

SOLEMN OPENING OF THE
SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL _____

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN XXIII

Thursday, October 11, 1962

Session I

Venerable Brothers,

1. Mother Church rejoices because, by a special gift of Divine Providence, the long-awaited day has now dawned on which here, at the tomb of Saint Peter, under the auspices of the Virgin Mother of God, whose maternal dignity is joyfully celebrated today, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council will solemnly begin.

Ecumenical Councils in the Church

2. 1. All the Councils - both the twenty Ecumenical ones and the innumerable and not to be underestimated Provincial and Regional ones - which have been celebrated over the centuries clearly attest to the vitality of the Catholic Church and are inscribed as shining lights in its history.

2. In calling this great assembly, the most recent and humble Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, who speaks to you, has proposed to reaffirm once again the Ecclesiastical Magisterium, which never fails and endures until the end of time; a Magisterium which with this Council presents itself in an extraordinary way to all men in the world, taking into account the deviations, the needs, the opportunities of the contemporary age.

3. In beginning this universal Council, the Vicar of Christ, who is speaking to you, looks, as is natural, to the past, and almost perceives its inciting and encouraging voice: in fact he willingly thinks back to the merits of the Supreme Pontiffs who lived in more ancient and more recent times, and who from the assemblies of the Councils, held both in the East and in the West from the fourth century to the Middle Ages and to recent times, have transmitted the testimonies of that venerable and solemn voice. They acclaim without ceasing the triumph of that human and divine Society, that is, of the Church, which assumes from the Divine Redeemer the name, the gifts of grace and all its value.

4. If this is a reason for spiritual joy, we cannot deny that in the long series of nineteen centuries many sorrows and bitternesses have obscured this history. It was and is true what the old Simeon with a prophetic voice said to Mary the Mother of Jesus: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many..., a sign that will be spoken against" [1]. And Jesus himself, having grown in age, clearly indicated how men would behave towards him in the future, pronouncing those mysterious words: "He who listens to you listens to me" [2]. He also said: "He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me scatters" [3], as we see written in St. Luke, who also reports the previous expressions.

5. After almost twenty centuries, the very serious situations and problems that humanity must face do not change; in fact, Christ always occupies the central place in history and life: men either adhere to him and to his Church, and thus enjoy the light, the goodness, the just order and the good of peace; or they live without him or fight against him and deliberately remain outside the Church, and for this reason there is confusion among them, mutual relations become difficult, the danger of bloody wars looms.

6. Every time they are celebrated, Ecumenical Councils solemnly proclaim this correspondence with Christ and with his Church and radiate the light of truth everywhere, direct the life of individuals, of domestic coexistence and of society on the right path, arouse and strengthen spiritual energies, and permanently raise souls to true and everlasting goods.

7. As We contemplate the successive epochs of humanity during these twenty centuries of the Christian era, before Our eyes parade the testimonies of this extraordinary Magisterium of the Church, that is, of the universal Councils. This documentation is contained in several volumes of great importance, and is to be considered as a sacred treasure, which is preserved in the archives of the City of Rome and in the most famous libraries throughout the world.

Origin and Cause of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council

3. 1. As to the origin and cause of the great event for which We have pleased to gather you, it is sufficient to report once more the testimony, certainly humble, but which We can attest as experienced: the first time We conceived this Council in Our mind almost suddenly, and later We communicated it in simple words before the Sacred College of Cardinal Fathers on that auspicious 25 January 1959, feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, in his Patriarchal Basilica on the Via Ostiense. The minds of those present were suddenly moved, as if a ray of supernatural light were shining, and all saw it gently shine on their faces and in their eyes. At the same time an enormous interest was kindled throughout the world, and all men began to await with impatience the celebration of the Council.

2. In these three years, intense work has been carried out to prepare the Council, with the program of investigating more accurately and extensively what

the condition of Faith, of religious practice, of the influence of the Christian and especially Catholic community was in our time.

3. Not without reason does this time spent in preparing the Council seem to Us to have been almost a first sign and gift of heavenly grace.

4. Enlightened by the light of this Council, the Church will, as we hope, grow in spiritual riches and, drawing from them the strength of new energies, will look with certainty to the times to come. In fact, by introducing appropriate amendments and wisely initiating a commitment to mutual aid, the Church will obtain that men, families, and nations truly turn their minds to supernatural realities.

5. It is therefore a duty of conscience to fervently thank the Supreme Giver of every good for the celebration of this Council, and to exult in the magnificence of the glory of Christ the Lord, who is the victorious and immortal King of the ages and of peoples.

