

# Events at the Second Vatican Council

by Christopher McMahon

Any account of the achievement of Vatican II has to include at least a brief narrative of the events that took place at the council. After all, Vatican II is not simply a set of documents. The documents produced by the council can only be properly understood when read against the backdrop of the discussions and controversies at the council sessions. The following brief overview of the sessions is provided so that the reader might better understand the significance of two of the major documents: *Lumen gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) and *Gaudium et spes* (The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World). If the council was primarily about the Church, then the council sessions themselves give a sense of how at least some of the most important parts of the Church operated.<sup>1</sup>

## Key Dates in Preparations for the Council (1959–1960)

October 28, 1958—Giovanni Giuseppe Angelo Roncalli, Cardinal Archbishop of Venice, elected as Pope John XXIII

January 25, 1959—Announcement of the Council (Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls)

February 5, 1959—Formation of the Pre-Preparatory Commission, made up entirely of Roman officials and placed under the leadership of the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Tardini

June 5, 1960—Formation of the Central Preparatory Commission along with the ten commissions that would handle the different thematic issues identified by the Pre-Preparatory Commission

December 25, 1961—Formal convocation of the Council (*Humanae salutis*)

February 2, 1962—Closing of the formal preparatory phase and marking October 11, 1962, as the opening of the council

## The Plan for Order at the Council

There was no real template for running a council. Consensus demanded that the procedures of Vatican I be used as a model, but over time and in the course of deliberations, this model would prove clumsy. A general outline of the council's working structure looked like this:

**Plenary sessions** (Saint Peter's Basilica) would meet in the mornings; Mass would be celebrated, and the council fathers would discuss issues related to the work of the commissions.

**Working groups** (off site), or commissions, would draft documents to reflect the wishes of the council fathers as expressed in plenary sessions.

**Solemn Sessions** (Saint Peter's Basilica) would be when votes were cast on the documents. Council fathers could vote *placet* (approve), *non placet* (reject), or *placet iuxta modum* (conditionally approve). To pass, documents required a two-thirds majority vote from the fathers.



**Council of Presidents** (at first, ten cardinals and then later twelve), assisted by a general secretary, headed each of the commissions. These were designated by the pope, who would then select eight bishops for the commission while the council fathers would elect the sixteen other members from among their numbers.

**Periti**, or theological experts, were also selected to assist the commissions with their work. *Periti* (such as Joseph Ratzinger, Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, John Courtney Murray) could not vote, though they exerted considerable influence.

**Observers** from Protestant and Orthodox churches were invited to witness the council proceedings, but their influence and participation in the deliberations were obvious if unofficial. Additionally, after the first session, several representatives of women's religious communities and laywomen attended the council as "auditors" and made significant contributions to the discussions. Only one layperson was ever allowed to address the assembly of bishops. Patrick Keegan addressed the bishops on the connection between the schema on the Church and the working document on the laity.

## Key Developments in Preparations for the Council (1959–1960)

The announcement of the council was a total surprise to the Roman Curia as well as the rest of the world. So much was this the case that official journals managed to ignore the announcement for the better part of 1959. It was apparent that the need for a general or ecumenical council was not recognized by most of the Vatican bureaucracy.

The struggle for the council began almost immediately. Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani headed the Holy Office (the office responsible for enforcing doctrine), and he vied with several others, especially Augustin Cardinal Bea of the newly formed Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, for influence in setting the agenda and outlook of the council. Ottaviani wanted a doctrinal council and prepared several texts that reflected this concern, including a new formula for the Profession of Faith, and documents on the deposit of faith, the moral order, the social order, the Blessed Mother, and on marriage, family, and virginity.

Secrecy during the preparatory proceedings had a negative impact on the preparations for the council. The famous French Dominican theologian, Yves Congar, who was part of this work, would later remark that because the Roman theologians and bishops knew one another, they could freely speak about the preparatory work with one another, while those who were not part of the Vatican bureaucracy were left in a cloud of secrecy and silence. They could speak freely to no one, and the upshot was a "Roman" preparation for the council.

During this period, Pope John XXIII ensured that three features of the council began to materialize: (1) the council was to be ecumenical but was not to be dominated by the issue of Christian unity; (2) the council was to privilege a pastoral (rather than a dogmatic or doctrinal) approach to topics; (3) the council was to operate in freedom as a deliberative body (it was not to be dominated or controlled by the Roman Curia or the pope).



