

The Second Vatican Council and Pope St John XXIII's Opening Address

This past Wednesday, October 11, the Church celebrated the memorial of Pope St John XXIII, the Pope who convened the Second Vatican Council. Other than questions of sexual morality, there is perhaps no other subject in the Church today that provokes such diverse reactions – from outright rejection on the one hand to a grossly misguided embrace on the other, an embrace which believes that the Council did away with the Deposit of the Faith! Pope St John XXIII died while the Council was still in session. His successor, Pope St Paul VI, concluded the Council and was responsible for its initial implementation. In a letter to Archbishop Lefebvre, Pope Paul brought to a point these all too frequent misuses of the Council: “it remains true that some priests and members of the faithful mask with the name “Conciliar” those personal interpretations and erroneous practices that are injurious, even scandalous, and at times sacrilegious. But these abuses cannot be attributed either to the Council itself or to the reform[s] that have legitimately issued therefrom, but rather to a lack of authentic fidelity in their regard.” Much of what was done in the name of “VCII” did not actually come from the Council.

What is the solution to this? How can there be an “authentic fidelity” to the Second Vatican Council? Of course the answer is to study carefully what the Council actually said, its 16 documents, noting carefully what they did *and* did not say. While such a study would certainly be fruitful, I do believe that one of the most valuable writings is the opening address given by Pope St John XXIII. It is always helpful to start at the start and to try and see what was really in the mind of the one who convened the Council. To make good use of Pope John's address, though, or any of the Council documents, a person has to set themselves aside – their own desires, what they want the documents to say, etc., and try to really discern the will of the Lord

It might be helpful to clarify a few terms before reading Pope John's address. For one thing you will notice he uses the word ‘We’ (or our) when he is referring to himself; at times the word ‘we’ is used in the usual plural sense, e.g.: “It is but natural...we should like to look to the past...” But at other times he is clearly speaking of himself: “We uttered these words” and it is actually he (singular) who uttered those words. Papal use of the word ‘We’ (or our) when referring to himself was a long-standing tradition, especially in formal papal writings. One reason for this is because it is pointing out that the Pope is not to stand on his own when he speaks or teaches; he is, rather, to speak in union with all of his predecessors all the way back to the Apostles and to our Lord Himself; the ‘We,’ then, is a reminder that all teaching (especially dogmatic) must be consistent with all that has gone before him, consistent with what our Lord Himself has given us. The pope is also speaking for the whole Church and thus the use of ‘We’ also refers to the sense of all the faithful.

One other term is ‘Ecumenical Council.’ Ecumenical means universal, and of course a council is a gathering to discuss problems, questions, or issues at hand. Thus, an Ecumenical Council is a gathering, called by the Pope, of all the bishops in the world to address whatever issues the Pope proposes. There have been only 21 of these in the entire history of the Church. Ecumenical Councils are typically named after the place they were held. The Council of Trent, for example, is called the Council of Trent because it was held in the city of Trent. Vatican Council II is so named because it was (the second Council) held at the Vatican.

Unfortunately, there is not nearly enough room in a bulletin article to present Pope John's opening address in its entirety. His address alone is 5 pages in a Word document, not including my preliminary comments. It's my hope, then, that the few excerpts presented below will prompt you to go and thoughtfully read his entire address. It is interesting and easy to read. Here is one place it can be found online:

<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?RecNum=3233>. And now for Pope John's address:

Mother Church rejoices that, by the singular gift of Divine Providence, the longed-for day has finally dawned when—under the auspices of the virgin Mother of God, whose maternal dignity is commemorated on this feast—the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council is being solemnly opened here beside St. Peter's tomb.

THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS OF THE CHURCH. The Council[s]...all prove clearly the vigor of the Catholic Church and are recorded as shining lights in her annals.

In calling this vast assembly of bishops, the latest and humble successor to the Prince of the Apostles who is addressing you intended to assert once again the magisterium (teaching authority), which is unfailing and perdures until the end of time, in order that this magisterium, taking into account the errors, the requirements, and the opportunities of our time, might be presented in exceptional form to all men throughout the world. ...

The great problem confronting the world after almost 2000 years remains unchanged. Christ is ever resplendent as the center of history and life. Men are either with Him and His Church, and then they enjoy light, goodness, order, and peace. Or else they are without Him, or against Him, and deliberately opposed to His Church...

THE ORIGIN AND REASON FOR THE SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL. As regards the initiative for the great event which gathers us here, it will suffice to repeat as historical documentation our personal account of the first sudden bringing up in our heart and lips of the simple words, "Ecumenical Council." We uttered those words in the presence of the Sacred College of Cardinals on that memorable January 25, 1959, the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, in the basilica dedicated to him. It was completely unexpected, like a flash of heavenly light, shedding sweetness in eyes and hearts. And at the same time it gave rise to a great fervor throughout the world in expectation of the holding of the Council. ...

In the present order of things, Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by men's own efforts and even beyond their very expectations, are directed toward the fulfillment of God's superior and inscrutable designs. And everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church.

It is easy to discern this reality if we consider attentively the world of today, which is so busy with politics and controversies in the economic order that it does not find time to attend to the care of spiritual reality, with which the Church's magisterium is concerned. Such a way of acting is certainly not right ...

PRINCIPAL DUTY OF THE COUNCIL: THE DEFENSE AND ADVANCEMENT OF TRUTH. The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously. That doctrine embraces the whole of man, composed as he is of body and soul. And, since he is a pilgrim on this earth, it commands him to tend always toward heaven. ...

The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character.

HOW TO REPRESS ERRORS. At the outset of the Second Vatican Council, it is evident, as always, that the truth of the Lord will remain forever. We see, in fact, as one age succeeds another, that the opinions of men follow one another and exclude each other. And often errors vanish as quickly as they arise...

The Church has always opposed these errors. Frequently she has condemned them with the greatest severity. Nowadays, however, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations. Not, certainly, that there is a lack of fallacious teaching, opinions, and dangerous concepts to be guarded against and dissipated. But these are so obviously in contrast with the right norm of honesty, and have produced such lethal fruits, that by now it would seem that men of themselves are inclined to condemn them, particularly those ways of life which despise God and His law or place excessive confidence in technical progress and a well-being based exclusively on the comforts of life. ...

THE UNITY OF THE CHRISTIAN AND HUMAN FAMILY MUST BE PROMOTED..."The Church, surrounded by divine light, spreads her rays over the entire earth. This light, however, is one and unique, and shines everywhere without causing any separation in the unity of the body. She extends her branches over the whole world. By her fruitfulness she sends ever farther afield her rivulets. Nevertheless, the head is always one, the origin one, for she is the one mother, abundantly fruitful. We are born of her, are nourished by her milk, we live of her spirit" (De Catholicae Eccles. Unitate, 5).

Venerable brothers, such is the aim of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council... God bless you, Fr Kuhn.