

# **AGGIORNAMENTO AS HEALING**

## **Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of Vatican II**

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**I**N 1959 POPE JOHN XXIII stunned the world when, after being Pope for only ninety days, he announced his plan to convoke the Second Vatican Council (only the twenty-first ecumenical council in the history of the Church). Such a dramatic event was not at all expected from the elderly Pope John. Yet he recognised the serious need for renewal in the Church, and so made his call to begin the process of *aggiornamento* ('updating'). Many aspects of life in the Church needed to be modernised and deep divisions needed to be healed. As the commemoration of Vatican II's fiftieth anniversary continues, looking back on these divisions and on how the council's documents brought reform and new life offers insight and encouragement for today's Church.

### **Earlier Councils**

Roman Catholicism in 1959 was still profoundly shaped by an earlier gathering of all the bishops of the Church, the Council of Trent (1545–1563). The sixteenth century was, of course, a time of great upheaval in the Church. Martin Luther, John Calvin and others began reforms that eventually led to the splintering of Christianity. It was a time of serious abuses, necessary reforms, regional politics and bitter polemics.

The Council of Trent provided an urgently needed response, one that was very effective in renewing the life of the Church. Trent took a firm and clear stance on such issues as justification and the sacraments; it strengthened the role of the Pope and bishops, and began measures to improve the education of clergy; it reformed and unified the celebration of the Mass and introduced catechisms for the education of the people.

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*John XXIII at Vatican II*

The Church paid a high price for Trent's rigorous reform, however. The response, while clear, was also very defensive and authoritarian; its polemics did not allow any acknowledgement of the Protestant reformers' valid insights. Trent chose to restructure the Church according to a medieval model: papal supremacy, absolute control of the diocese by the bishop, no lay participation in administration. The council also failed to restore people's participation in the Mass; Latin was maintained and the vernacular prohibited (one of Luther's reforms had been to translate the Bible into the language of the people).

Trent brought renewal to many areas of Church life: spiritual, intellectual, cultural and missionary. But, because of the negative elements, the reform of Trent gradually slipped into a rigid form of religion. More and more, Roman Catholicism reacted defensively to the growth of the modern world. The next ecumenical council, Vatican I (1869–1870), reinforced these authoritarian and reactionary elements.<sup>1</sup>

### ***The Spirit of Blessed John XXIII***

What was energizing and renewing in the 1500s had become oppressive by the 1900s. So John XXIII opened the windows for some fresh air. His opening address to Vatican II set the tone for the council, calling not for condemnations but for patience and openness, acknowledging not only the errors but also the opportunities of the time, disagreeing with the prophets of gloom and offering an optimistic and pastoral view of the Church and the world. John also got down to basics. He affirmed that with Christ there is goodness, order and peace. The fundamental concern for the council, therefore, became the effective proclamation of the

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, revised and expanded edn (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 214–228, 276–294.

Christian truth for the twentieth century. John stressed both authentic faithfulness to the tradition and the need to find appropriate expressions of that tradition in the modern world.<sup>2</sup>

With remarkable dedication, and sometimes intense disagreement, the council responded to John's challenge.<sup>3</sup> Meeting in four sessions between 1962 and 1965, Vatican II produced sixteen documents and a renewed vision of Roman Catholicism. One way to view this renewal and reform is to consider three major divisions that the council began to heal: the division within Roman Catholicism itself, the division between Roman Catholicism and other religions and Christian denominations, and the division between Roman Catholicism and the world.

### ***Healing within the Church***

Vatican II both reflected and addressed the differences within the Church. Although there is an uneven quality to the documents, three deserve attention here: the documents on revelation, liturgy and—most important—the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*).

The development of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei verbum*) demonstrates well the progressive mentality of Vatican II. The original draft, written by a pre-council commission, emphasized traditional formulas in a defensive and negative tone. After spirited debate, the document was rejected by a majority of the council members and returned by John XXIII to a new commission for complete rewriting. This work made use of a 1964 Instruction of the Roman Pontifical Biblical Commission, 'The Historical Truth of the Gospels'. The Instruction stresses that attention be paid to the three stages that are part of the process of the formation of the Gospels: '(1) the ministry of Jesus, (2) the preaching of the apostles and (3) the writing by the evangelists'.<sup>4</sup>

The new version of the Constitution on Divine Revelation then, finally approved in the last session of the council, relies on modern biblical and historical research. The document emphasizes that revelation is God's gracious self-manifestation. Saying 'yes' to this personal encounter with God is faith. This experience is handed on orally (tradition) and in writing

<sup>2</sup> 'Pope John's Opening Speech to the Council', in *The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter M. Abbott (New York: America, 1966), 710–719.