## The First Session (Autumn 1962)

The preparatory period had been marked by attempts to control the council's agenda. The Doctrinal Commission, in particular, exercised a kind of hegemony over the other commissions, and its head, Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani, the Prefect of the Holy Office, wielded enormous power. The documents prepared for the bishops reflected the Doctrinal Commission's concern to complete the agenda of Vatican I, that is, they wanted to offer an ecclesiology that would complement *Pastor aeternis* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ). To the extent that the Doctrinal Commission was able, it subsumed the pope's concerns about addressing the modern world in a series of polemical documents that often reaffirmed the triumphalism and antagonism that was consistent with the Modernist crisis. When the agenda had been crafted and presented to the council fathers, there was alarm, and a revolt began to unfold against the Doctrinal Commission and the Holy Office.

Pope John XXIII's opening remarks set the tone for the council's work in the first session.<sup>2</sup> As the pope stood in St. Peter's Basilica, surrounded by his closest advisors and by members of the Curia who had constructed the documents that the council fathers were preparing to discuss, he issued a dramatic rebuttal of the "prophets of doom." These prophets were those who held on tenaciously to the rhetoric of apocalyptic confrontation with the modern world. The pope's agenda of "updating," or *aggiornamento*, was under attack in the preparations for the council, and the pope was determined to ensure that the council would not simply renew the acrimonious relationship with the modern world enshrined in documents such as Pius X's *Pascendi dominici gregis* (Syllabus Condemning the Errors of Modernists). It was clear that the pope wanted the council to function as a deliberative—not merely as a consultative—body. His vision for the council was put to the test almost immediately.

At the council's first working session, on October 13, 1962, two days after its ceremonial opening, plans were made to take an immediate vote to establish the commissions that would work through the various documents the council would produce. However, Cardinal Frings (Germany) and Cardinal Liénart (France), two prominent members of the College of Cardinals, intervened in order to postpone the vote.<sup>3</sup> They believed that the bishops who gathered for the council had not had sufficient time to get to know one another and to discuss the issues at hand in order for the council to function as the pope seemed to have indicated. The vote to establish commissions at this point would have forced the majority of the bishops present simply to vote for those bishops who had been part of the various preparatory commissions. If that was to be the case, then what need was there for a council? The documents of the preparatory commissions would have remained largely intact. The intervention of Liénart and Frings was successful, and the eventual vote for the commission represented a blend of preparatory commission members and other council fathers.

As the council began, it became apparent that virtually none of the draft documents could serve as adequate bases for preliminary discussion and debate. The only exception was the document on the liturgy. The reform of the liturgy had been under way for a century, and all agreed that further reformation was needed.<sup>4</sup> The draft document was approved as the basis for further (contentious) discussion. As for the other documents, they had to be completely redrafted. Though there appeared to be general agreement on the inadequacy of the draft documents, there was no unanimity on what the council should say; and so the council truly became a deliberative body, with bishops and their theological advisors seeking to influence and cajole one another.

Although some council fathers had hoped that only one session would be needed, the events that took place in the autumn of 1962 indicated that new draft documents were required, and this work was undertaken that winter and in the spring of 1963. The discussions at the council became the basis for creating new draft documents, and these documents would then be circulated in preparation for the next



session of the council, scheduled for October 1963. The work of these commissions was accompanied by the death of John XXIII and the election of his successor, Cardinal Montini of Milan, who took the name Paul VI.

Unlike his predecessor, the new pope had been a Vatican insider for years, having served in the Vatican diplomatic corps for a significant part of his career. He had been sent to Milan (he had fallen out of favor with Pius XII) but was now returning to the Roman Curia, which was now reeling from the events that had unfolded in the years leading up to the council and from the actions undertaken by the council itself.<sup>5</sup> Paul VI entered his pontificate with the expressed intention to see the council through to its conclusion, but his manner of dealing with the council would differ, in many ways, from that of his predecessor.

In the interim period, Paul VI undertook a reform of the council's administration. Under John XXIII, the procedures of the council were often chaotic and slow, and thus frustrating (until this time, bishops had been accustomed to acting merely as an advisory group rather than a deliberative body). The Curia tended to manage the operations of the council, and they were not prepared to move as swiftly as many in the majority had hoped. The majority of council fathers, for their part, were not unified or well organized. Paul VI tried to balance the needs of both the majority and the minority in an effort to create procedures that would facilitate debate and that would focus the work of the council. Generally his efforts were viewed as successful.

## The Second Session (Autumn 1963)

The new draft document on the Church was the focal point of the council's work in the second session. The original draft of the document had been rejected at the first session due to its triumphalistic tone and overwhelming focus on church governance. The Theological Commission, which had been reformed in the course of the council, assigned Jesuit theologian Gérard Philips to construct a new draft of the document on the Church, one that would reflect the concerns expressed by the council fathers at the first session.

