

# Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 3 in a series

February 5, 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.

## Where did the Council come from?

The Second Vatican Council took the world by surprise, but in hindsight, we can see that the Church had, in a sense, been preparing for it for decades. There had been discussion—and debate—about many of the Council's primary themes for years leading up to the bishops' arrival in Rome in October, 1962.

## The Liturgical Movement

Following the reforms of the Council of Trent, the liturgy remained essentially unchanged for several centuries. But from the middle of the 19th century, there was a growing sense that renewal was needed. A Benedictine, Dom Prosper Guéranger, worked to revive and restore the tradition of Gregorian chant, and established a monastery at Solesmes, France, which became a center for liturgical music and practice. In the early 20th century, what came to be called "the liturgical movement" gathered momentum. There was a surge in liturgical research and experimentation. Scholars like Joseph Jungmann, SJ explored the history of the Roman Rite, showing how the Mass had grown and developed through the centuries. Many advocated *ressourcement* – a "return to the sources," to the roots of Catholic worship and practice. The participation of the people and the use of the vernacular became the keystones of the liturgical movement.

A watershed moment came in 1947 with Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Mediator Dei*, which has been called "the Magna Carta of the liturgical movement." The document touched on many of the major themes which would emerge in the Council's reflections on liturgy, including the presence of Christ in the liturgy, the need for liturgical catechesis, and the active participation of the assembly.

## Ecumenism

Ecumenism—dialogue with Christians of other denominations--was not the invention of the Second Vatican Council. The week of prayer for Christian unity had been observed annually since 1908, and beginning in the 1950s, there was what might be called a "thaw," as Christians of many denominations began to come together in dialogue. In 1952, Bishop Charrière of Switzerland gathered 24 European



theologians for an unprecedented meeting, from which came the "Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions." Several prominent Catholic theologians, including Yves Congar and Karl Rahner, were involved in these annual gatherings, which helped to develop a language and a framework for ecumenical dialogue which in many ways made possible the Second Vatican Council's breakthroughs in this area.

## The Church and the World

The attitude within the Church from the Council of Trent into the 19th century has been described as a "siege mentality." That mentality was understandable: the church seemed to be besieged by change, as the Protestant Reformation was followed by the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution.

While the Church never stopped ministering to the needs of the poor, it was not as comfortable questioning the root causes of the world's problems. That began to change in 1891, with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. It was "the Magna Carta of social Catholicism, the movement that more than any other within the Church gradually forced Catholics out of their medievalism... and inspired them to grapple realistically with the problems of the twentieth century" (Bokenkotter, 331). The Church began to distinguish between the givens of modern life—freedom of the press, freedom of religion, the separation of Church and state—and "Modernism," with its philosophies that were at odds with the Church's teaching. With *Rerum Novarum*, the Church began to look to the root causes of poverty and to advocate for justice and for social reform. The Church began to see itself not as apart from the world, but as a part of it.

Corinna Laughlin, Director of Liturgy

## For further reading

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- Gaillardetz, Richard. *The Church in the Making: Lumen Gentium, Christus Dominus, Orientalium Ecclesiarum*. Paulist Press, 2005.
- Hebblethwaite, Peter. *John XXIII: Pope of the Century*. Continuum, 2000.
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