<sup>3</sup> John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard UP, 2008), 5–8 and throughout.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Brown, *Reading the Gospels with the Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 10. This book's first two chapters offer excellent insights—in a very readable fashion—into the interpretation and adaptation contained in the Gospels.

(scripture). Both scripture and tradition, of course, must be transmitted by a living community which preserves and re-expresses their meaning, applying them to new situations. The renewed understanding of the Bible, along with the emphasis on it, in this document on revelation provides the basis for an inner renewal of the whole Church.

The document that probably had the most immediate and visible impact on the Church was the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum concilium*). This document, based on the vast research and scholarship of a number of liturgical pioneers, led to a major revision of the Mass. Worship would no longer appear to be just the action of a priest, back turned to the people, speaking in a language most did not understand. The reformed liturgy would focus on community worship through the participation of the people, use of the vernacular and renewed emphasis on the scriptures.

In the restoration and development of the sacred liturgy the full and active participation by all the people is the paramount concern, for it is the primary, indeed the indispensable source, from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Although not all the changes were introduced as well as they might have been, the renewal of the liturgy began to heal the split between clergy and laity in the most important religious experience of everyday Christian living.

The significance of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church cannot be stressed enough.

Vatican II was a council of the church, for the church and about the church. And nowhere is the church's own self-understanding—its sense of itself, its nature and its purpose—laid out as clearly as in *Lumen gentium*.<sup>6</sup>

Like the document on revelation, *Lumen gentium* was also drastically revised. Again, a first draft was rejected and followed by a new document that was more biblical, historical and dynamic. By re-imaging the Church as the 'people of God', this final version radically changed its self-understanding. It marked the beginning of the healing of deep divisions within the Church.

<sup>5</sup> *Sacrosanctum concilium*, n. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Edward P. Hahnenberg, *A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II* (Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger, 2007), 37; see also 38–55.

One of these divisions was another kind of separation between clergy and laity. The document on the Church stressed the dignity and responsibilities of the laity and set aside the purely hierarchical point of view. Authority was now to be viewed in terms of service. An entire chapter of the document is devoted to the laity. But even more important, its basic image of the Church as the 'new people of God' clearly emphasizes the human and communal nature of the Church rather than its institutional and hierarchical dimensions. Indeed, it stresses the fundamental equality of all in terms of vocation, dignity and commitment.

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The chosen people of God is, therefore, one; 'one Lord, one faith, one Baptism' (Ephesians 4:5); there is a common dignity of members deriving from their rebirth in Christ, a common grace as sons and daughters, a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope and undivided charity .... In the church not everyone walks along the same path, yet all are called to holiness and have obtained an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God.<sup>7</sup>

A second division within the Church was between bishops and Pope. Vatican I had just completed its work on the papacy when Rome was invaded.<sup>8</sup> It ended, therefore, without being able to discuss the rest of the Church. In its document on the Church, especially given its discussion of collegiality, Vatican II balanced the earlier council. Vatican II states that all the bishops make up a stable body of people (a 'college') that is collectively responsible for the entire Church. The Pope acts as head of this college. That is, the supreme authority in the Church is all the bishops together with and under the Pope.<sup>9</sup> This union of the primacy of the Pope and the authority of the episcopal college begins a new and sometimes tense era in the understanding of church authority.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Healing between Catholicism and Other Religions***

The second major division that Vatican II addressed was that between the Roman Catholic Church and other religions and Christian denominations.

<sup>7</sup> *Lumen gentium*, n. 32; see also nn. 39–42.

<sup>8</sup> After most of Italy was unified, Rome had remained under the control of the Pope, supported by the French empire. In 1870, after the French forces were called back to France during the Franco-Prussian war, the Italian army took Rome.

