

# Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 10 in a series

May 27, 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'll mark this milestone anniversary by celebrating the Council, and exploring its teachings through bulletin inserts, lectures, and a variety of special events.

## Debates on the Nature of the Church

A few months before the Council began in October of 1962, the Bishops received several draft documents (*schema*) to study in preparation for the discussions ahead. The document on the nature of the Church—perhaps the most important document—was not ready in time. The bishops did not receive this key text until November, 1962, and debate began in the last days of that First Session, continuing in the Second and Third Sessions.

The original schema covered a vast amount of terrain: it began with a chapter called “The Nature of the Church Militant,” and included treatment of the episcopacy (the bishops), the religious life, laity, the Magisterium, religious freedom, and ecumenism. Except for a few passages in the chapter on the laity, the document broke no new ground. It continued to present the Catholic Church as coterminous with the Mystical Body of Christ, which had negative implications for ecumenism. And it still emphasized the religious life as primary (if not the only) way to perfection, which still kept the laity decidedly in second place.

The debates on the Council floor raised many questions about this hastily-prepared schema. Bishop De Smedt of Bruges, Belgium, spoke for many of the Council Fathers when he objected to the “triumphalism,” “clericalism,” and “juridicism” of the document. To begin with the image of the Church Militant, with the faithful like soldiers in battle array, was very far, De Smedt argued, from the images Jesus used for the Church: the sheep and the sheepfold. And then, he asked, was the Church really a pyramid? Was it not rather the “People of God,” who together extended Christ’s presence to the world? The whole document, he argued, was imbued with a “legalistic spirit... No mother ever spoke thus.”

Cardinal Suenens, also of Belgium, pointed out that the draft covered too much—it should be divided into two, one *ad intra*, on the Church in itself, and another *ad extra*, on the Church and the world. In fact, the original schema ended up



An Ecumenical Council is a gathering of bishops, but others have a role to play as well. Each bishop could bring with him a *peritus*, or expert, to advise him on the matters under consideration. The *periti* made tremendous contributions to the work of the Council. Pictured above are two who helped shape some of the Council’s key teachings: Father Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, and Yves Congar, OP, the great Dominican theologian whose writings on the nature of the Church have had a profound impact.

being divided into several parts, with the two major constitutions, *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, addressing the nature of the Church and the Church in the world, respectively, and separate documents on relations with people of other religions, especially Jews, ecumenism, and religious liberty. It was also Cardinal Suenens who made the suggestion that the chapters should be reordered, placing “The People of God” ahead of “The Hierarchical Constitution of the Church.”

One of the most contentious issues that emerged was collegiality—the authority of bishops. Did the college of bishops constitute a governing body, with the Pope as its head? The answer might seem obvious—but it wasn’t

so simple. Did Jesus really establish a college of apostles, some asked? Did Christ intend for the apostles to share in the governance of the Church, as well as in its ministry? Would saying *yes* to collegiality mean weakening the authority of the Pope, and therefore threatening the unity of the Church?

The question of collegiality led to some of the sharpest disagreements on the Council floor. Archbishop Connolly wrote home to his *Progress* readers about one such exchange between Cardinal Frings of Cologne and Cardinal Ottaviani, head of the Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith). Cardinal Frings roundly criticized the Holy Office for its outdated and unfair procedures. Cardinal Ottaviani rose to reply. “To use the parlance of the prize ring,” wrote Archbishop Connolly, “the Cardinal had been taking it on the chin so often during the past few weeks that he had reached the limit of his patience. He picked himself up off the canvas; he lashed out at all his critics, swinging freely right and left. In a voice shaking with emotion and pent-up anger, he declared that criticisms of the Holy Office were criticisms of the Pope himself, that the German Cardinal’s words were spoken out of ignorance, if not worse.... It was the hottest exchange yet but of course, such things are to be expected for this council is not a sodality meeting.” Archbishop Connolly added that both Frings and Ottaviani spoke “in pure Ciceronian Latin, without the benefit of any manuscript.”

Through dialogue and debate, though, a consensus began to emerge. In our next issue, we’ll look at some of the key teachings of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

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