Opportunity to celebrate the Council

4. 1. There is also another thing, Venerable Brothers, which it is useful to propose for your consideration on this subject. To increase the holy joy which in this solemn hour pervades our souls, let Us be permitted to observe before this great assembly that the opening of this Ecumenical Council falls precisely in favorable circumstances of time.

2. It often happens, as We have experienced in the daily exercise of Our apostolic ministry, that, not without offense to Our ears, the voices of some are reported to Us who, although inflamed with zeal for religion, nevertheless evaluate the facts without sufficient objectivity or prudent judgment. In the present conditions of human society they are capable of seeing nothing but ruins and troubles; they go around saying that our times, if compared with past centuries, are altogether worse; and they go so far as to behave as if they had nothing to learn from history, which is the teacher of life, and as if in the times of the previous Councils everything proceeded happily as regards Christian doctrine, morality, and the just liberty of the Church.

3. It seems to Us that we must resolutely disagree with those prophets of doom who always predict the worst, as if the end of the world were imminent.

4. In the present state of human events, in which humanity seems to be entering a new order of things, we should rather see the mysterious plans of Divine Providence, which are realized in successive times through the work of men, and often beyond their expectations, and which wisely arrange everything, even adverse human events, for the good of the Church.

5. This is easy to deduce if one carefully considers the problems and dangers of a political and economic nature of the present day. They keep men so busy that they divert their interests and their worries from the religious fact, which is the concern of the sacred Magisterium of the Church. This way of acting is certainly not without error, and must be rightly reprobated. However, no one can deny that these new situations induced have at least this advantage, that in this way those innumerable impediments are eliminated with which the sons of the century were accustomed to hinder the free action of the Church. It is enough to leaf quickly through the annals of the Church to note clearly that the same Ecumenical Councils, whose events are recorded in letters of gold in the history of the Church, have often been celebrated not without very grave difficulties and reasons for sorrow because of the undue interference of the civil power. Sometimes, in fact, the Princes of this world sincerely proposed to assume the protection of the Church, but many times this did not happen without spiritual harm and danger, because more often they were guided by political calculations and were too concerned with their own interests.

6. We confess that today We are afflicted by very great sorrow because among you many Pastors of the Church, dear to Us, are missing, who for the Faith of Christ are held in chains or are hindered by other obstacles, and whose memory impels Us to raise most ardent prayers to God for them; nevertheless, not without hope and Our great consolation We see today the fact that the Church, finally freed from so many profane impediments of past ages, from this Vatican Temple, as from a second Cenacle of the Apostles, can raise her voice, pregnant with authority and majesty, through you.

The main task of the Council: to defend and spread the doctrine

5. 1. What concerns the Council most of all is that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine be safeguarded and taught more effectively.

2. This doctrine embraces the entire man, composed of soul and body, and commands us, who live on this earth, to tend as pilgrims towards the heavenly homeland.

3. This shows how this mortal life must be ordered, so that, by fulfilling our duties, which we are bound to the earthly and heavenly City, we can reach the end set for us by God. In other words, all men, both individually and as a society, as long as this life permits, have the duty to tend without rest to obtain heavenly goods, and to make use of earthly realities to do this, but in such a way that the use of temporal goods does not prejudice their eternal happiness.

4. It is certainly true that the Lord has pronounced this exhortation: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" [4]. This "first" expresses where our strength and our care must be directed first of all; but we must not at all neglect the other words which follow in this command of the Lord: "and all

these things shall be added to you" [5]. In fact, in the Church there have always been and there are those who, while dedicating themselves with all their strength to the practice of evangelical perfection, at the same time make their contribution to civil progress, because from the example of their lives and from their beneficial initiatives of charity, all that is highest and noblest in human society receives no little strength and increase.

5. But in order for this doctrine to reach the many fields of human activity, which touch individuals, families and social life, it is necessary first of all that the Church never turn her eyes away from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the ancients; and at the same time she needs to look also at the present, which has brought about new situations and new ways of living, and has opened new paths to the Catholic apostolate.

6. For this reason the Church has not remained indifferent to those marvelous discoveries of human genius and to that progress of ideas which we enjoy today, nor has she been incapable of honestly appreciating them; but, following these facts with vigilant care, she does not cease to admonish men to turn above the attraction of visible realities, to God, the source of all wisdom and all beauty, so that they, to whom it was said: "Subdue the earth and have dominion over it" [6], do not forget that most rigorous command: "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" [7], so that the fleeting attraction of things does not hinder true progress.

How should the doctrine be developed today?

