

Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 19 — last in the series

October 21, 2012

This year, 2012, marks the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, which began on October 11, 1962, and closed on December 8, 1965. Throughout the year, we celebrate the Council, and explore its teachings through bulletin inserts, lectures, and a variety of special events. Explore the entire series at the Cathedral website, www.stjames-cathedral.org.

The Council Ends

The Council began to reshape the Church even before the Council ended. When the Fourth Session began, the giant ostrich plumes and the *sedes gestatoria* which had formerly accompanied the entrance of a Pope were no more. Instead, Pope Paul VI walked down the aisle of St. Peter's, carrying a crozier in a visible sign of the collegiality of bishops. And the Fourth Session ended in a way that would have been difficult to imagine when the Council began four years earlier. The concluding ceremonies began on December 4, 1965 with an ecumenical service at St. Paul outside the Walls. It was here, six years before, that Pope John XXIII had declared his intention of summoning a Council. Now, one of Good Pope John's dreams was coming true as Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox united in prayer, sharing scriptures and prayers, psalms and hymns, including "Now thank we all our God." The Pope sat not in a throne but in a simple straight-backed chair, and "he joined in the singing of the hymns and canticles as if this type of service was for him the most natural thing in the world" (Rynne).

During the next three days, Pope Paul VI had private audiences with countless people whose work had supported the Council. He met with the auditors, the chauffeurs, the handymen. He met with the *periti* or experts. He met with many and various groups of Council Fathers. To the Italian bishops he said, "Now that the Council is finished, will everything go back as it was before? Appearances and custom say Yes. But the spirit of the Council says No. Some things, many things, will be new for us all... The period following the Council cannot be one of back-to-normal or the good-old-days. It must be a period of immense labor."

On Tuesday, December 7, the last session of the Council was held. The bishops filed into their tiered seats for the last time, and Pope Paul solemnly promulgated the hard-fought Declaration on Religious Liberty and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*. And then came a moment which for many was the high point of the concluding ceremonies. Pope Paul VI stood with Metropolitan Meliton, representing Patriarch Athenagoras, head of the Orthodox Church, and together they solemnly annulled the sentences of excommunication which had separated East and West for centuries. After receiving the decree, the Patriarch's representative knelt to kiss the Pope's ring; but Paul VI raised him up and embraced him in a kiss of peace. At the very same moment, in Istanbul, a similar ceremony was taking place in the cathedral of Athenagoras I himself, with Cardinal Shehan of Baltimore at the head of a papal delegation. A Protestant observer later said, "if the Church is able to express its regret for the past with such ease and humility, anything is possible."

On December 8, the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the Council formally concluded, with an outdoor Mass in St. Peter's Square.



People were beginning to realize that with the end of the Council, the work had only begun. "There is no doubt in my mind that the Council has been an outstanding success insofar as the achievement of the aims of Pope John XXIII, John the Good, are concerned," wrote Archbishop Connolly in the *Progress*. "It is equally true, of course, that the successful attainment of the Council's aims and purposes will depend to a great extent on you and you and you, on the manner in which you translate into action in your daily lives the decrees and declarations promulgated by the Holy Father as the official law of the Church."

Now, said Pope Paul VI, "there comes the third stage: that of ideas and plans, of acceptance and execution of the conciliar decrees... Discussion is coming to an end, and understanding is beginning. The disturbance wrought by ploughing a field is followed by the well-ordered labors of cultivation... This is the period for the true 'aggiornamento' proclaimed by our predecessor of venerable memory, John XXIII... clergy and faithful will find a magnificent spiritual work to be done for the renewal of life and action according to Christ our Lord."

Looking to the future

The Church throughout the world marks the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council with a special "Year of Faith," which emphasizes the call of every Christian to understand the faith and help to proclaim it by witnesses to Christ in word and in deed. Exploring the documents of the Council and recalling the history of this watershed time in the Church, we realize how far we have come, and how much remains to be done. On October 10, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI said: "The documents of Vatican Council II are, even in our own time, a compass guiding the ship of the Church as she sails on the open seas, amidst tempests or peaceful waves, to reach her destination. [At the Council] I was able to witness the living Church ... which places herself at the school of the Holy Spirit, the true driving force behind the Council. Rarely in history has it been possible, as it was then, to touch almost physically the universality of the Church at a moment of peak fulfillment of her mission to carry the Gospel into all ages and unto the ends of the earth...."

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