



Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time October 7, 2012 B

Celebrating the Fiftieth Anniversary of Vatican Council II — How It Changed Our Church

Many would say that Vatican Council II which opened on October 11, 1962, was the most important event to happen in our Church since Pentecost Sunday. (Vatican Council I took place in the late 1880s.) Over 2,000 bishops from 116 countries were in attendance, as were Orthodox and Protestant representatives. Vatican II was the first general council of the Church that did not issue condemnations. Every general council, from the very first one held in Nicaea in 325, was called to condemn someone (heretics, Protestants) or something (heresies, false doctrines). As a result, people were excommunicated from the Church and some heretics were even burned at the stake.

By contrast, Vatican II did not issue any condemnations. Its approach was pastoral and positive. It sought to reach out in dialogue to *all* people of good will. In his opening homily, Blessed John XXIII said:

“Errors vanish as quickly as they arise, like the fog before the sun. The Church has always opposed these errors. Frequently she has condemned them with the greatest severity. Nowadays however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make us of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity.”

The Council issued *sixteen Documents*, all of which were significant for the life of the Church in relationship to her own people and to her attitude towards Christian and non-Christian religions and towards the secular world. All 16 documents can be found on the internet. See Vatican Council II Documents. The following is a brief summary of the 16 Vatican II Documents.

Document #1: The Constitution on the Church. This Document is often called *Lumen Gentium* (“Light to the Nations”—the opening words of the text). This has been seen as an immensely important document because of the way the Church redefined herself. At Vatican Council I (which was not finished due to war), the Church defined herself mainly in terms of the hierarchy. Vatican Council II offered several images of the Church (Bride of Christ, Body of Christ, Sacrament of God’s love, People of God). While all these images are beautiful and important, *Lumen Gentium* (LG) gives a

whole chapter on the Church as the *People of God*. This definition of Church underlines the fact that the Church consists of *ALL* the baptized and not just the clergy. To further emphasize this fact, there is a full chapter in LG on The Role of the Laity, and one of the 16 Documents of Vatican II is focused entirely on the Laity. Finally, LG stresses that *ALL* the baptized are called to live a life of holiness. Prior to Vatican II, it would seem that only the clergy—especially those in monasteries—were called to a life of holiness. We witness the results of this Document when we see the large numbers of lay people involved in the life of the Church. They pursue a life of holiness by participating in retreats and spiritual growth programs offered by the Church.

Document #2: Constitution on Divine Revelation. The focus of this Document is the Bible. One of the huge blessings of the Council is that it gave the Bible back to the people. Before Vatican II, the Bible was seen by many as a “Protestant book” and the clergy discouraged the laity from reading it lest they misinterpret it. The Constitution on Divine Revelation encouraged *all* the faithful to read the Bible. Today, Catholics are much more comfortable reading the Bible and joining Bible study groups.

Document #3: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. This Document revolutionized the way the Church approaches and celebrates the Liturgy. Prior to Vatican II, the priest celebrated (“read”) Mass in Latin with his back to the people. He alone read the readings and gave out communion. In all too many cases, the people were just silent spectators at Mass. After Vatican II, the Mass was celebrated in the vernacular with the priest facing the people. Gradually, the laity carried out the functions that used to be exclusively performed by the priest. This Document stressed that:

- ◆ The liturgy was the *source and summit* of the entire Christian life. In the celebration of the liturgy, we receive the grace we need to be witnesses to Christ in the world.
- ◆ Pastors were told that it was their solemn duty to help the laity to become involved in the liturgy “*knowingly, actively and fruitfully.*”

This Document led to the reform of the way we celebrate *all* of the seven sacraments, e.g., confessionals

were replaced by Reconciliation rooms, Baptism sometimes occurs at Mass, Last Rites became the Sacrament of the Sick to be administered not just to the dying but also to the sick. The Divine Office (Liturgy of the Hours), previously only prayed by priests and religious sisters, was gradually prayed by the laity.

Document #4: The Church in the Modern World. Prior to Vatican II, the Church had a “fortress mentality” towards the world. This was symbolized by the fact that the Pope was seen as a “prisoner of the Vatican,” never leaving it to visit his flock. This Document speaks to *all* men and women of good will seeking to cooperate with them to build a better and more just world. The Council Fathers expressed a desire to better understand the world in which the Church lived, “its expectations, longings and characteristics” (art.4). This is the longest of the 16 Documents. It addresses *many* issues such as the desires of mankind, the dignity of the human person, conscience, atheism, social justice, how the Church can serve the world, how developments in the world benefit the Church, marriage and family life, human culture, economic development, political action, war and peace, building an international community.

Document #5: Decree on Social Communication. This Decree which is almost 50 years old, opened with these words: *“By divine favor, especially in modern times, human genius has produced from natural material astonishing inventions in the field of technology. Some of these have extraordinary bearing on the human spirit, since they open up new and highly effective avenues of communication for all kinds of information, ideas, and directives.”*

The Council Fathers could not have envisioned the advances in social communication since the 1960s but we can assume that they would have encouraged the members of the Church to use all forms of social media to communicate the message of Jesus.

