

**THE VATICAN II COUNCIL**  
**PART I: THE OPENING OF THE COUNCIL**

I. Pope John XXIII astonished the Vatican and the world by calling for the Second Vatican Council, a decision that would change the history of the Church and of the world.

A. On October 28, 1958, the Cardinals elected the archbishop of Venice, 77 year old Cardinal Angelo Roncalli, with many perhaps most believing he would be a “transitional pope” to hold the see until the cardinals worked out how to respond to the rapidly changing world.

B. On January 25, 1959, the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, now Pope John XXIII astonished everyone by announcing to cardinals gathered in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome that he was calling for an ecumenical council, the first in 90 years, to present the Church anew to the world. See, e.g., “Vatican II Council: Light for the Church and for the Modern World” in Vatican Jubilee Initiative at [vatican.va](http://vatican.va).

- There had been 20 ecumenical, i.e. universal councils up to this time, some dealing with central matters of doctrine, and others dealing with reform within the Church. Ecumenical councils are the highest level of meetings of the bishops and the Pope; and often define infallible dogma. They are generally called in response to some crisis or crucial question that needs to be resolved. Although not an ecumenical council, the gathering of the Apostles in Jerusalem to resolve how the Jewish law applied to Gentile converts set a precedent. See Acts of the Apostles 15:1-29.
  
- In the early centuries of the Church, the Pope did not always call an ecumenical council, but his approval was always needed for one to be effective. In the Middle Ages, the Popes called eight ecumenical councils; and one more, the Council of Constance in the fourteenth century, initially met without papal approval, but then received it.
  
- Since the Middle Ages, there had only been three ecumenical councils up to that point, the Fifth Lateran Council of the early sixteenth century, the central Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century, and the First Vatican Council in 1870.
  
- Popes Pius XI and Pope Pius XII, who together had reigned from 1922 – 1958, had also considered calling an ecumenical council, particularly because of the rapid changes in the world, and because the previous council, Vatican I, has been interrupted in 1870 due to the Italian invasion of Rome. This fact became known to Pope John XXIII, but was not generally known to anyone outside the Vatican.

See “Vatican II Council: Light for the Church and for the Modern World” in Vatican Jubilee Initiative at [vatican.va](http://vatican.va).

C. The reaction to Pope John XXIII’s call was mixed.

1. Many of the cardinals thought that there was no need for a council, and in fact that it could open up controversies better left alone. Other cardinals, especially those of Germany, France and many missionary countries, did see the opportunity for reform.

2. Orthodox churches tended to welcome the council as an opportunity for a possible reconciliation. Protestant churches likewise saw the Council as a possible opportunity for dialogue. See Fr. John Vidmar, The Catholic Church Throughout the Ages (2005) 335-337. The press was generally very favorable, although often with some unrealistic expectations about what the Council would do, with many wanting a change in doctrine. See Fr. John O’Malley, What Happened at Vatican II (2008) 34-35.

D. Pope John XXIII considered the Council to be primarily a means of presenting the Church anew to the modern world and, hopefully reunifying Christianity.

1. His 1959 encyclical letter *Ad Petri Cathedram (The Chair of Peter)* said that the Council should focus on increasing of the faith, renewing the Church’s traditions, and reforming her practices. See “Vatican II Council: Light for the Church and for the Modern World.”

2. On Christmas, 1961, Pope John XXIII published *Humanae Salutis*, which described the reasons for the Council. In that document, he spoke of a world afflicted by spiritual crisis, which have led to devastation and could lead to more, but also of a vibrancy within the Church and her ability to bring hope to the world. He spoke of the goals of the Council in terms of promoting ever greater vitality and beauty within the Church, of promoting unity among Christians, and or presenting her gifts better to a world desperately in need of them.

3. At the eve of the Council, Pope John XXIII gave a homily *entitled Gaudet Mater Ecclesia (Mother Church Rejoices)*, in which he again stated that the primary goal of the Council was to defend and promote Catholic doctrine in the modern world. He noted the spiritual blindness common in the world, but said that the Church can use the opportunities now present to present the faith better than ever before. He also held out the prospect of increasing Christian unity and unity among all peoples.

