

# Bishop Casey Reports on the Accomplishments and the Decrees of the Vatican Council

One of the most moving ceremonies of Vatican II came just two days before its close. The Greek Metropolitan Melitos, representing the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras, placed nine white roses on the tomb of Pope John XXIII in the crypt below St. Peter's.

This ceremony was a symbol of the healing of the rift between the Catholic and Orthodox churches which had existed for nine centuries. In a sense, it was a public acknowledgment that the events which led to the final break between East and West in the eleventh century involved injustice and guilt on both sides.

It was fitting that these nine roses be placed on the tomb of the dead Pope. It is a small tomb of reddish marble — he was a very short man — but a very big man in the Church's history. He was the architect of the great Council and unleashed forces which will be felt more than a hundred years from now.

When he first announced the Council, he did not realize what a tremendous undertaking it would be, nor did any of us who gathered in St. Peter's for the first time on October 11, 1962 sense this.

It was a long road we traveled. To give you a spare outline of what was done, let's mention these figures: Vatican II was in session from October, 1962 to December, 1965, a span of 38 months. There were 188 general congregations or business sessions, plus ten solemn public sessions for the promulgation of Council documents or the transaction of other Council business.

The average number of Council Fathers present was 2,200. They spent 615 hours in actual sessions. Uncounted were the hundreds of hours which the Fathers spent on their homework, studying the documents, and the several thousand hours which the men on Commissions spent preparing the documents which were presented to the Council. I have a complete collection of all the Council material for the four years, hundreds of items. All this, and my personal papers relative to the Council, will be given this summer to the archives of St. Bernard's Seminary. We might add, finally, that there were 54 separate votes on the various propositions and that more than a million and a half individual votes were cast and counted during the four sessions of the Council.

Vatican II produced sixteen finished documents: four constitutions, or statements of grave doctrinal import which will be of permanent value to the Church down through the ages; nine decrees, or authoritative statements on more practical problems of the Church and, last of all, three declarations, or statements of policy on specific problems of daily life.

As we stated in previous talks on the Council, it is humanly impossible to cover an entire session in one talk. The documents from this last session alone make a pile four feet high, so I threw up my hands when I began this talk.

I shall summarize a few of the constitutions and declarations which may be of interest to you, say a word about the post-conciliar era in which we shall live, and then wind up with questions about the reforms that have already been made. This talk will be chiefly

informative. There is not sufficient time to go deeply into the spirit, the inner life, of the Council.

The fourth and final session was the most productive of all. The workload was staggering. Eleven out of the sixteen documents coming out of Vatican II were approved by the Council and promulgated by Pope Paul at this last session, although much preliminary work had been done on most of them in previous sessions.

Let's make a few comments, first of all, about the Decree on the Pastoral Role of Bishops in the Church. This decree spells out the role of bishops as shepherds and guides of the People of God. Probably the greatest document to come out of this Council is the Constitution on the Church which gives a dogmatic explanation of the entire "People of God," the bishops, priests, and you, the faithful. The Decree on the Bishops gives these dogmatic principles concrete application in the government of the Church.

Two points in this decree will ultimately affect you. Beginning probably in 1967, a Bishops' Synod will meet with the Pope in Rome. The Pope is not an absolute monarch. Without prejudice to his primacy, it is stated in the Constitution on the Church that the bishops together with the Pope have a common, collegial responsibility for the Church.

This is the case not only when they are gathered for an ecumenical council, but always. In the future, this collegiality will manifest itself in and function through the Bishops' Synod which will be made up of the elected representatives of the various national bishops' conferences. There will be about 150-160 members from every nation in the world. For example, the six or so U.S. bishops

will reflect the views of the bishops of this country as the Synod meets to grapple with the problems facing the Church throughout the world and makes its recommendations to the Pope.

About the Bishops' Conference, there will be, for example, the Body of Bishops for the United States, about 250 of them, which will make its decisions affecting the welfare of the Catholics in this country. The present setup, the National Catholic Welfare Conference in Washington, will probably implement those decisions. The new feature is: heretofore the votes taken at the annual meeting of the U.S. bishops in November have not been binding. In the future, the votes of the U.S. Body of Bishops will be binding on all and this is good because there will be uniformity in the country and less confusion among the priests and people.

**The Declaration on the Attitude of the Church Toward Non-Christian Religions**

This Declaration has only four pages and also had one of the stormiest careers of the entire Council. Promoted by Cardinal Augustin Bea of the Secretariate for Christian Unity at the specific desire of Pope John, this Declaration started out initially as a mere statement on the special relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people.