<sup>9</sup> *Lumen gentium*, nn. 22–23.

<sup>10</sup> O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 180–185, 302–305.



The Constitution on the Church takes ecumenical tensions and opportunities very seriously, and provides the foundation for a dialogue that continues in more detail in several documents, including those on ecumenism, non-Christian religions and religious freedom.<sup>11</sup>

In the decree on ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*), Vatican II significantly changes the Church's position in relation to non-Catholic Christian communities. It treats them with respect, and tries to understand and present their positions fairly. It states that the Spirit is at work in these communities, that they are part of the mystery of salvation.

Moreover, some, even very many, of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements.<sup>12</sup>

An important implication here is Vatican II's acknowledgement that Christianity is not limited to Roman Catholicism. The polemics of Trent, with its condemnations of heretics, are replaced by reaching out to the

<sup>11</sup> 'This church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines.' (*Lumen gentium*, n. 8; see also Hahnenberg, *Concise Guide*, 41–42.)

<sup>12</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 3.

‘separated brethren’. Instead of dogmatically insisting on a Protestant return to Rome as the only possible path to unity, the document expresses concern that *all* parties pray and work for the restoration of unity.

Although brief, the declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions (*Nostra aetate*) expresses a remarkable change, highlighting the positive contributions and qualities of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism (which receives special attention). Other religions are included in a more general way. The Council declares that:

The Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women.<sup>13</sup>

The declaration ends with a strong rejection of all forms of discrimination or harassment based on race or religion.

Another dramatic breakthrough occurs in the declaration on religious liberty (*Dignitatis humanae*). The classical Catholic position, as expressed in the 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*, at best tolerated other religions and claimed preferential treatment for the Catholic Church by governments. The religious freedom that is now taken for granted in many countries has not been supported by the Roman Catholic tradition. Historically, numerous countries, including those in Europe, have seen many bloody persecutions related to religious liberty.<sup>14</sup>

Vatican II’s document stresses the ethical foundations of the right to religious freedom:

The Vatican council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. Freedom of this kind means that everyone should be immune from coercion by individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, no men or women are forced to act against their convictions nor are any persons to be restrained from acting in accordance with their convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in association with others. The council further declares that the right to religious freedom is based on the very dignity of the human person as known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Nostra aetate*, n. 2.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Bokenkotter, *Concise History*, 208–213, 248–260.

<sup>15</sup> *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 2.

While the document emphasizes the responsibility to search for truth, especially religious truth, it insists that each person must be free from coercion, especially in religious matters. No one can be forced to act in a way that is contrary to personal beliefs; no one can be forcibly restrained from acting in accordance with those beliefs as long as the just requirements of the common good are observed.

This declaration, not surprisingly, generated much controversy. The issue was not only religious freedom but also the underlying question of the development of doctrine.<sup>16</sup> The council was concerned about radically changing the position of the Church on religious liberty, a position firmly stated by Pope Pius IX. In the final session of the council, the document was approved by an overwhelming majority.

### ***Healing between Church and World***

The third major division addressed by Vatican II was the separation of the Church from the world. Discussed in many documents, this topic was the specific focus of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*). This significant document clearly expresses and symbolizes the spirit of Vatican II, for it is the only document to have originated directly from a suggestion (by Cardinal Suenens) made during the council itself. With it Vatican II begins a realistic dialogue with the modern world. The council accepts the progressive cultural and social movements of modern history and, grounded in its faith, optimistically describes the building of the human community.

This long document is divided into two parts. The first spells out a religious anthropology that is the foundation of many conciliar, papal and episcopal documents. Included in this description are discussions of the dignity of the person, the interdependence of persons and societies, the significance of human activity in the world and the role of the Church in the modern world. The second part applies this Christian understanding of the person in community to some of the most critical problems of the contemporary world: marriage and family; the proper development of culture; economic, social and political life; and war and peace. The most

