

# Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 9 in a series

May 13, 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.

## Transition in the Council: From John XXIII to Paul VI

Pope John XXIII had lived the life of a saint; and he died as he had lived. Shortly after the Council began, he received his diagnosis: stomach cancer. And by the spring of 1963, he knew that the doctors could do nothing more for him. But he continued to work, paying visits, receiving guests, and writing his last and greatest encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, in spite of incredible pain ("I feel like St. Lawrence on the grid-iron," he told his secretary).

The Council was never far from his thoughts. At the end of May, he asked all Catholics to pray that "his death would win blessings for the ecumenical council and for the cause of world peace." And on June 3, Pentecost Monday, he uttered his last words, the words of St. Peter to the risen Christ: "Lord, you know that I love you." He breathed his last just as Cardinal Traglia, who was offering Mass at that moment in St. Peter's Square, chanted "Ite, missa est"—*Go, you are sent*.

Rarely had a Pope so thoroughly won the hearts not only of Catholics, but of the entire world. "Good Pope John" was a hard act to follow, to say the least, and when Giovanni Montini, Cardinal of Milan, was elected, feelings were mixed. This thin, rather severe-looking intellectual was clearly no John XXIII. "Ah, yes," lamented Father Shearin in a syndicated column, entitled *In Fairness to Pope Paul*, "we will never have another Pope John. He was 'one in a million' and we will never see his like again. But then God never repeats himself... God gives the world the saints and the popes that the times demand. So we can expect Pope Paul to be different precisely because he will have to meet the new challenge of a new time. He will meet it in his own way and, I am confident, with a degree of success beyond our fairest expectations."

During the Vacancy of the Holy See, all the work of the Council was of course suspended. But those who hoped that the Council might not be reconvened that year, or ever, were destined to be disappointed. Paul VI made it clear from his very first days as Pope that the Council would reconvene as planned, in September of 1963. Then, just a week before the Second Session opened, Paul VI announced that he would reform the



The spirit of Pope John XXIII watches over the second session of the Council. *Progress*, 1963.

Roman Curia. (During the first session, as Cardinal Montini, Paul VI had witnessed firsthand the struggle between the Fathers and the Curia for authority in the Council.) It was clear that the Second Session of the Council—and the new Pope whose vision would guide it—would hold some surprises.

The surprises began with the opening of the session. "There was little of the 'pomp and circumstance' that marked the opening of Act I," Archbishop Connolly wrote home to his faithful readers in the *Catholic Northwest Progress*; "there was no stately procession through the crowded piazza for the Fathers." Instead, they simply assembled in the Basilica. Pope Paul VI was carried to the doors on the *sedia gestatoria*, but then dismounted and walked the length of the nave. The anticipation was intense, for this was the first time most of the Bishops had seen their new Holy Father. "He is a pleasant, kindly looking man slight of stature that was somewhat

accentuated by the voluminous cope that he was wearing," wrote Archbishop Connolly, who sensed that this was a man with "a vast store of energy in reserve."

A more complete contrast to the rotund John XXIII could hardly have been planned. But when the new Pope began his address, the Fathers realized that Paul VI was, after all, a man after John's own heart (little did they know that John had prayed that Cardinal Montini would succeed him!). "O dear and venerated Pope John," Paul VI exclaimed in the course of his opening address, "may gratitude and praise be rendered to you for having resolved—doubtless under divine inspiration—to convoke this council in order to open to the Church new horizons, and to tap the fresh spring water of the doctrine and grace of Christ our Lord and let it flow over the earth."

Most astonishing of all, during his address, the Pope turned deliberately towards the observer-delegates, who represented almost all the world's Christian denominations, and spoke words of hope and apology: "Our voice trembles and our heart beats faster both because of the inexpressible consolation and reasonable hope that their presence stirs up within us, as well as because of the deep sadness we feel at their prolonged separation. If we are in any way to blame for that separation," he went on, "we humbly beg God's forgiveness and ask pardon, too, of our brethren who feel themselves to have been injured by us." The First Vatican Council had defined papal infallibility: the Second witnessed a Pope apologizing for the sins of the Church, its members and its leaders.

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***In the next issue: debates on the nature of the Church.***