As a result of preliminary skirmishes in the Council Hall, and in order to forestall any reasonable risk that the document might be distorted for purely political purposes (some of the bishops living in Arab countries were opposed to the Declaration), its scope was vastly widened to include the other non-Christian beliefs with the Jewish religion.

After considering the positive and acceptable elements in such religions as Buddhism and Hinduism, the Declaration recalls the great spiritual patrimony possessed in common by both Christianity and Judaism.

Regarding the Passion of Christ, the text states that guilt for what was then perpetrated cannot be imputed indiscriminately to all the Jews of that time nor to the Jews of today. The Council concludes that the Jews are never to be portrayed as a people reprobated or accursed by God, and then warns against anything in preaching or catechetical instruction which might run the risk of giving this erroneous impression.

The Declaration takes the occasion also to deplore present and past anti-Semitism and to denounce any and all discrimination on the basis of race, color, social condition or religion as completely contrary to the spirit of Christ.

**Decree on Priestly Life and Ministry**

The purpose of this decree is to set forth the place of the priesthood in the life of the Church. Some have asked whether there would be any change in the law of celibacy. Discussion of this subject was taken out of the Council at the outset, with the overwhelming approval of the Fathers.

This Council document on the priesthood affirms the positive elements of the ministry and mentions celibacy only in passing. The experience of the Western Church has proved that the total dedication of one celibate priest to the care of souls is at least three times as effective as the work of a man distracted by family cares and responsibilities. There is no likelihood of change in the present law of celibacy.



St. Peter's at Rome where sessions of the Vatican Council were held during the autumn of the years 1962 to 1965.

**The Apostolate of the Laity**  
Someone said that before Vatican II about all that could be done by the laity and the other ecclesiastical documents on the laity was a declaration of what the layman is not, with practically nothing on the positive side of his existence and role in the Church. It was the long-accepted tradition that the only role of the layman in the Church was "to pray, obey and to pay."

**The Declaration on Religious Liberty**  
In last year's talk we mentioned to you the controversy which sidetracked this Declaration and kept the Fathers from voting on it. Both sides were sincere in their convictions. In any case, the disagreement was resolved at this last session and the DRL was approved by an overwhelming majority, 1954 for and 239 against.

Let's find out first what this historic Declaration does not say. It does not state that all religious beliefs are equally true or that man is free to pass as he wishes from one religion to another. God has manifested truth to men and they have the moral duty to follow it when they see it.

Neither does the Council teach that Catholics may freely accept or reject the doctrines of the Church. There is in the Church a magisterium (a teaching authority) established by Jesus Christ Himself, and, in certain circumstances, guaranteed by the charism of infallibility. The words of Our Lord about His Church will always be applicable here: "He who hears you, hears Me, and he who rejects you, rejects Me and Him Who sent Me." The Catholic who feels that he is free to pick and choose, and accept only the doctrines which please him personally, might remember these words of Christ.

The Council does not teach either that the Church can disregard the preaching of the Gospel and the conversion of men. The work of converting those outside the Church should go ahead with unabated vigor. Both these tasks, preaching and conversion work, will always be necessary. The DRL states that it is only in the bosom of the Catholic Church that we can find the fullness of the means of salvation granted by God to men.

After these considerations of what the DRL does not say, let's call attention to the following truths which the document explicitly sets forth: The DRL is based fundamentally on the dignity of the human person. Every man, in virtue of his dignity as a human person, has the right not to be subjected to force, either on the part of other individuals or on the part of any human society, to act against his conscience or not to follow his conscience in religious matters.

This right is not one which pertains to men only as individuals, but extends also to all of man's community activity, since acting in community is a requirement of human nature and of religion.

Remember too, that this right to religious liberty is not merely a concession or a manifestation of tolerance on the part of civil authority. If it were, then this same authority would be in a position to revoke this right arbitrarily (as has been done in Communist countries). It is made more than clear in the text that this right to religious liberty is a natural right of every human person, which must necessarily be recognized by all public authorities on every level.

This religious liberty of individuals and of communities includes the right not to be prevented, whether privately or publicly, from spreading one's religious beliefs, provided that this be done by honest means and that no effort be made to take undue advantage of material indigence or lack of instruction — on the part of the faithful of another belief.

Lastly, according to the doctrine of the DRL, civil authority goes beyond its competence, which is to promote the common good, when it undertakes to prohibit or to control manifestations of religion. Its duty is to recognize the religious life of its citizens and to favor it.