<sup>16</sup> Hahnenberg, *Concise Guide*, offers keen insight into this fundamental issue in many of the council's debates: 'If revelation itself is not primarily words *about* God, but a living encounter *with* God [as expressed in the Constitution on Divine Revelation], then we can admit that our limited human words often fail to capture this mystery. In such a view, doctrinal development is our becoming more and more conscious of all that is contained in God's offer of friendship. What is present implicitly from the beginning gradually becomes explicit in the church as we grow in our relationship with God.' (153)



distinctive note sounded throughout this progressive and optimistic text is that of the Church putting itself consciously at the service of the human family, as expressed in the now famous opening lines:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.<sup>17</sup>

The separation of the Church from the world is overcome in yet another way—in the Church's own self-understanding. That is, Vatican II marks the beginning of the Church understanding itself from a global perspective. Karl Rahner (who was very involved in the council) compares the significance of this breakthrough to the opening of the early Christian community to the Gentiles more than 1,900 years ago. Rahner uses the image of 'world-Church' to describe this new self-understanding.<sup>18</sup> By world-Church Rahner means that Roman Catholicism is no longer a European and Western religion that has been 'exported' to the rest of the world. It has now allowed itself truly to be shaped by a whole variety of cultures from Latin America, Asia and Africa as well as Europe.

### **Past and Present**

Vatican II stands out as a remarkable example of renewal and reform. With its emphasis on the Bible, the council turned again to the foundation



<sup>17</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, n. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Rahner, *Concern for the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 77–102.

of the Christian experience and found renewed means of expressing that experience in the modern world. Deep divisions within the Church began to be healed; aloofness and separation from other religions and the world itself were seriously addressed. Scholars, some of whom had been questioned or silenced in pre-council days, first prepared the way by their scholarship and then actively worked with the bishops at the council to help create a new vision of the Church. Vatican II carefully considered the signs of the times and responded by moving Roman Catholicism beyond its siege mentality to become an open and pastoral community in the world.

Just as with individuals, however, diseases and divisions also re-emerge in the people of God. The years immediately following the close of the council were marked by a wide variety of responses, including bitter debates about appropriate liturgical celebrations and about structures of authority.

Thanks to the Second Vatican Council, Catholics [were] forced to re-examine many of their most cherished practices and traditions. Such a process was bound to be disruptive, but the sheer magnitude of the crisis it provoked astonished everyone.<sup>19</sup>

In recent years, as polarisation increased in the Church, the debate about the proper interpretation of Vatican II intensified. In a recent article, the Vatican II scholar John O'Malley addresses some of these controversies concerning issues that 'should be of concern to all Catholics who cherish the heritage of the council'.<sup>20</sup> In pointing out how not to interpret Vatican II, O'Malley clearly also makes positive points.

Several of these points address interpretations that downplay the significance of the Second Vatican Council. O'Malley stresses that Vatican II was a doctrinal council as well as a pastoral one. It taught many things though 'in a style different from previous councils'.<sup>21</sup> He emphasizes that significant change happened in the council. Similarly he affirms continuity, but also discontinuity, in its teachings; the healings expressed in collegiality and religious liberty are examples of such change.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Bokenkotter, *Concise History*, 386; see also 368–386.

<sup>20</sup> John W. O'Malley, 'Misdirections: Ten Sure-Fire Ways to Mix Up the Teaching of Vatican II', *America*, 208/3 (4 February 2013), 25–27, here 25.

<sup>21</sup> O'Malley, 'Misdirections', 25.

<sup>22</sup> O'Malley does not give these examples in the article, but see his book, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 8–14, 254–258, 302–305.

Other points focus on the question of context. O'Malley highlights the importance of reading the documents in the chronological order in which they were approved in the council, recognising their interdependence. This approach differs from the one that reads the constitutions first since they carry the most authority. O'Malley also encourages attention both to the general historical context and to the debates in the council. And he recommends using unofficial sources such as diaries and correspondence to get a better picture and understanding of the dynamics of the council.<sup>23</sup>

Given the examples of healing and the need for new healing, the purpose and inspiration of Vatican II expressed in the council's Opening Message to Humanity still offers sound direction for all Christians today: 'under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we wish to inquire how we ought to renew ourselves, so that we may be found increasingly faithful to the gospel of Christ'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> O'Malley, 'Misdirections', 26–27.

<sup>24</sup> 'Opening Message to Humanity', *Documents of Vatican II*, 3–4.