6. 1. Having said this, Venerable Brothers, it becomes clear what has been entrusted to the Ecumenical Council with regard to doctrine.

2. The Twenty-first Ecumenical Council - which avails itself of the effective and important help of people who excel in the science of sacred disciplines, in the exercise of the apostolate and in rectitude in behavior - wishes to transmit in its entirety, not diminished, not distorted, the Catholic doctrine, which, even amid difficulties and controversies, has become the common heritage of men. This is not pleasing to everyone, but it is proposed as an offering of a most fruitful treasure to all those who are endowed with good will.

3. However, we must not only guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but, eagerly, without fear, we must continue in the work that our age demands, pursuing the path that the Church has traveled for almost twenty centuries.

4. But our work does not consist, as a primary aim, in discussing some of the principal themes of ecclesiastical doctrine, and thus recalling in more detail what the Fathers and theologians ancient and modern have taught and which we obviously suppose is not ignored by you, but impressed on your minds.

5. It was not necessary to call an Ecumenical Council to engage in such discussions alone. At present, however, the entire Christian teaching must be subjected to a new examination by all in these our times, with a calm and peaceful mind, without taking anything away from it, in that careful manner of thinking and formulating words which stands out above all in the acts of the Councils of Trent and Vatican I. The doctrine itself must be examined more broadly and more deeply and minds must be more fully imbued and informed by it, as all sincere supporters of Christian, Catholic, and Apostolic truth ardently desire. This certain and immutable doctrine, to which faithful assent must be given, must be deepened and expounded according to what is required by our times. For the deposit of Faith, that is, the truths which are contained in our venerable doctrine, is one thing; the way in which they are announced is another, but always in the same sense and with the same meaning. Great importance must be given to this method and, if necessary, applied with patience; that is, it will be necessary to adopt the form of exposition that best corresponds to the magisterium, whose nature is predominantly pastoral.

How to fight errors

7. 1. As we open the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, it is clearer than ever that the truth of the Lord endures forever. Indeed, we see, as one age follows another, that the uncertain opinions of men conflict with one another, and that errors often vanish as soon as they arise, like mist dissipated by the sun.

2. There is no time in which the Church has not opposed these errors; often she has even condemned them, and sometimes with the utmost severity. As for the present time, the Bride of Christ prefers to use the medicine of mercy rather than take up the weapons of rigor; she thinks that one should meet the needs of today, by expounding more clearly the value of her teaching rather than by condemning. Not because there is a lack of false doctrines, opinions, dangers from which to guard oneself and to oppose; but because all of them conflict so openly with the right principles of honesty, and have produced such lethal fruits that today men seem to begin spontaneously to reprobate them, especially those forms of existence that ignore God and His laws, placing too much trust in the progress of technology, founding well-being solely on the comforts of life. They are increasingly aware that the dignity of the human person and his natural perfection is a question of great importance and very difficult to achieve. What matters most is that they have learned through experience that external violence exercised on others, the power of weapons, political domination are absolutely not enough to resolve in the best way the very serious problems that torment them.

3. This being so, the Catholic Church, while raising the torch of Catholic truth through this Ecumenical Council, wishes to show herself to be a most loving mother to all, kind, patient, moved by mercy and goodness towards her

separated children. To humanity troubled by so many difficulties she says, as Peter once did to the poor man who had asked him for alms: "Silver and gold I have no possessions, but what I have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!" [8] In other words, the Church does not offer to the men of our times perishable riches, nor does she promise merely earthly happiness; but she dispenses the goods of supernatural grace, which, by raising men to the dignity of children of God, are such a powerful defense and help to make their life more human; opens the sources of his most fruitful doctrine, with which men, enlightened by the light of Christ, succeed in understanding deeply what they really are, what dignity they are invested with, what goal they must strive for; finally, through his children he manifests everywhere the greatness of Christian charity, than which nothing else is more effective in uprooting the seeds of discord, nothing more effective in promoting concord, just peace and the fraternal union of all.

Promote unity in the Christian and human family

8. 1. This solicitude of the Church in promoting and safeguarding the truth arises from the fact that, according to the plan of God, "who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" [9], without the help of the whole of revealed doctrine men cannot arrive at that absolute and most solid unity of souls to which true peace and eternal salvation are linked.

