

# Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 1 in a series

January 8, 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 remembering the Council, and exploring its teachings through bulletin inserts, lectures, and a variety of special events. This first in a series of bulletin inserts answers some basic questions.

## What is a Council?

The word "council" comes from the Latin *concilium*, which means "gathering" or "assembly." In the Church, a council is a gathering of leaders to address areas of concern in teaching or governance.

The first council, called the "Council of Jerusalem," is described in the Acts of the Apostles. "No little dissension and debate" had arisen because of the question of what to do about Gentile believers (15:2). Some argued that it was not enough to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, but that converts must also be circumcised and thus bound to observe the entire Mosaic Law. But others—Paul among them—argued that baptism in Christ was enough. In order to resolve the issue, Paul and Barnabas went up to Jerusalem, and "the apostles and the presbyters met together to see about this matter" (15:6). After much prayer and debate, they came to an agreement that these new converts did not need to be bound to the Mosaic Law. Together, they wrote a letter proclaiming this decision, which was read to all the churches. They spoke with great authority: "It is the decision of the holy Spirit *and of us*," the Apostles wrote, "not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities" (15:28; emphasis added). Their confidence that the Spirit speaks when the Church gathers in solemn Council remains today. "The infallibility promised to the Church is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter's successor, they exercise the supreme Magisterium, above all in an Ecumenical Council" (*Catechism*, 891).

## What is an ecumenical Council?

When we use the word "ecumenical" in regards to Church matters, we usually think of a gathering of Christians of various denominations. But when we speak of a church council, "ecumenical" means "universal." An "ecumenical" Council is one to which all the bishops of the world are summoned. (The word "ecumenical" comes from a Greek root which basically means "the whole house"! ) While there have been many Church councils through the centuries, there have been only 21 ecumenical Councils.

## What do Councils do?

Just as in the Acts of the Apostles, Councils gather to settle disputes and to reform the Church in areas of teaching and of discipline. While we may not have heard of many of the Councils in Church history (*we'll learn more about them in the next issue*), we experience their fruits every day as we live out our faith. The first councils of Nicaea and Constantinople rejected the heresy of Arianism and wrote the Creed we recite every



Sunday. The Second Council of Nicaea defended the use of Christian images. The Council of Trent published the first catechism and reformed the liturgy. The First Vatican Council defined the dogma of papal infallibility.

## Why is the Second Vatican Council called *Vatican II*?

A Council is traditionally named after the city where it took place. No fewer than five councils are called "Lateran" because they took place at the Lateran Basilica, which until the 14th century was the official residence of the Pope. The most recent Council was called "Vatican" because it took place at St. Peter's in the Vatican, and it was called "Second" or "II" because it was the second ecumenical Council to take place there.

## What was the point of Vatican II?

Most of the Church's 21 ecumenical councils were called at times of crisis, when heresies or scandals were shaking the Church. Vatican II was not like that. Instead, Pope John XXIII convoked the Council because the Church needed "aggiornamento," updating, if it was to respond effectively to the unprecedented challenges of modern times. The Council brought the bishops of the world together to talk about everything from the liturgy and the Scriptures to modern media. "This is the greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council," said Pope John XXIII in his opening address on October 11, 1962: "the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and more efficaciously taught. . . . Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but also to dedicate ourselves whole-heartedly and fearlessly to the task that our era demands of us."

The wisdom of the Council—the wisdom of the Church—was poured out in sixteen documents and, now, in fifty years of lived experience, the fruits of the Council. As we explore the documents and their ongoing legacy during the coming year, we will realize the truth of Cardinal Shehan's words a few weeks after the closing of the Council: "the Council is over; the Council has just begun."

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