

# Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 12 in a series

July 1, 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.

## Human Dignity: The Declaration on Religious Liberty

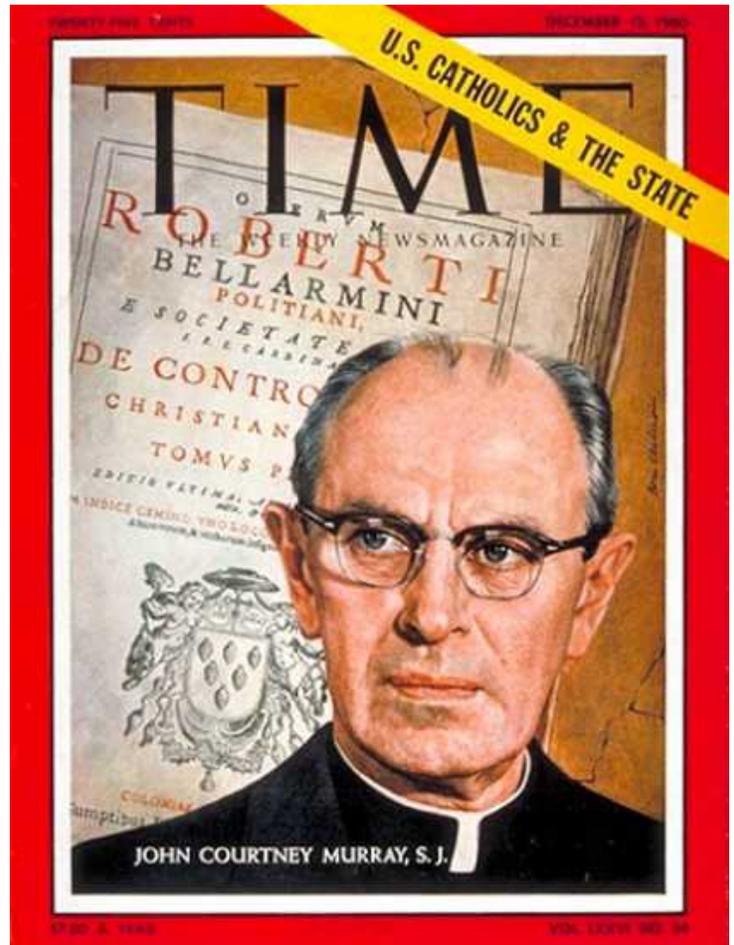
Note: Though the Decree on Religious Liberty was one of the last of the documents to be debated and approved, we are looking at out of sequence because the US bishops have invited all Catholics to reflect on religious liberty during these days leading up to July 4.

The Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*, Human Dignity) was one of the most fiercely debated teachings of the Second Vatican Council, and one of its greatest achievements. Debates on the issue began during the discussion of the document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, but it soon became clear that the Fathers needed additional time for this topic. The chapter was removed from the document on the Church, rewritten, and finally approved overwhelmingly at the beginning of the Fourth Session of the Council (1965).

### What Came Before?

To understand the importance of the decree, it is important to look back at the Church's teaching on religious liberty before the Council. We need to go back as far as the Emperor Constantine! Up until the time of Constantine, the Church was alternately persecuted and ignored by the Roman Emperors. But Constantine tolerated the Christians, and after 313, with the Edict of Milan, gave Christianity privileged status in the Empire. He styled himself "protector of the Church," and convoked several Councils, waged wars against heretics, and generally made it clear that there was one "official" religion in the Empire.

With the Protestant Reformation, that assumption of a church-state identity necessarily changed. With the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 and the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, a new relationship between church and state emerged. One religion (that of the prince or ruler) was given preferred status, but other religions would be tolerated. It was in this environment that the Catholic Church began to develop its teachings on religious liberty more fully. In a nutshell, that teaching was this: Catholicism should be the religion of the state; but in nations where it is not, Catholics must be free to worship. As for other believers – whether Protestant or non-Christian – they do not possess any inherent right to worship as they choose, because they are considered to be in error (and, in the famous phrase, "error has no rights"). Nonetheless, for the sake of peace, they should be tolerated.



