

Why the Second Vatican Council Really Is That Important

By Cynthia Stewart, PhD

If you put all the writings from all the councils through the centuries into one big stack, nearly a third of the pile comes from Vatican II. The bishops issued sixteen documents, with the ones called constitutions having the highest teaching authority. The documents reflect new ways of thinking applied to ancient beliefs, and they shook many people to the core. To many both outside and inside the Church, it seemed like the Council changed everything from the ground up, and in some ways it did. From a theological perspective, the Council reaffirmed the fundamental teachings of the faith while updating their presentation and practice. The bishops tried to look beyond the historically conditioned nature of many Church teachings to the basic ideas those teachings were trying to convey, then took those ideas and expressed them in light of modern understandings and ideas. The documents of Vatican II are themselves historically conditioned, and future generations of Catholics will once again need to retrieve the basic ideas presented in them and express them in ways that make sense in their own time. For now, however, these documents give us the best picture possible of who the Church is and how it sees its mission.

The following are the top seven reasons why the council really is that important:

***Aggiornamento*: Updating the Church**

This Council was all about renewal, which means restoring something to its original state. This was not an effort to make the Church look as it did in the second century but rather to get back to its roots in figuring out what was most important in its mission. The bishops attempted to show how the traditional teachings were relevant, even vital, to the modern world.

Religious Freedom: Conscience Is Key

Historically, the Church had held the view that every person had a duty to be Catholic and that governments should make Catholicism the official religion; the Church had also taught a legalistic morality that revolved around doing what you were told. The bishops at Vatican II certainly did not tell people to throw Church authority out the window, but they recognized that in the end, people have a duty to develop their own consciences rather than simply following the Church's rules. In addition, governments, they said, have a duty to protect the rights of all citizens rather than trying to promote a certain set of religious beliefs. These were huge changes.



Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue: Talking to People with Other Beliefs

The Church had been battling other Christian believers and groups for much of its history. Through it all, the Church had seen itself as the sole bearer of truth, with other believers misled by their all-too-human pride. At Vatican II, though, the bishops acknowledged that God is not limited to working through the Catholic Church but is found working through other Christian denominations and even in other religions. Vatican II explained that while Catholic teaching gives the fullest human expression of God's truth, God's truth can also be found in these differing beliefs.

The Church's Mission: Living the Good News

The Church has always held that its mission is to share with people the good news of Christ, but too often it has confused the cultural "packaging" for that good news with the good news itself. Vatican II owned up to this confusion and said that missionaries need to recognize the beauty of the cultures where they are working and express the Christian message in ways that make sense within those cultures. The Council also pointed out that there is more to the Church's mission than converting people to Christianity. To live the message it proclaims, the Church must also stand with the poor and the afflicted, educate young people, fight disease and famine, promote better living and working conditions, and work for peace.

Scripture: Read It for Yourself

For centuries, Church leaders did not want the laity to read the Scriptures for themselves because they might misinterpret it and thus threaten their salvation. After all, Protestants split into thousands of denominations based on their differing interpretations. At Vatican II, however, the bishops recognized that Catholics need to ground themselves in the Scriptures. Moreover, while earlier Church leaders had been skeptical of using modern methods of scholarship to study the Bible, at Vatican II the bishops encouraged those methods, as long as the scholars worked within the limits of the Church's teaching authority.

The Faithful: All Working Together to Be Church

Too often people saw the Church as a pyramid, with the Pope at the top, the bishops acting as his deputies coming next, and the laity at the bottom simply following orders. The Council talked about the different roles within the Church. Bishops, they said, are more than middle managers carrying out the Pope's orders; they are teachers and shepherds with a responsibility before God for their work. The laity are not just worker bees but are absolutely necessary to the Church's work in the world. Lay Catholics need to be active in the lives of their parishes and dioceses and beyond that in society as a whole. Their baptismal faith is a call to action in the world.

On a practical level, the bishops changed the way the Mass was celebrated. People could use their native languages rather than Latin, altars were turned around so that the priest faced the congregation, lay people could be readers and Eucharistic ministers, and the required fast before taking communion changed from midnight on to just one hour. Through these and other changes, the Council sought to get lay people more involved in the worship service that was the center of their lives as Catholic Christians.



Diversity: Different Ways of Being the Same Church

For centuries, the Church had thought of unity as meaning that everybody did the same thing everywhere all the time. This usually was translated as everybody doing things the way that European Catholics did them. The bishops at Vatican II saw that true unity could accommodate diversity, not just of culture but also of individual church communities—each is important and brings something to the whole. In other words, the universal Church is really the communion of all the local churches.

Vatican II covered a lot of ground—so much, in fact, that almost half a century later, the Church is still working through what it means. That work has been challenging and not without its critics. While the Council created a Church that is more open and participatory, some people feel it weakened what being Catholic really means. They point out that Catholics growing up after Vatican II seem to pay less attention to rituals like novenas or the Stations of the Cross and that some seem to rely so much on their own consciences that they neglect or ignore the Church's teaching that it presents the truest expression of God's will.

