

Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 6 in a series

March 18, 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.

The Council Opens

The Council opened on October 11, 1962, with a grand procession and ceremonial that lasted more than five hours. "That I should live to see a day such as this!" exclaimed our own Archbishop Connolly, in the account he wired home to the Catholic Northwest Progress that evening. "How good is the good God." A week later he was still talking about it: "Mere words, even the gigantic, colossal, stupendous of Hollywood usage are so inadequate to describe the scene and the experience itself."

Rain early in the morning gave way to glorious sunshine in time for the procession of the Council Fathers (as the participating bishops were called) through St. Peter's Square and into the Basilica. The procession was like nothing the Church had ever seen. More than 2,500 bishops walked six abreast through the crowd of 500,000 who had gathered for the occasion. It became astonishingly clear that the Church was not simply—or even primarily—European. Well over half of the bishops were from North and South America, Asia, and Africa. Nor were all of the Council Fathers Roman Catholic: "Every now and then, the white mass was dotted with the black cassock, full beard, and cylindrical headdress of an oriental bishop, and here and there with the bulbous gold crown and crossed pectoral reliquaries of a bishop of the Byzantine rite" (Rynne). The Church would never see itself the same way again.

Pope John XXIII came last of all, carried aloft on the *sedia gestatoria*. Once inside the Basilica, the Pope descended and intoned the ancient hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*, and all the Fathers joined in, imploring the Holy Spirit's guidance. Mass was said; the Gospel was proclaimed not only in Latin but in Greek as well, as sign of the unity of East and West; and the Litany of Saints was chanted. Then Pope John XXIII delivered his address for the occasion. While many papal addresses (then and now) are composed by other hands, this



John XXIII in the *sedia gestatoria*, October 11, 1962

one was written by the Pope himself, and drafts exist, carefully corrected in John's own handwriting.

"Mother Church rejoices," the Pope began, "because, by a singular gift of divine providence, the desired day has finally dawned.... the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council is being solemnly opened here beside St. Peter's tomb." The Holy Father looked to the glories of the past, the authority and dignity of the Church through the ages—familiar and comfortable territory for his listeners. But then he spoke of the present day. And in spite of all that was happening in the world, he spoke with hope and confidence:

"In the daily exercise of our pastoral office, sometimes (much to our regret) we have to listen to people who... can see nothing but calamities and ruin in these modern times. Comparing our era with previous centuries, they say that we are becoming worse. By their actions they show that they have learned nothing from history, which is the teacher of life.... We feel that we must disagree with these prophets of gloom who are always forecasting disaster, as if the end of the world were imminent. In the present day, Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations. By man's own efforts, and beyond the greatest expectation, we are being directed towards the fulfillment of God's higher and inscrutable designs." The Pope's address, entitled *Toward Christian Unity*, set the tone for the whole Council: hopeful, forward-looking, open to change.

Late that evening, after the events of the day were over and the Council Fathers had gone back to their hotels and residences in preparation for the morrow, a crowd spontaneously gathered in St. Peter's Square, holding lighted candles, singing, and praying. The crowd grew to tens of thousands, and at last Pope John XXIII came to the window and spoke to them. "My dear children, I hear your voices.... It seems that even the moon has hastened here tonight, to behold this scene.... Returning home, find your children. Give them a kiss, and say: 'This kiss is from the Pope.' ... Let us encourage one another: singing, sighing, weeping, but always full of faith in Christ who helps us and listens to us, let us continue on our journey."

Corinna Laughlin, Director of Liturgy