The Declaration on Religious Liberty was the great contribution of the American hierarchy to the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Father John Courtney Murray, SJ, was the *peritus* (expert) on religious liberty who helped shape the final decree.

### The American Experience

It was in the atmosphere of the religious wars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that the first Europeans settled in America, many of whom had left Europe to escape religious intolerance and violence. Gradually, a new nation was established far from the shadow of the Edict of Milan. Here, there was to be no state religion, and what was more, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" (Bill of Rights). To the surprise of many, the Roman Catholic Church thrived in the United States under this governmental system which accorded all religions equal status. At the Council, the United States bishops shared this American experience with the universal Church. With the signal contributions of an American *peritus*, Father John Courtney Murray, SJ (who had served as advisor to the first Roman Catholic President, John F. Kennedy!), the Church's teaching on Religious Liberty was gradually formulated.

It produced some of the most contentious moments of debate in the Council, and it was only by the strenuous efforts of some of the leaders among the Council Fathers—especially Cardinal Meyer of Chicago—that the Declaration survived at all. But at last, it passed overwhelmingly and its promulgation on December 7, 1965, has been called “the end of the Constantinian era.”

### What does the Declaration say about religious liberty?

- The Declaration states that every human person—believer or non-believer, Catholic or non-Catholic—has a right to religious freedom and no one should be coerced into religious practice by the state or by anyone else.
- This does not mean that the Church considers all religions to be equal! “We believe that this one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church,” and every person has not only the right, but the duty, to seek the truth. However, “This Vatican Council likewise professes its belief that it is upon the human conscience that these obligations fall and exert their binding force. The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power.”
- Religious freedom is a God-given right; it should be a civil right in every place. And this right extends to every aspect of a person’s public and private life. “This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.”

While none of this sounds very revolutionary to American Catholics, to bishops from other nations it represented a major shift in thinking. Seattle’s own Archbishop, Thomas Connolly, was there, and offered his *Progress* readers a quick



Archbishop Connolly at the Fourth Session of the Second Vatican Council (1965), photographed by his friend (and Council neighbor), Archbishop Espino of Monterrey, Mexico.

summary of the Declaration on Religious Liberty and its impact:

“The Council has repudiated the idea that the power of the State should be used to promote the Catholic religion, if you will.... the verdict on the schema [draft document] was received with enthusiastic approval all over the world.... you should all be immensely proud of the key role that was played in this discussion by our American cardinals and hierarchy. We were not alone, of course, but we spearheaded the campaign for the passage of this historic document and that in the face of more or less bitter opposition from certain die-hard obstructionists....

“Of all freedoms, the freedom of individual conscience to obey its own dictates is unquestionably one of the most important. It is true that it must operate within the proper framework of law and order in an organized society, that it must render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s but it is just as true that our beliefs can wax and wane, as it were, in accordance with their appeal to our minds and hearts, without help or hindrance from the police power of the State. In supporting this contention, the Council did not have to change or weaken a single one of the doctrines of the Church. It simply removed any coercion beyond the moral sanctions which are at the disposal of any organized religious body.

“... Naturally Protestant, Orthodox, and Jewish leaders everywhere together with the observers in attendance at the Council, warmly acclaimed the Council’s stand in behalf of religious liberty, as a landmark in Church history. When the final vote was cast last week in almost unanimous favor of the measure, the observers broke out in spontaneous applause.

“It appears that in some areas of the world, Protestant missionaries have had a difficult time getting started, Spain and in some countries of Latin America, for instance, but it is to be hoped now that all that will end. Would you say that if we can’t hold our own people by the strength of their religious convictions, we deserve to lose them?” (Archbishop Connolly)

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Visit the Cathedral website, [www.stjames-cathedral.org](http://www.stjames-cathedral.org), for more resources on the Church’s teachings on religious liberty.