Some individuals and groups found the changes so unsettling that they broke away from the Church entirely, claiming it had abandoned being faithfully Catholic in exchange for fitting in with the modern world. Many more Catholics remained in the Church but still felt deeply concerned about the changes. Many other Catholics were so excited that they wanted to implement everything as quickly as possible. The late 1960s and early 1970s were rough but exciting times in the Church, and the dust is still a long way from settling. But as Catholics work together to navigate the waters of a more open Church, they are finding that even rough waves carry them to a deeper sense of what it means to be Church.

The Vatican II Documents

The Vatican II documents were written in Latin because that is the international language of the Church and later were translated into many languages, including English. Following is a look at each one:

| Name | Main Points |
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| <i>Dogmatic Constitution on the Church</i> (<i>Lumen Gentium</i>) | Talks about how the Church sees itself: as the gathering of all those (including non-Catholics) called by God, as an assembly of believers containing both the hierarchy and the laity, and as a fallible human institution continuing the perfect work of Jesus. The Church's role is to create a space for humans to come into relationship with God. |
| <i>Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation</i> (<i>Dei Verbum</i>) | While God has revealed himself most fully through Christ and his Church, God has also come to humans in many other ways throughout history. Other religions also possess wisdom that God has revealed to them, and Christians need to engage in respectful dialogue with them. |
| <i>Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World</i> (<i>Gaudium et Spes</i>) | The Church is a vibrant, living sacramental sign of Jesus in the midst of history. Progress in society is part of God's design, which includes salvation not only for individuals but also for all of humanity and the entire cosmos. The centerpoint of the Christian life is not heaven but rather working for God through a greater commitment to the world. |
| <i>Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy</i> (<i>Sacrosanctum Concilium</i>) | The liturgy needs to be updated so that worshippers can truly understand the richness of the Church's traditions and sacraments in language and symbols meaningful for them. The liturgy is a communal event, and the congregation needs to participate in it rather than simply receiving it. |



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| <i>Declaration on Religious Freedom</i> (<i>Dignitatis Humanae</i>) | Each human has the right to religious liberty, a right that governments must safeguard. The main issue in the relationship of the Church and the State is the Church's fundamental right to freedom. |
| <i>Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)</i> | Believers of all faiths experience similar struggles, and Catholics need to dialogue and collaborate with followers of other religions. Discrimination on the basis of race, color, condition of life, or religion is simply unacceptable. |
| <i>Declaration on Christian Education</i> (<i>Gravissimum Educationis</i>) | Everyone has the right to education, and Christians have a duty to educate their children in a Christian manner. Parents, the community, and the Church must work together to provide this education. |
| <i>Decree on Ecumenism</i> (<i>Unitatis Redintegratio</i>) | Those who follow Christ are not all Catholic Christians. Other Christian communities have also been used by God as a means of salvation. All Christians are called to work for unity among themselves. |
| <i>Decree on the Catholic Eastern Churches</i> (<i>Orientalium Ecclesiarum</i>) | This document affirms the value of the Eastern Churches that are in communion with Rome and gives guidelines for sharing worship with the Eastern Orthodox Churches. |
| <i>Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes)</i> | The Church is missionary in its very nature, and Catholics should work closely with other Christians in this most important task. Local churches and bishops have the right and duty to express the Church's message in ways that make sense within their cultural contexts. |
| <i>Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church</i> (<i>Christus Dominus</i>) | Bishops are the shepherds of their communities, and as part of the hierarchy, they also have a responsibility to the universal Church; gives a general discussion of their roles and duties. |
| <i>Decree on Ministry and Life of Priests</i> (<i>Presbyterorum Ordinis</i>) | Priests have vital roles to play as helpers of the bishops and in working together with and among the laity; gives a general discussion of their roles and duties. |
| <i>Decree on the Training of Priests</i> (<i>Optatum Totius</i>) | Seminary training should be restructured to include greater emphasis on the study of Scripture, a deeper understanding of other Christian communities, and more thoughtful use of sociology and psychology. |
| <i>Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of the Religious Life</i> (<i>Perfectae Caritatis</i>) | Religious Orders should be updated to adapt more to the modern world and to the particular cultural contexts in which the brothers and sisters are living. This can include adapting the religious habit to modern conditions. |
| <i>Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People</i> (<i>Apostolicam Actuositatem</i>) | The laity have their own Christian vocation. They should participate fully in the life of the Church in roles such as Eucharistic ministers and lectors, and on parish councils, but their apostolate also extends into the sphere of society. |



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| <p><i>Decree on the Means of Social Communication</i> <i>(Inter Mirifica)</i></p> | <p>New means of communication have been developed, and the Church must use these to further the work of Christ.</p> |
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