



Address of Pope John XIII at opening of the Second Vatican Council

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Summary
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The entire Church rejoices today
because that longed-for moment
has finally arrived when,
under the watchful eye
of the Virgin Mother of God,
the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council is opened,
here beside the tomb of St. Peter.

The previous ecumenical councils of the Church,
some 20 in number,
plus many other regional ones,
all prove clearly the vigor of the Catholic Church
and are recorded as shining lights
in the Church's history.

We take into account the opportunities,
as well as errors of our time
and we trust that the Church's teachings
will be presented exceptionally well
to all people.

It is natural for us to look back into our history today
and listen again to the voices of Church leadership,

both in the East and the West,
where, beginning in the 4th century,
councils like this have gathered.
But despite the joys of these previous councils,
there has also been a trail of sorrow and trial,
just as Simeon foretold to Mary
that Jesus would be the source
of both the fall and the rise of many.

What confronts the Church today,
therefore, is not new:
those who are in Christ enjoy light,
goodness,
order,
and peace.

Those who oppose Christ sink into confusion,
bitter human relations,
and the constant danger of war.

Ecumenical councils like this,
whenever they gather,
are an occasion for the celebration once again
of the unity between Christ
and the Church.

They lead to a more clear announcement of the truth,
to guidance for people in everyday life,
and to the strengthening of spiritual energy
for goodness' sake.

We now stand in the wake of 20 centuries
of such history as we begin.

For the sake of the historical record,
let me mention the first moment
when the idea of calling such a council came to me.

I first uttered the words on January 25, 1959,
on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul,
in the church dedicated to him in Rome.

It was completely unexpected,
like a flash of heavenly light,
and it gave rise to three years of tremendous activity
throughout the world
in preparation for this day.

These years alone have been an initial gift of grace.

I confidently trust that under the light of this council
the Church will become richer in spiritual matters
and, with this new energy,

will look to the future without fear.

In fact, by bringing itself up-to-date where needed,
the Church will make people,

families,
and whole nations

really turn their minds toward divine things.

And, therefore, we are all very grateful for this moment.

Moreover, I also want to mention

before you now my own assessment
of the happy circumstances

under which this council begins its work.

As I go about my daily work as pope,

I sometimes have to listen,
with much regret,

to voices of persons who,
though burning with zeal,
are not endowed with too much
sense of discretion or measure.

These people can see nothing but a decline of truth
and the ruin of the Church
in these modern times.

They say that our era, in comparison with past ones,
is getting worse

and they behave as though they had learned nothing
from history,
which is nonetheless, the teacher of life.

They behave as though at the time of former councils,
everything was a full triumph
for the Christian idea and religious liberty.

I feel I must disagree with these prophets of gloom
who are always forecasting disaster
as though the end of the world was at hand.

In fact, at the present time,

divine providence is leading us
to a new order of human relations which,
by the very effort of the people of this time,
is directed toward the fulfillment
of God's great plans for us.
Everything, even human differences,
leads to a greater good for the Church.

It's easy to see this if you look even casually
through history.

Most of the councils called in the past
were forced to address
serious challenges to the Church
brought about by civil authorities,
even when they thought
they were helping the Church.

Most of the world today
does not live under such civil tyranny
and this is a great thing.

I am saddened, of course,
by those places where such oppression still exists
and, indeed, some bishops are noticeable here today
mainly by their absence
where they are imprisoned for their faith.

And even though modern life brings with it
great stress and pressure from economic
and political sides,
nonetheless it at least has the advantage
of having freed the Church
from obstacles to its freedom
in most parts of the world.

The greatest concern of this council is this:
that the sacred and central truths
of our Christian faith
should be guarded and taught
more effectively.

These central truths embrace the whole human person,
composed as we are of body and soul
and, since we're pilgrims on earth,
they lead us always toward heaven.

This puts into perspective that we are to use earthly things
only to attain a divine good.

According to the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew,
Jesus himself called on us to seek first
the reign of God,
addressing our energy on that.

But Jesus also completed that thought by saying that,
if we did seek that first,
all worldly things would be given to us
as well.

Both sides of this equation
are present in the Church today,
as they have always been,
and we take this into account
as we begin.

In this effort, we will not depart from the truth
as it is passed on to us
by the early Fathers and Mothers of the Church.

But we will also be attentive to these times,
to the new conditions
and new forms of life
present in the modern world
which have opened new arenas of work
for Catholics.

So, while the Church is mindful
of marvelous human progress
it is also eager to remind people
that God is the true source of wisdom and beauty.