4. A repeated theme of Pope John XIII and others in the years before the Council was also *aggiornamento*, which means a bringing up to date. The concept, which Cardinal Roncelli had already been using before his election, referred in this case to representing the faith, the liturgy and the practices of the Church to the world in a new and fresh way. See Kenneth Whitehead, The Renewed Church (2009) xvi, 9-10.

II. The preparation for the Council took almost four years, and involved 10 Preparatory Commissions, who took comments from bishops, leaders of religious orders, and other scholars throughout the world, and then prepared schemata on various subjects. Even during the preparation, it became apparent that the Council would be more extensive than expected.

A. The preparation was to take place in two phases.

1. First, the Ante-Preparatory Commission sent letters to all of the bishops of the world, the leaders of religious orders and other Catholic leaders such as the heads of pontifical universities and other leading theologians. The majority of those surveyed, including 77 percent of the bishops (1998) responded, and the Commission gathered together their comments into 12 volumes, with over 5000 pages.

2. Then, based upon these responses and their own views, 10 Preparatory Commissions prepared 72 schemata to be presented as the initial drafts to the Council.

a. The commissions were focused on: (1) Doctrine; (2) Bishops; (3) Oriental Churches, i.e., the Eastern Rite Churches; (4) Sacraments; (5) Discipline of Clergy and Laity; (6) Religious Orders; (7) Missions; (8) Liturgy; (9) Seminaries and Catholic Schools; and (10) The Apostolate of the Laity. Except the last, the commissions were all based on Congregations of the Vatican, and were headed by the Cardinal Prefect of that Congregation.

b. The Commissions employed over 650 clergy and a number of other experts called *periti* to draft 72 schemata, or draft documents for the Council. The schemata and the supporting documentation filled 32 volumes.

c. For the most part, the Commissions were guided by the Vatican Curia and people well known to them, for they were considered to be the experts and the ones most familiar with the whole Church.

B. The work had been immense, but as the Council approached, it was clear that matters were going to be more complex than expected.

1. When he called the Council, Pope John XXIII fully expected it to last only one session, perhaps going to two months. Most expectations were along similar lines.

2. However, the Archbishop of Brussels Cardinal Leon Suenens spoke with Pope John XXIII in March of 1962. And the Pope agreed that a plan for the Council should be drawn up. Cardinal Suenens then proposed that there should be two sessions, one for dealing with the outside world, presenting Church teachings anew (ad extra) with internal Church matters, such as liturgy and the approach to Revelation (ad intra.) He also thought that the 72 schemata were too many, and that the documentation should be reduced.

3. He shared his views with other Cardinals, including the Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini, who many people rightly expected would be elected as the next Pope. Cardinal Montini then circulated a letter in which he agreed with the basic insights of Cardinal Suenens, but proposed that there should be three sessions. The first would deal with what the Church is, the second with what she does, and the third with issues of the world at large. See Whitehead, The Renewed Church 16-20. These views would gradually guide the views of the bishops who would be gathering for the Council later that year. Consistent with the future Pope Paul VI's desire, "the central theme [of the Council was] the Church. From this, the Council explored the mystery, outlined the divine design of the constitution, deepened the nature, illustrated the mission, and re-evaluated the vocation of the laity and their part in the mission of the People of God." "Vatican II Council: Light for the Church and for the Modern World"

C. Meanwhile, on August 6, 1962, Pope John XXIII published the Regulations that would govern the conduct of the Council.

1. The Council would open on October 11, 1962, the Feast of the Maternity of Mary, with all clerics of bishop level invited to attend and vote. The bishops could bring experts called periti, and there would also be periti of the Council itself. Theologians and even representatives of the Orthodox Churches and Protestant denominations were also invited to attend, but not to vote. There were about 2500 bishops in attendance during the meetings of the Council.

2. The bishops would vote for 16 members for each of the 10 Conciliar Commissions that would cover the same subject matters and the Preparatory Commissions. (On October 22, Pope John XXIII added an 11<sup>th</sup> commission, for Christian Unity.) The Pope would appoint the chairman of each Commission and could appoint additional members, as he eventually would.

