief essay, first in a series, will be useful in helping Vatican Council II come alive for Catholics today.

Let's begin by framing some basic questions: Who called the Council and why? Where was it held? Who attended? What did the Council do?

Let's Have A Council!

Pope John XXIII announced his decision to call a Council on January 25, 1959. It was a surprise to everyone, including it seems, to the Pope himself. He had been Pope for less than one hundred days and there was no crisis or heresy (in church history the usual reasons for calling a Council) that seemed to need the attention of a Council. In fact, Pope John would later say that the idea of a Council came to him "like a flash of heavenly light."

Trembling a little with emotion but at the same time humbly resolute, I announce to you a double celebration which I propose to undertake: a diocesan synod for the City [of Rome] and a general Council for the universal Church.

That "general Council for the universal Church" is what we know as Vatican Council II.

Before the Council Opens

Preparation for the Council was lengthy and much was done including writing the drafts of what would eventually become the official sixteen documents of the Council. Also, Pope John used this time to explain his hopes for what the Council would mean to the life of the Church.

Hopes and Goals of the Council

One goal was that the Council be a "new Pentecost"; that the power of the Holy Spirit as reflected in that "flash of heavenly light" would guide the Council and bring forth good fruit. The Council was meant, as well, to be a means of inner renewal – both for individuals and for the Church as a whole. It was to be a Council **for** the Church as well as a Council **about** the Church. The Council was to "read the signs of the times" and respond to them. That is, the Council was to engage the modern world in a positive way.

Also important was Pope John's strong commitment to ecumenism; that is, the restoration of unity of all Christians. This commitment to unity was uppermost as he announced his desire for a Council that would reach out to "the faithful of the separated Churches."

The Council Opens; Who Attends

The Council's first session opened on October 11, 1962 when 2500 persons gathered in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Attending were bishops from around the world, superiors of religious orders, and theologians who worked alongside the bishops. During the Council, members of Protestant and Orthodox eastern Churches were invited as Observers, and, as Auditors, 80 Catholic laypersons.

The Torch Is Passed

Pope John XXIII saw the first session of the Council he envisioned, but after his death in 1963, Pope Paul VI saw it through to its concluding session in December 1965.

A Word on What They Did

The task of the assembled bishops was to draft, debate, revise, and approve the sixteen documents that we have today. All of the documents were overwhelmingly approved by the bishops, with final approval of Pope Paul VI, and then officially promulgated.

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Additional information:

Hahnenberg, Edward. *A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II*. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007.

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