Document #6: Decree on Ecumenism. Prior to Vatican II, Catholics were not allowed to go to a Protestant service. I remember standing outside a Protestant church for the funeral service of our Protestant neighbor. Since the 1930s Protestant churches started to gather together to pray for Christian unity. The Catholic Church did not participate; rather, she prayed that the Protestants would return to Rome.

With the pontificate of John XXIII and the Council, our Church developed a whole new attitude towards our “separated brethren.” Pope John invited representatives of the Protestant and Orthodox churches to the front of St. Peter’s Basilica to be “official observers” of the discussions. He also created a new secretariat for Christian unity. The Decree on Ecumenism states that the divisions amongst Christians is a scandal and the

result of sin on both sides. The Document is remarkable for the fact that the focus is more on a “pilgrim” church moving toward Christ than on a movement of “return” to the Catholic Church. As a result of Pope John’s approach and the Council’s *Decree on Ecumenism*, most Christian churches today now have more cordial relations among themselves and often work together on social action projects. Many Christian churches are engaged in dialogue concerning doctrinal differences.

Document #7: Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches. This Decree is closely related to the previous one. It is addressed to two groups of Christians: the Eastern Orthodox Christians who are in union with Rome and those who are not. The Decree offers a wholehearted recognition of the liturgical rites of the Eastern Church, something that was previously missing. If an Eastern Catholic not in union with Rome wanted to join the church, he/she would not need to be confirmed in the Catholic Church. Likewise, if an Eastern Rite priest wanted to join the Roman Catholic Church, he would not need to be ordained in the Roman or Latin Rite. The *only* thing separating Eastern Rite Catholics from union with Rome is the papacy. Eastern Rite Catholics not in union with Rome do not accept the Pope as the head of their church.

Document #8: Decree on the Bishops Pastoral Office. Vatican Council I has been called “the Council of the Pope” and Vatican II “the Council of the Bishops.” This Decree does much to restore the important role of the bishop as the successor of the Apostles, and teacher and shepherd of God’s people. The Decree says a lot about the responsibilities of the bishop and almost nothing about his power and rights. It also calls on the bishop to work in a collaborative way with the clergy and people of his diocese.

Document #9: Decree on Priestly Formation. This Decree opens with these words: *“This sacred Synod well knows that the wished-for renewal of the whole Church depends in large measure on a ministry of priests which is vitalized by the spirit of Christ. Hence it proclaims the extreme importance of priestly formation and affirms certain basic principles pertaining to it.”* In other words, the Council Fathers are saying that future priests must be imbued with the vision of the Council. It also stressed the importance of a priestly formation that kept in mind “the pastoral needs of the area in which the ministry was to be exercised” (1). This led to a huge revamping of the theological, spiritual and pastoral formation of future priests.

Document #10: Decree on Religious Life. This Decree speaks to religious orders of priests, brothers and sisters and lay secular institutes that seek to follow the spirit and teaching of the founder of their religious order,

while having a family and holding a job in the world. This Decree underlines that all belonging to a religious order seeking to renew themselves must keep in mind two fundamental norms: the ultimate norm of every Christian to follow Christ as set down in the Gospel, and the individual teachings of their charism or religious founder.

Document #11: Decree on the Laity. In his introductory note to this Decree, 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 *Lumen Gentium* which has a whole chapter on the laity and *Gaudium et Spes* which also speaks about the role of the laity in the marketplace. The opening paragraph of the Decree 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.

Document #12: Decree on the Ministry and Life of the Priest. While this Decree has in mind *all* priests—religious and diocesan—it is primarily addressing those "devoted to the care of souls in parishes." Like *all* members of the Church, the priest is first called to be a faithful disciple of Jesus. This image joins him to the members of his flock. In the fourth century, St. Augustine said: *"For you I am a bishop, but with you I am a Christian."* This Decree debunks the idea of "priestly caste" separated from their people. It addresses the relationship of the priest to his bishop and the laity. It speaks about priestly holiness and pastoral duties.

Document #13: Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church. This Decree states that *"it is God's plan that the whole body of people which make up the human race should form one People of God, should be joined into one body of Christ, should be built up together in one Temple of the Holy Spirit."* It seeks to bring about the people's obedience to Jesus' last words to his Apostles: "Make disciples of all nations" (Mt. 28).

Document #14: Declaration on Christian Education. This Declaration stresses the importance of an education that speaks to the whole person, body, mind and spirit,

and an education that prepares the student to live in a pluralistic society.

Document #15: Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. This Declaration is remarkable for its outreach to non-Christian religions, specifically, Buddhists, Muslims and Jews. It was the will of John XXXIII to emphasize what all people had in common without denying differences, and that was their search for the meaning of existence. Since ancient times, people have looked to various religions for answers to the profound mysteries of life. Specifically, this Declaration states that our Muslim brothers and sisters "adore one God, living and enduring...the Maker of heaven and earth." They recognize Abraham as their spiritual father and honor Mary, the mother of Jesus. This Declaration strongly denounced all forms of anti-Semitism, expressly stating that *all* Jews cannot be blamed for the death of Jesus. Furthermore, no Catholic can quote the Bible to say that the Jews are an accursed and rejected people.

Document #16: 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 had a big hand in the writing of the Declaration. Also, America had more experience with the issue of religious freedom, permitting many religions to practice their beliefs without interference from the government. In paragraph 2, the Document states that *"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 to 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.

Have a blessed week,

