

Vatican II: The Beginnings

Vatican Council II was convened 20 years ago Oct. 11 and took the Church on the path of aggiornamento — updating. What happened in the council halls is recounted in this two-part anniversary series.

By John Maher
National Catholic News Service

The Second Vatican Council which opened 20 years ago brought with it profound changes, affecting everything from the way the Church views itself to how Catholics worship at Mass.

Vatican II, the 21st ecumenical or general council in the history of the Church, was the first to take place in the view of modern communications media. Media reports of clashes between bishops attending over doctrines and the way of presenting those doctrines strongly affected Catholics, many of whom carried their disagreements into the postconciliar period.

The momentous council, the largest and most representative in history, with 2,860 churchmen from 134 countries participating, grew out of a sudden inspiration which came to Pope John XXIII less than two months after his election. He said he was discussing one day the role of the Church in the modern world with Cardinal Domenico Tardini, papal secretary of state, when the thought came to him to summon a council.

In an encyclical, "Ad Petri Cathedram" (To the See of Peter), in 1959, Pope John explained the purposes of the council. The Italian word "aggiornamento" expressed the idea of an adaptation of Church practice to the needs and modes of the times.

Preparations took more than three and a half years.

Of the 2,908 prelates eligible, 2,540 attended the first solemn session on Oct. 11, 1962, in St. Peter's Basilica, where the public sessions and general congregations were held.

The delegation from the United States, 241 strong, was the second largest at the council, exceeded only by the Italian delegation.

In addition to the council Fathers, 201 officially appointed experts were on hand. Theologians assisting the council Fathers included Fathers Karl Rahner, Hans Kung, Yves Conger, Henri de Lubac and Edward Schillebeeckx.

In his address to the first public session, the pope set the tone for the council. He came into daily contact, he said, with those who see nothing but ruin in modern times. He made it clear that he disagreed with "these prophets of doom who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand."

He urged the council to forego condemnations of errors and instead to meet the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of the Church's teachings.

"The substance of the ancient doctrine of faith is one thing," he said, "and the way it is presented is another."

The pope also emphasized the obligation of working toward Christian unity.

During the first period of the council, from Oct. 1 to Dec. 8, the council discussed the schemata, or proposed council documents, on the liturgy, the sources of revelation, the communications media and the unity of the Church.

A major turning point occurred during the debate on the sources of revelation.

Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, president of the council's doctrinal commission, had guided the preparation of a schema expressing the long-standing position that the Bible and tradition are two separate sources of divine revelation. Many council Fathers held the view that Scripture and tradition constitute a whole, two modes by which the word of God is transmitted within the Church. They also



With Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, left, at his side, Pope John XXIII speaks at the first session of Vatican Council II. Right, cardinals move in procession for opening ceremonies on Vatican II on Oct. 11, 1962. (NC Photo)

regarded the schema as unreflective of contemporary research in Scripture and as posing an obstacle to Christian unity by stressing the primacy of tradition.

After six days of debate, the council voted. Although a majority opposed, opponents did not muster the necessary two-thirds to reject the schema.

But the next day, Pope John intervened and ordered the schema withdrawn and appointed a special commission under the joint chairmanship of Cardinals Ottaviani and Augustin Bea, president of the Christian unity secretariat, to rewrite the schema.

Fifteen days were devoted to a thorough discussion of the schema on the liturgy, which was then returned to the liturgical commission for revision.

Among the proposals made and eventually incorporated into the constitution on the liturgy:

— To use the vernacular or local language in the instructional parts of the Mass, while reserving the use of Latin for the canon.

— To permit the celebrant to say Mass at an altar so situated that he faced the congregation.

— To allow the use of a variety of forms of music, art and architecture as long as they are dignified and serve the purposes of divine worship.

The last six general congregations of the first period were on the schema of the Church. Cardinal Lienart objected to the schema's identification of the Mystical Body with the Roman Catholic Church. Bishop Emile De Smedt of Belgium described it as overly triumphal, clerical and juridical. He said the hierarchy was more a ministry of service than a governing body.

Cardinal Giovanni Montini of Milan recommended having the schema revised by the theological commission and the unity secretariat.

On Dec. 7, Pope John, who had been ill since November, visited the council and told the Fathers that he wanted to pay tribute to them "because charity in truth has really dominated your meetings."

The following day, in an address at the closing of the first session, the pope said the sometimes "sharply divergent" views expressed by the council Fathers were a healthy demonstration to the world of the "holy liberty" that existed within the Church.

On June 3, 1963, Pope John died and 18 days later Cardinal Montini succeeded him as Pope Paul VI. The next day, Pope Paul announced that the council, automatically suspended by Pope John's death, would continue. Five days later, he set Sept. 29 as the opening day of the second session.

(NEXT WEEK: The results.)

Coronary Club

The second meeting of the Coronary Club of Rochester for the season will be held 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 12, in the Bishop Kearney Lounge at St. Mary's Hospital. Dr. Alvan Santos will discuss "A Review of Drugs for Angina: Uses/Abuses." The organization is a national, non-profit group open to all parties interested in the prevention and progress of cardiac disease. Further information is available by contacting Henry T. Hickey, 175 Selye Terr., Rochester, N.Y. 14613; 254-0448.

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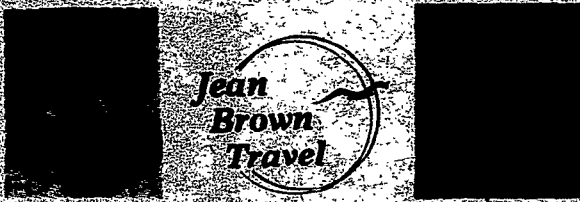
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