Having said this, it is clear that much is expected of us here
regarding the passing on of the doctrines
of the Church,
as we have done without fail for 20 centuries,
despite occasional difficulties in that regard.

The important point of this council is not, therefore,
a discussion of one article or another
of the fundamental teachings of the Church;
a council would not be needed for such work.

Instead the work of this council
is to better articulate the doctrine of the Church

for this age.
This doctrine should be studied and expounded
through the methods of research
and literary forms of modern thought.
Here is a key distinction on which our work is based:
The *substance* of our central beliefs is one thing,
and *the way in which it is presented* is another.
It is this latter presentation of the faith
with which we are concerned here
and our approach to this
will be a thoroughly pastoral one.

As we open this council we see, as always,
that the truth of Jesus is permanent.
Often, as one age succeeds another,
the opinions of people follow one another
and exclude each other.
Errors creep in but vanish like fog before the sun.
In the past we have opposed these errors
and often condemned them.
But today we prefer to make use
of the medicine of mercy
rather than that of severity.
We meet the needs of the present day
by demonstrating the validity of our teachings
rather than by condemning others.
In fact, error today is so obvious when it emerges
that people themselves reject it.
People are evermore convinced of the high dignity
of the human person,
the evil of violence,
and the dead end of arms and political domination.

That being so, the Catholic Church in this council
desires to show herself as the loving mother of all,
benign,
patient,
full of mercy and goodness
toward all who are separated from her.
The Church does not offer riches that will pass away
to the people of today.

Like Peter when he was asked for alms,
we say that we have neither silver nor gold
but that we have a certain power in Jesus Christ
to offer the world:
a way to walk in truth.

We distribute the goods of divine grace to all
which raise the children of God
to great dignity.

We open here the fountain of our life-giving doctrines
which allow all people to understand
their real dignity and purpose.

Finally, through our members we spread Christian charity,
the most powerful tool
in eliminating the seeds of discord
and in establishing harmony,
peace,
and unity.

True peace and salvation are associated with having
a complete grasp of revealed truth.

This truth is passed on
through the doctrines of the Church
and the Church wishes very much
to promote and defend this truth
so that everyone can have access to it
with a unity of understanding.

Unfortunately, the whole Christian family does not have
this unity of mind.

The Catholic Church considers it a duty to work actively
to bring about that unity,
which Jesus himself called for
in his final prayers.

It is a triple sort of unity which we seek.

First, a unity among Catholics themselves
which we want to keep firm and strong.

Second, a unity of prayer and desire
among those other Christians
now separated from Rome.

And third, a unity in esteem and respect
for those who follow non-Christian religions.

It is the clear aim of this council
to bring together the Church's best energies
and strive to have people welcome more favorably
the good tidings of salvation.
This council will prepare and consolidate the path
toward that unity of humankind
which is required as a necessary foundation
in order that the earthly city
may be brought to resemble the heavenly one
where truth reigns,
charity is the law,
and eternity is the timetable.

In conclusion, I direct my voice to you,
my venerable fellow bishops of the Church.
We are gathered here today
in this great Vatican basilica
upon which the history of the Church is hinged,
where heaven and earth are closely joined,
near the tomb of Peter
and so many others
who have gone before us in faith.

The council now beginning rises in the Church
like daybreak,
a forerunner of most splendid light.

It is now only dawn.
And already,
at this first announcement of the rising day,
how much sweetness fills our heart!

Everything here breathes sanctity
and arouses great joy.

The Church is now in your hands,
gathered as you are here
from all the continents of the world.

We might say that heaven and earth
are united in the holding of this council,
the saints of heaven to protect us
and the people on earth
looking for inspiration and guidance.

Indeed, our work is expected to correspond
to the modern needs

of the various peoples of the world.
This requires of you serenity of mind,
brotherly concord,
moderation in proposals,
dignity in discussion,
and wisdom of deliberation.
God grant that your labors and work,
toward which the eyes of all people
and desires of the entire world
are turned,
may generously fulfill the hopes of all.

Almighty God!
In you we place all our confidence,
not trusting in our own strength.
Look down kindly on these pastors of your Church.
May the light of your grace help us
in taking decisions
and in making laws.
Graciously hear the prayers which we offer you
with unanimity of faith, voice, and mind.
O Mary, help of Christians
help of bishops,
arrange all things for a happy and helpful outcome.
With your spouse, St. Joseph,
the holy apostles, Peter and Paul,
St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist
intercede to God for us.
Jesus Christ, our loving redeemer,
immortal ruler of people and the ages,
be love,
be power,
and be glory for ever and ever. Amen.