

# Why Did the Second Vatican Council Occur?

Kristopher W. Seaman

Pope John XXIII (now Blessed John XXIII) called the Second Vatican Council on January 25, 1959. His intention for doing so suggests that the Council was two-fold. First, the Council was to be pastoral. Just as a shepherd pastors his land and sheep, John XXIII, as the pope and pastor of the Roman Catholic Church, sought to build the faith of those within the Church. This Council was to do more than simply look inward to the faith of the Church's members; it was to be ecumenical as well. Today, when we hear the word "ecumenical," we usually think of the dialogue among various faith traditions with one another. In a broad sense, this dialogue tends to focus on the similarities and divergences on how various faith traditions understand and practice the faith. To be ecumenical, according to the Greek root of the word, means to take care of and order one's own household. The Second Vatican Council, as an ecumenical event, was an ordering of the household in the presence of representative Christians from other faith traditions, who listened to but could not formally take part in the proceedings. While historically the major councils of the fourth through sixth centuries dealt with right or correct faith (for instance, how we understand Christ Jesus as both fully divine and fully human comes from the early councils), the Second Vatican Council was pastoral. Again, pastoral because its first concern was to discuss how to build and strengthen faith as it is lived and practiced by all of the faithful.

The second reason John XXIII called the council was to "update" (*aggiornamento*) the Church to modern times. Western Europe since the eighteenth century Enlightenment had been growing more secular. At the same time, faith was increasingly viewed and practiced as a private and individual matter since the eighteenth century. The other reality, as Karl



Rahner, SJ, has suggested, was the rapidly growing reality of Christianity around the globe; the Church is not limited to Western Europe, but is global (particularly as the growing populations of Christians in various parts of Africa and Asia attest). The Council addressed these issues by introducing changes in the liturgy that included vernacular (local) languages, calling for an openness

to new styles of liturgical music, stressing concern for the Church's mission to evangelize (witnessing to and build Gospel faith), and highlighting the need for a more just and equitable social order. Of course, these are only a few of the concerns of the council that we know and experience regularly. Overall, this updating was not, as John XXIII stated, a changing of beliefs, but the updating of how beliefs are presented.

Of course, this concern is closely related to living faith. The human response to God's gift of salvation is faith. Faith is not only intellectual; it is also something that is felt and acted upon within human lives in daily activities. The Council met from 1962 through 1965, though John XXIII died in the summer of 1963. He attended only the first session of the Council. The Council continued under the newly elected Pope Paul VI.

The council was called to update the presentation of faith and to spiritually strengthen the the lives of all the faithful in the modern world. Giuseppe Alberigo, a noted historian of the Second Vatican Council, suggests that the council was indeed quite successful in its goals. Not only did the cardinals, archbishops, and bishops who voted to approve the final Conciliar documents welcome the documents, but the Church as a whole enthusiastically embraced the documents' contents (*A Brief History of Vatican II*, trans. Matthew Sherry [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006], 130).