Some of the main issues raised by the new document included papal authority and the collegiality of bishops. The emphasis on papal power and papal jurisdiction that had preoccupied the Church since the Middle Ages was also the focal point of the First Vatican Council. The new draft document, however, seemed to signal a modest retreat from this emphasis by stressing the role and authority of bishops in the Church.

A common assumption had animated a rather limited understanding of the role of bishops in the Church. For some, a bishop, in many ways, was simply a priest with a larger area of jurisdiction. A bishop received this jurisdiction from the pope and was essentially the pope's delegate, administering a diocese on behalf of the pope, who had the real power and authority. At the second session of the council, the fathers determined that bishops were really ordained, not simply appointed, and that they had their own charism or power as a result. Moreover, bishops formed part of a body, a college, comprised of all the bishops in the world. As part of this college, bishops were to teach and govern in union with their brother bishops, not simply follow orders from Rome. It was this emphasis on collegiality that alarmed many in the minority at the council, for they saw such an idea as a form of conciliarism, an attempt to circumscribe the power and authority of the papacy with that of the bishops.

The second session of the council dealt with other important issues. In particular, the order of topics to be covered in the document on the Church was revised. The discussion of the hierarchy was moved from the second to the third topic, after a discussion of the "People of God." Such a move signaled an important change in ecclesiology, a shift away from the emphasis placed on hierarchy and governance, to a more participatory understanding of the Church. Additionally, the second session saw the approval and



promulgation of the *Sacrosanctum concilium* (Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy) that would rapidly lead to a complete overhaul of the Mass.

In all, the second session witnessed greater progress in the council's agenda. However, the continuation of the council into a third session was disappointing to many council fathers. The pace of the discussions was still slow, and the results of the council's work were seen as thin in comparison to the enthusiasm and energy the council seemed to generate. During the second interim period in the winter of 1963 and the spring of 1964, more revisions were made to the document on the Church as well as on a number of other documents. Additionally, more revisions were made to the working procedures for the council that seemed to speed the pace of the council's work, though nothing could have helped prepare the council fathers for the events of the third session.

## The Third Session (Autumn 1964)

The third session opened with an overwhelming agenda. It was strongly hoped that this third session would be the council's last. However, discussions and deliberations on a number of contentious issues at the heart of the council's agenda remained. There were many successes during the third session, but these successes were accompanied by what some might regard as failures.

Among the most controversial topics was the question of the Church's relationship to the modern secular state. Since the time of Gregory XVI and his condemnation of the principles of modern liberal democracy in *Mirari vos*, 1832, the Church had taken a dim view of the so-called indifferentism of the state. Popes continued to insist that the state had an obligation to promote the Catholic faith and to secure the rights of the Church in the laws enacted by the state. The state could not simply remain indifferent to religious questions; it had an obligation under divine law to promote the truth and to destroy evil and error. Within this context, it had become axiomatic to declare, "error has no rights." It was possible, however, for Catholics to agree to a kind of separation of Church and state and to accept religious freedom if the Catholic Church was a small minority and the nation had no history of association with the faith. In this instance religious freedom would be the lesser evil in comparison to the alternative.

As a result of such thinking, many European bishops and theologians had difficulty with the question of religious freedom, and it was left to an American Jesuit to play the decisive role in revising Catholic teaching on religious freedom; his name was John Courtney Murray. Before the council, Murray had been censured by the Vatican for his writings on religious liberty and was kept away from the council by several prominent Church officials. Yet, Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York eventually had Murray appointed as his theologian advisor, a *peritus*, and it was in this capacity that Murray made some of the most important contributions to the council.

Murray's work on the question of religious liberty caused quite a stir at the council. His approach seemed like a complete reversal of Catholic teaching on the question—before the council, religious liberty was viewed as an evil, and after the council, it would be viewed as a good. How does one reconcile such an apparent reversal with the continuity of past teachings? The question seemed to be at the heart of so much of the controversy about religious liberty. However, this was not the only controversy unfolding during the third session.

The week of November 14–21 became known as the Black Week, because it witnessed three interventions that shaped the drama of the council in the minds of many participants and observers.<sup>6</sup> The first intervention came from the Theological Commission at the behest of the pope. The Commission had inserted a note into the document on the Church that addressed the issue of episcopal collegiality. To some of the more conservative bishops, the notion of collegiality was dangerously reminiscent of the conciliarist position (revived as Gallicanism in France in the nineteenth century) from the later medieval



and early modern periods. The note reinforced the primacy of the pope in relation to the bishops and circumscribed the collegiality of the bishops with the power of the pope. Although the concerns of the note were addressed in the third chapter in the document on the Church, the note was introduced on behalf of the minority in an effort to secure the widest possible approval of the document as it was presented to the council for a vote. The second intervention came from the Council of Presidents, a group of cardinals whose role had been sharply reduced at the council. They announced that the vote on the document on religious freedom was not going to take place, much to the dismay of the council fathers. The allegation was that recent revisions to the document were so substantial that the document had to be debated and discussed more. The third intervention that defined the Black Week came from the pope himself. He had made some twenty modifications to the document on ecumenism (the relationship between various Christian churches) without allowing time for discussion of the document.

