

# Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 5 in a series

March 4, 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.*

## Preparations for the Council

Where did Pope John's idea for the Council come from? There are several accounts. According to some, John XXIII was thinking about the Council even during the days of the conclave that elected him. John himself later reported that the idea of the Council came to him in a burst of inspiration on January 20, 1959, as he spoke with Cardinal Tardini, the Secretary of State, about the anxieties and troubles of the world. "What should the Church do? Should Christ's mystical barque simply drift along, tossed this way and that by the ebb and flow of the tides? Instead of issuing new warnings, shouldn't she stand out as a beacon of light? What could that exemplary light be?... Suddenly my soul was illumined by a great idea which came precisely at that moment and which I welcomed with ineffable confidence in the divine Teacher. And there sprang to my lips a word that was solemn and committing. My voice uttered it for the first time: a Council."

One thing is certain: Pope John XXIII astonished everyone when he announced the Council on January 25, 1959, just three months after becoming Pope. The occasion he chose was a gathering with the Cardinals for the conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. At the end of the liturgy, the Pope gathered the Cardinals in the adjacent chapter-house. "Trembling with emotion, and yet with humble resolution," he said, "we put before you the proposal of a double celebration: a diocesan synod for Rome and an ecumenical Council for the universal Church." He announced a third project as well – the reform of the Code of Canon Law – and then quietly returned to the Vatican.

What was John's hope for the Council? He did not lay out a specific agenda. Instead, when asked what he expected, it is said that he went to the window, and made a gesture as if to open it. "I expect a little fresh air from it," he said simply. "We must shake off the imperial dust that has accumulated on the throne of St. Peter since Constantine."

By June of 1959, a preparatory commission for the Council had been established. There was much to do, and John was occasionally frustrated at the glacial pace of the



proceedings. ("How many people work in the Vatican, your Holiness?" he was asked. "About half," was his swift reply.) He hoped for a speedy beginning to the Council. When a curial official told him that it would be impossible to convoke the Council in 1963, he replied that it should begin in 1962!

There were several reasons for the slow pace. For one thing, the preparatory commission was enormous, with 800 members. The various subcommittees were headed up by the leaders of the Curia, some of whom were not thoroughly convinced of the need for an ecumenical Council. And then, the careful process took time. Every bishop in the world, along with major Catholic universities and other institutions, received a questionnaire, inviting them to share their thoughts about the Council and the various concerns it might address. More than 75 percent responded, so there were 2,150 responses to sort through (when they were later published, these responses filled 15 volumes). Then, the various subgroups of the commission needed to review all this material and distil it into "schemas," or preparatory documents which would provide a basis for discussion when the bishops finally arrived in Rome.

Slowly but surely, the wheels began to turn. At long last, Rome ready for the Council, and the date for the opening was announced: October 11, 1962.

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*For further reading: Hebblethwaite, Peter. John XXIII: Pope of the Century. Continuum, 2000.*