On all sides, it is generally agreed that the Church had to make a declaration of this kind in response to a question which had been put to it by the entire world. Our Brethren, all men, especially non-Catholic Christians, must have the assurance of our respect and our sincerity. We must also manifest before the entire human race that religious liberty is the inalienable right of every man and that the Church, as a society composed of men, claims this right for herself.

Basing this right to religious liberty on the dignity of the human person means giving it the widest field of application: Believers and unbelievers alike

can readily see the logic of this doctrine. To sum up, the Catholic Church has not renounced, and could not renounce, its claim to be the true Church, regarding herself as the first and only depository of the doctrines of Christ. But this firm and sure conviction is not to be imposed on others by coercive measures.

**The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.**

Unlike Vatican I, Vatican II recognizes that the world has definitely broken with the medieval world view which prevailed in the Church into the 19th and 20th centuries.

The new relationship of the Church to the human family is expressed above all in the conciliar document on the Church in the Modern World. What is said there is really new. The Church declares herself in solidarity with all men. She regards it as her Christ-given responsibility to be open to others, to listen to them, to serve them, and to hear the burden of life in union with them. The Church, in this Constitution, acknowledges with joy and gratitude the wonderful works of God in the whole human family.

This Pastoral Constitution, commonly known as "Schema XIII," is considered by some as really the core and heart of the Council. No one will deny the far-reaching significance of this Constitution. For the first time in history, a General Council has undertaken to initiate dialogue with "the world."

It has been said, and with good reason, that this Constitution is the only document Pope John really wanted when he convoked Vatican II. In fact, he called the Council, not to condemn heresy or to define dogma but rather to study the role of the Church and her relevance in the world today.

Schema XIII faces up to this gigantic task, first with a rapid yet profound study of doctrinal principles, then with the application of these principles to certain pressing human problems: the nature of culture, the family, marriage, war and peace, socio-economic progress and the like. It is impossible to discuss any of these problems in this talk. Each would require separate treatment.

Through Vatican II, however, the ecumenical age has finally and irrevocably begun for the Catholic Church. Since Pope John XXIII, the relationship between Catholics and non-Catholics has undergone a drastic change. Pope John not only said he loved all men, he meant it. Impressed by his sincerity, the whole world came to love this gentle-hearted man. His efforts to draw all Churches closer together have produced their fruit in the Constitution on Ecumenism issued by Vatican II.

This document formally recognizes that Catholics share the blame for the disunity of the Church, and the Council as well as the Pope have asked other Christians for forgiveness. At the same time the necessity of continuing reform was recognized: "Ecclesia semper reformanda," the renewal of the Church in life and doctrine according to the Gospel.

The other Christian communities are recognized as churches: until now only individuals were recognized, and then as "heretics" or "schismatics." Now the communities themselves are recognized, and not merely as ecclesiastical communities or as churches.

An ecumenical attitude is expected of the whole Church: The genuine conversion of Catholics themselves and prayer in an ecumenical spirit; then the mutual effort to understand one another and sympathetic dialogue, the recognition of what is good in others and learning from them, the recognition of the faith, love and baptism of other Christians; finally, theological and historical research carried on in the ecumenical spirit.

The document states that cooperation with other Christians is to be encouraged in every way. Practical cooperation is possible in the entire social domain. Even more common prayer is desirable as well as a growing liturgical fellowship, especially in the Liturgy of the Word.

The impressive service of the Word conducted by Paul VI and the non-Catholic observers just before the end of the Council was most moving. We believe that the first Community Eucharistic Service, to be held at the Eastman Theater Sunday evening, March 27, will also, in its own way, be impressive. Try to attend it, I might add, finally, that Monsignor McCaffery, head of the Diocesan Ecumenical Commission and all questions relating to this subject should be directed to him.

**The Post-Conciliar Era**  
As Pope Paul and the bishops left St. Peter's Square at the end of the Mass closing the Council on December 8, 1965, this historic moment was both an end and a beginning. It marked the end of Vatican II and the beginning of the Church of the future.

The Church and the world can now look back on a Council which came into being thanks to the holy inspiration and fearless initiative of Pope John XXIII. Taking into account the historical reality of the Catholic Church and measured by what the Council started with, the achievements of this Council are nothing sort of miraculous.

Whether Pope John realized how far the Council would go is really an irrelevant question. The important point is that he started it and thus saw to it that the Church would never be entirely the same after it. (Continued on Page 4A)



Long thoughts must fill his mind as he looks out from his Cathedral rectory.



Bishop Casey will continue his schedule in Rochester Diocese until May.