

Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 15 in a series

August 26, 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 celebrate the Council, and explore its teachings through bulletin inserts, lectures, and a variety of special events. You'll find the entire series at the Cathedral website, www.stjames-cathedral.org.

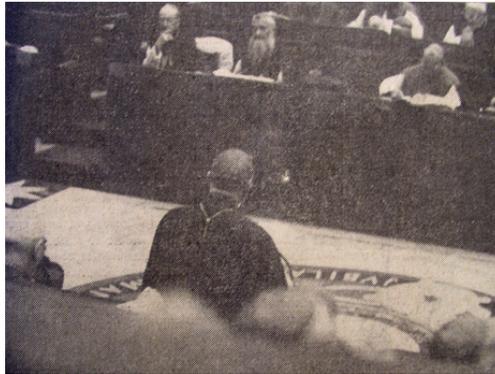
Towards Perfect Love: The Council and Bishops, Priests, and Religious

The broad vision of the Church presented in *Lumen Gentium* called for a new understanding of the Church and how it functions. Before the Council, the Church itself was seen primarily as a hierarchy, quite starkly divided ("There are two kinds of Christians, clerics and lay people," said a 12th-century canonist [quoted in *Keys to the Council*]). But beginning with Pope Pius XII, a new understanding of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ began to emerge. In *Lumen Gentium*, the Church is seen as a mystery. It is, first and foremost, the people of God, one body with many members. Within that body, some are called to special roles of leadership, but all such calls are rooted in the baptismal priesthood shared by all. The roles of bishop, priest, and consecrated religious remain an essential part of the Church. Each of these callings would, however, need to be revisited in light of the Council's move towards renewal, reform, and *aggiornamento*. That happened in four documents related to bishops, priests, and religious.

Bishops: Successors to the Apostles

Christus Dominus, the Decree on Bishops, generated the most intense debate because of the teaching on collegiality, which stated that bishops were called to lead the Church, together with the Bishop of Rome—the Pope. "By divine institution and by virtue of their apostolic office, all of them jointly are responsible for the Church" (6). The teaching was controversial not because it threatened the Pope—it was always clear that the Pope remained the Supreme Pontiff—but because it threatened the long-held sway of the Roman Curia. The Decree on Bishops also called for the creation of a Synod of Bishops, so that the Pope could consult and hear from representatives of the entire college of bishops on an ongoing basis. And it called for the reform of the curia, which should be restructured and revisited in light of its true function—to support the bishops and to serve the Church.

In addition to these areas of reform, the Decree on Bishops emphasizes the pastoral role of Bishops who, as successors to the Apostles, are called to be spiritual leaders not only to their priests and to the religious within the diocese, but to the entire flock entrusted to them. They are to encourage the active involvement of the laity and to use every means at their disposal—including "social research" (16), to stay abreast of the situation and needs of the flock. They have a special responsibility also for those in their diocese who are not Catholic, and are called to form friendly and fruitful ties with non-Catholics as well as Catholics.



Seattle's own Archbishop Connolly addresses the Council during the debate on the Decree on Priestly Ministry, 1965.

On Priestly Ministry and Formation

Edward Hahnenberg observes that the title of the document on priests went through a number of changes. From *De Clericis* (on clerics) to *De Sacerdotibus* (on priests) to *De Presbyterorum Ministerio et Vita* (On the Ministry and Life of Presbyters). The change is significant: the Latin word *sacerdos* means, literally, one who offers a sacrifice, and emphasizes the ritual role of the priest as dispenser of the sacraments. The word *presbyter*, on the other hand, comes from a Greek word meaning "elder." The change shows a

subtle but significant shift, emphasizing the priest's role of leadership within the Christian community. While the priest is set apart, he is set apart only in order better to serve the faithful. "The priests of the New Testament are, it is true, by their vocation to ordination, set apart in some way in the midst of the People of God, but this is not in order that they should be separated from that people or from any person, but that they should be completely consecrated to the task for which God chooses them. They could not be the servants of Christ unless they were witnesses and dispensers of a life other than that of this earth. On the other hand, they would be powerless to serve people if they remained aloof from their life and circumstances" (3).

In order to realize this new vision of the priest as a servant leader in the midst of the People of God, a new kind of seminary education was necessary. The document on priestly formation, *Optatam Totius*, called for a healthy, integrated approach to preparation for ministry.

To the Sources of Religious Life

The renewal of religious life (like that of so many other areas addressed by the Council) started well before the Council. In the 1940s, there was a movement towards increased education for women religious, who began to pursue advanced degrees in order better to serve the needs of their communities. In the 1950s, Pope Pius XII encouraged the formation of new religious congregations, and the adaptation of existing ones, to meet the challenges of the present day. These trends helped shape the Council's decree on religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*.

Religious life, the document says, is, like all other vocations in the Church, rooted in baptism. (This is the reason many religious sisters and brothers returned to the use of their baptismal name, rather than the name given them in religious life, as the Council's decrees were implemented.) Two key themes intertwine in the document: adaptation to modern times, and return to the sources. The two are connected. Religious communities of both men and women were urged to rediscover the *charism*, the special spiritual gift, of their founder, and to adapt their mode of life to best live out that charism in the present day. This resulted in changes not only in externals like the use of the habit, but in even more dramatic internal changes, especially in how the communities govern themselves.

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