This last week of the third session, the Black Week, epitomized the council in many ways. The council was a contentious meeting; there were battles, maneuverings, and procedural stunts, which is not uncommon. Church councils have always been lively and unwieldy events. Perhaps this is the reason they are held so seldom—participants do not necessarily know how they will all work out in the end. Although the third session was marked by significant controversy, it also heralded several important achievements, including the promulgation of the *Lumen gentium* and the *Unitatis redintegratio* (Decree on Ecumenism).

## The Fourth Session (Autumn 1965)

The period before the fourth session saw the implementation of the initial reforms of the liturgy. Contrary to popular belief, many of the changes to the liturgy were not mandated by *Sacrosantum concilium*; rather, the constitution had enumerated several principles for the reform of the liturgy, and the Consilium (a group of liturgical scholars gathered by the pope) was charged with the actual implementation of those principles in the reform of the liturgy. The Consilium had established March 7, 1965, as the date for the inauguration of the new rite for the celebration of the Mass, and for most of the faithful, this was the most tangible sign of the council's work. The achievement of the council was beginning to hit home, with the implementation of the liturgical reforms in local parishes, even before the council itself had been concluded.

The interim period between the third and fourth sessions of the council also witnessed significant developments in the Church's relationship to the modern world. The positive attitude emphasized by John XXIII had carried great momentum at the council, yet many still feared the modern world and its implicit, and sometimes explicit, challenge to Church teaching and authority. As the draft of "Schema XIII" (the name given to the document that would later become *Gaudium et spes*) was being improved, questions related to the Church's teaching on religious freedom, ecumenism, and religious pluralism continued to cause a stir among council fathers. In the end, several important documents were being edited and voted upon as the final session of the council came to a close: *Dignitatis humanae* (Decree on Religious Liberty), *Nostra aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), *Dei verbum*, as well as *Gaudium et spes*.

The question of religious freedom was simmering between the third and fourth sessions (Nov. 1964–Sept. 1965), and this issue became increasingly bound with the issues of religious pluralism and the relationship between the Church and the modern world. At the fourth session, debates on the documents relating to these issues concluded amid much controversy. Many council fathers viewed the move to embrace religious freedom and a broad ecumenism as a repudiation of Church teaching. In fact, some of the so-called traditionalist Catholics (many of whom were followers of the Swiss Bishop Marcel Lefebvre) separated from the Catholic Church because they viewed this change as highly problematic at best and heretical at worst. Though by no means a majority at the council, the traditionalists made the debates



around the issues related to religious freedom and ecumenism extremely contentious. Additionally, the document on non-Christian religions remained controversial because it seemed to some council fathers that the missionary obligation of the Church was being attenuated.

*Dei verbum* also occasioned much debate because it sought to understand revelation in the context of human history, which struck many conservative council fathers as a tendency of Modernism. Of particular significance in this document was its account of tradition and its development. The Catholic Church teaches that Sacred Tradition emerges over the course of history in conjunction with Scripture. Scripture and tradition do not form two separate “fonts” of revelation, as earlier drafts of the document suggested. Rather, divine revelation, accomplished definitively in Christ, unfolds in the course of human history through the intersection of the apostolic preaching, the witness of sacred Scripture, and the emerging sense of the faithful. Such an account of revelation is intimately tied with an understanding of the Catholic Church that is at once hierarchical, communal, and historical. This represented a significant departure from the approach to revelation that seemed to become enshrined at the First Vatican Council and in the theological manuals and textbooks throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The fourth session brought the council to a close on Dec. 8, 1965, and it also brought a sigh of relief to its participants. The arduous work, the endless debates, the difficulties posed by bureaucracy, and the inexperience of the council fathers in deliberative situations helped to make the council much longer than anyone had anticipated. The conclusion of the council moved the debates out of Rome and into the world where the laity would be crucial to the real work of Church updating and reform.

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<sup>1</sup> For most of what follows see Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, trans. M. Sherry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006). This is a highly abridged version of Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, eds., *History of Vatican II*, 5 vols. (Leuven: Peeters / Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995–2006).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–23.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> For a complete description of the events of the Black Week, see Luis Antonio G. Tangle, “The ‘Black Week’ of Vatican II (November 14–21, 1964),” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4, 387–452.