2. Unfortunately, the entire community of Christians has not yet fully and perfectly achieved this visible unity in truth. The Catholic Church considers it her duty to work actively to bring about the great mystery of that unity which Christ Jesus with most ardent prayers asked of the Heavenly Father in the imminence of his sacrifice. She enjoys the sweetest peace, knowing that she is intimately united with Christ in those prayers; moreover, she sincerely rejoices when she sees that these invocations multiply their most generous fruits even among those who are outside her group. If we consider well, this same unity, which Christ implored for his Church, seems as if it shines with a triple ray of supernatural and saving light, to which correspond: the unity of Catholics among themselves, which must be held most firmly and shine as an example; then, the unity which consists in the pious prayers and ardent hopes with which Christians separated from this Apostolic See aspire to be united with us; finally, the unity based on the esteem and respect towards the Catholic Church that those who follow the different forms of religion that are not yet Christian have.

3. In this regard - although all men who are born have also been redeemed by the blood of Christ - it is truly regrettable that a large part of the human race still does not participate in those sources of supernatural grace which are in the Catholic Church. It follows that to the Catholic Church, whose light illumines all things and whose power of supernatural unity redounds to the benefit of the whole human community, these beautiful words of St. Cyprian perfectly apply:

"Perfused with light, the Church of the Lord spreads her rays over the entire world; but it is one light which is irradiated everywhere, nor is the unity of the body divided. It extends its branches over the whole earth by its abundant growth, it profusely spreads the streams which flow in abundance; but it has one head and one origin and one fertile mother by its fortunate fruitfulness: we are born of her, we are nourished by her milk, we are vivified by her spirit [10].

Venerable Brothers,

4. This is the purpose of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, which, while gathering together the best energies of the Church and zealously striving to make men receive the message of salvation more favorably, prepares and consolidates the way to bring about that unity of the human race, which is as it were the necessary foundation, so that the earthly City may be organized in the likeness of the heavenly City "whose king is truth, whose law is charity, whose greatness is eternity" [11].

Conclusion

9. 1. And now "our voice turns to you" [12], Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate. Here we are gathered together in this Vatican Basilica, where the hinge of the history of the Church is found: where now Heaven and earth are united in a very close embrace, here near the tomb of St. Peter, near the tombs of so many of Our Holy Predecessors, whose ashes at this solemn hour seem almost to exult with a mysterious tremor.

2. The Council which is beginning dawns in the Church like a day shining with a most splendid light. It is only dawn: but how sweetly the first rays of the rising sun already touch our souls! Everything here breathes sanctity, arouses exultation. We contemplate in fact stars increasing with their brightness the majesty of this temple, and it is you, according to the testimony of the Apostle John [13]; and through you the golden candelabra shine around the sepulchre of the Prince of the Apostles, which are the Churches entrusted to you [14]. We also see the most worthy personalities who have come to Rome from the five continents, representing their own Nations, and who are present here with great respect and in most courteous expectation.

3. It can therefore be said that the Saints and men cooperate in the celebration of the council: the Saints of Heaven are committed to protecting our work; the faithful to raise ardent prayers to God; and all of you, promptly seconding the supernatural inspirations of the Holy Spirit, to apply yourselves actively so that your efforts fully respond to the expectations and needs of the different peoples. For this to happen, serene peace of mind, fraternal harmony, moderation of initiatives, correctness of discussions, wisdom in all decisions are required of you.

4. May your commitment and your work, to which not only the eyes of the people but also the hopes of the entire world are turned, largely correspond to expectations.

5. Almighty God, in you we place all our trust, distrusting our own strength. Look kindly upon these Pastors of your Church. May the light of your supernal grace assist us in making decisions, be present in issuing laws; and promptly hear the prayers that we address to you in unanimity of faith, of voice, of soul.

6. O Mary, Help of Christians, Help of Bishops, whose love we have recently experienced in a special way in your temple of Loreto, where we venerated the mystery of the Incarnation, with your help arrange everything for a happy, auspicious, propitious outcome; together with your Spouse Saint Joseph, with the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, with the Saints John the Baptist and the Evangelist, intercede for us with God.

7. To Jesus Christ, our most loving Redeemer, immortal King of peoples and times, be love, power and glory for ever and ever. Amen (*AAS* 54 (1962), pp. 785-795).

[1] *Lk* 2,34.

[2] *Lk* 10,16.

[3] *Luke* 11, 23.

[4] *Mt* 6,33.

[5] *Mt* 6,33.

[6] Cf. *Gen* 1,28.

[7] *Mt* 4,10; *Lk* 4,8.

[8] *Acts* 3,6.

[9] *1Ti* 2,4.

[10] *De Catholicae Ecclesiae unitate* , 5.

[11] S. AGOSTINO, *Ep . CXXXVIII* , 3.

[12] *2 Cor* 6,11 Vlg.

[13] Cf. *Rev* 1,20.

[14] Cf. *Rev* 1,20.

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