

Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 11 in a series

June 10, 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.

Lumen Gentium: Key Teachings

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (known as *Lumen Gentium* because of its opening words: "Christ, the light of peoples") was promulgated on November 21, 1964, at the conclusion of the Third Session, and after much intense debate (see #10 in this series). The document, one of the longest and most important produced by the Council, is *ecclesiological*—that is, it expresses the Church's understanding of itself. What is the Church? Who is the Church? Who belongs to the Church? How does the Church function in God's plan? The Constitution addresses questions like these. Here are some of the key teachings of *Lumen Gentium*.

The mystery of the Church. The Church, the Council Fathers agreed, is like a sacrament, making Christ present in the world, and like a sacrament, it has both earthly and heavenly aspects. The Church on earth and in heaven "form one complex reality which comes together from a human and a divine element" (8). The one Church of Christ "subsists" in the Catholic Church. But that does not mean that there is no goodness or holiness outside of the Church. "Many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines. Since these are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, they are forces impelling towards Catholic unity."

The People of God. In discussing the members of the Church, the Council Fathers voted to begin not with the hierarchical structure of the Church but with the People of God. We are a priestly people, for we all share in the common priesthood of the baptized, and are called to share in the prophetic office—to spread the good news and to intercede for the world. Those baptized in other Christian denominations are "joined in many ways" to the People of God. Even those who do not believe in Christ are close to us, because God is close to them.

Collegiality. The chapter on the hierarchy clarifies the Church's teaching on collegiality—the authority of the body or college of bishops. "The order of bishops is the successor to the college of the apostles in their role as teachers and pastors, and



Council Fathers in session at St. Peter's Basilica

in it the apostolic college is perpetuated. Together with their head, the Supreme Pontiff, and never apart from him, they have supreme and full authority over the universal Church" (22). Peter was the alone the "rock" upon which the Church was built, yet worked in collaboration with the Apostles, who shared in the authority granted by Christ. In the same way, the Pope "has full, supreme and universal power over the whole Church," but the bishops also "exercise their own proper authority for the good of their faithful, indeed even for the good of the whole Church" (22).

The dignity of the laity.

Everyone is called to holiness; everyone has a vocation. While "not

everyone marches along the same path, yet all are called to sanctity and have obtained an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God" (32). The laity, collaborating with the bishops and priests who are their "brothers" (32), build up the Church by using their God-given gifts in the world and in the Church itself.

Mary, Mother of the Church. Instead of dedicating a separate document to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Council Fathers decided to include a chapter on Mary in the Constitution on the Church. This decision emphasized Mary's role within the Church, and pointed to Mary as the model of the Church and of all believers. "In the most Blessed Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle (cf. Eph. 5:27), the faithful still strive to conquer sin and increase in holiness. And so they turn their eyes to Mary who shines forth to the whole community of the elect as the model of virtues" (65). Devotion to Mary should be built on the firm foundation of Scripture, the Fathers of the early Church, the Doctors of the Church, and the liturgy, and should avoid exaggeration, superstition, and error, since these do not lead to true devotion, and also impede ecumenical efforts.

Lumen Gentium was approved on November 21, 1964, by an overwhelming majority of the Council Fathers (only 5 voted against it). Cardinal Avery Dulles has called it "the most imposing achievement of Vatican II." A French commentator at the time of the Council referred to it as the "Magna Carta" of Vatican II, and observed: "the greatest merit of the Constitution is that, far from canonizing the past, or even consecrating the present, it prepares for the future."

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