

Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 7 in a series

April 15, 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.

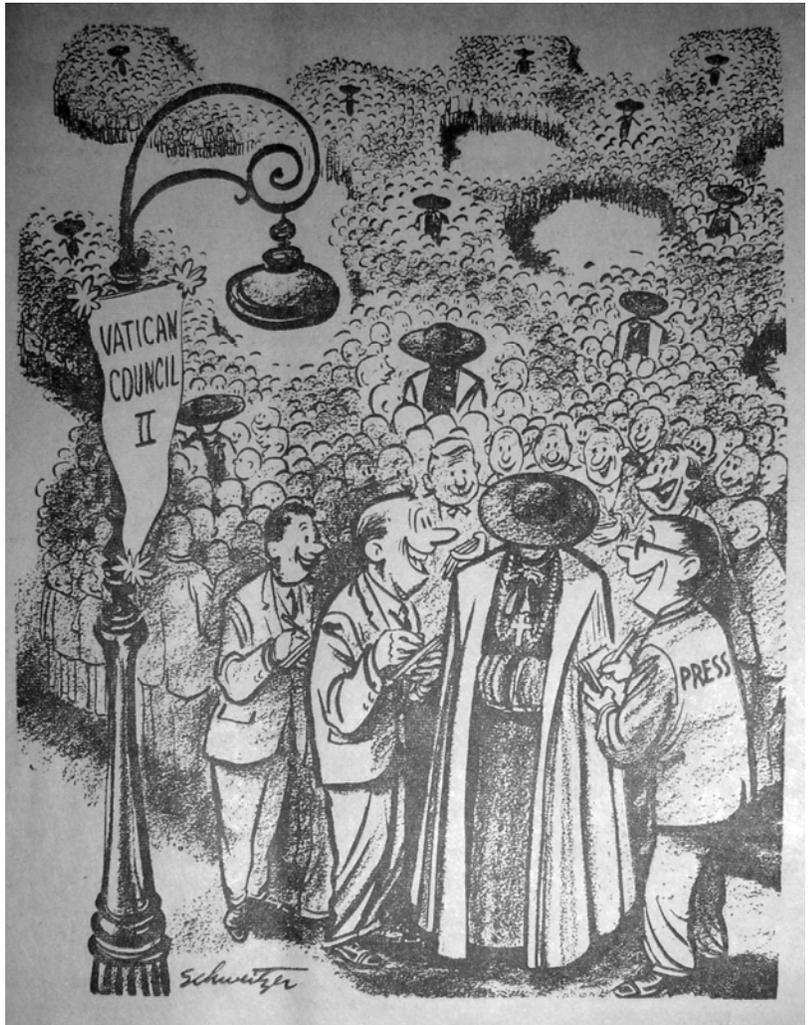
The Council at Work

Following the solemn opening on October 11, 1962, the work of the Council got underway.

What was the day-to-day experience of the Council like? The bishops assembled in St. Peter's Basilica, sitting in bleachers facing each other across the nave. They did not sit with their national groups, but in order of precedence (that is, the date they were ordained bishops), which meant that many new friendships were formed across national and linguistic divides. All the proceedings took place in Latin. The discussion of each topic began with a draft document called a "schema." Any Council Father was free to critique, defend, or comment on any aspect of each schema. At various points, the moderator of the session (the Cardinals took turns) would call for a vote and move the conversation forward.

The Council was not, therefore, a free-form, open-ended discussion, but something more like a parliamentary debate. What is more, everything took place in Latin, which meant that the Bishops had to plan and prepare their "interventions," as their responses were called, well in advance. Even though Latin was the universal language of the Church, the Fathers soon found that Latin as pronounced by a German sounded quite different from Latin as pronounced by an Englishman or a Roman. The American bishops came under particular fire for their Latin accents – and when Cardinal Spellman of New York moderated, he had to employ an interpreter to translate his Latin into Latin!

Liturgy was the first topic the Council tackled, partly because it was thought to be much less controversial than some of the other issues. The Liturgical Movement had been underway for more than fifty years, and liturgical renewal had already begun. In 1947, Pope Pius XII had published *Mediator Dei*, an encyclical on liturgy which anticipated many of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, and in 1955, he had reformed the liturgies of Holy Week, restoring the Holy Thursday Mass and the Easter Vigil to the evening (they had been celebrated in the morning since the Council of Trent). Seattle was on the forefront of the Liturgical Movement. In August of 1962, a national Liturgy Week had



"May we quote your 'no comment'?" (A cartoon from *The Progress*, 1962)

been held at the new Seattle Center, and Catholics filled the Arena for the first Mass on the West Coast facing the people.

The Church was ready for liturgical reform. But that didn't mean that the Council's liturgy debates were easy. Some of the issues that emerged were the use of Latin, communion under both kinds, and the importance of the liturgy in forming and teaching the faithful and seekers alike. In listening to each other and responding to each other, the liturgy schema was revised and enhanced. It would finally be presented for a vote in December, 1963, at the end of the Second Session of the Council. The final document, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, was approved by a landslide: 2,147 bishops voted in favor; only 4 voted against it.

In our next issue, we'll look at some of the key teachings of this Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

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