3. The Preparatory Commissions would present the schemata to the Council and ask for recommendations regarding improvements. Those recommendations would be discussed by the Council and the new commissions, who would draft revised documents. The Council would then vote on the revised documents, with a two thirds majority needed for approval.

III. When the Council opened in October of 1962, events took a very unexpected turn.

A. The Council was held in the shadow of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which in turn created the threat of a nuclear war. Most of the bishops of the Church were in attendance, but some of them, especially in Communist countries, were not allowed to leave their countries, and a few, as Pope John XXIII noted, were imprisoned by tyrannical regimes. Pope John's homily at the opening reflected this unease, but also optimism that the Church could be a shining example to the world. At that very moment, he was working on resolving the Cuban Missile Crisis, among other things with a letter to the Soviet premier Khrushchev and President Kennedy, a letter that would even be published by Pravda, the newspaper of the Soviet government in an attempt to portray the Khrushchev's willingness to compromise as a peace gesture.

B. On October 13, the first working day of the Council, the bishops were to elect members of the Conciliar Council, but things turned out differently.

1. The Preparatory Commissions had already nominated the proposed 16 members of each Conciliar Commission, and the vast majority of bishops thought that they would be voted in.

2. Cardinal Achille Leichardt, the Archbishop of Lille, France proposed that the elections be delayed in order for the bishops to get to know each other and be able to make an independent judgment regarding the best members for the Commission. The Archbishop of Cologne Germany, Joseph Frings immediately made a similar proposal and added that this idea was supported by the German speaking bishops. (Cardinal Frings peritus was a young professor, Fr. Joseph Ratzinger.) The proposals were well received and the bishops voted overwhelmingly to delay the vote on the members.

3. Over the next week, the bishops began drawing up new lists for the Commissions. There was some debate over voting procedures, but eventually the Commissions were filled with very different members than first expected.

4. The issue was not just the members of the Commissions, but also the fact that the bishops at the Council were going to exercise an independent voice, not simply make a few changes to documents already prepared.

C. The discussion of the schemata indicated that the Council was going to proceed in an unexpected direction.

1. The Preparatory Commission on Liturgy was the first to present its schema to the council; the constitution on the liturgy was called Sancrosanctum Concilium. On October 22, the Council began its consideration. The bishops did make a number of proposed changes, but the vast majority of speakers were in favor of it as a whole. After a three week discussion, the bishops voted 2147 – 4 to accept it as the basic text. Things had gone slower than expected, and it was clear that the Council was going to take longer than expected. But that document had basically cleared the preliminary hurdle.

2. On November 14, the Preparatory Commission on Doctrine presented its document On the Sources of Revelation. With regard to that document, there was much more criticism, including speeches by Cardinals Leichardt and Frings that it must be substantially revised. On November 20, by vote of 2209 – 1368, the bishops voted to send back the text for substantial revisions. Pope John XXIII then sent an instruction the next day for the document to be sent to a mixed commission with representation from both the Commission on Doctrine and the newly created Commission on Christian Unity.

3. On November 26, the Council took up the document On the Church, which most of them considered to be the most important. Once again, a heated discussion ensued. Cardinal Suenens made a crucial speech in which he argued that the bishops must go back and consider what the main goal of the Council would be. He argued that the Church must first discuss what she is at her essence and what she is called to do (ad intra focus) and then address the world regarding the great issues of the day (ad extra focus.) His speech was greeted with great enthusiasm. And on the next day, December 6, Pope John XXIII sent a communication, apparently agreeing with Cardinal Suenens. He said that, from now on, the work of the Conciliar Commissions would be under a Coordinating Commission.

D. The First Session concluded with a Mass on December 8. The Council had not approved any documents yet, but as Cardinal Ratzinger would later say, that was an accomplishment, for it indicated that it was taking the issues very seriously.

E. There would be three more sessions, and much more work in between, continued under the pontificate of Pope Paul VI. The Council would eventually approve four constitutions and twelve other documents, nine decrees and three declarations, which would set guide the Church to live out and teach her ancient faith in the modern world.