

Celebration of the 50th anniversary of the opening of the 2nd Vatican Council and the opening of the Year of Faith 11 October 1962-2012

Based on the Vigil of Pentecost with meditations by Monsignor John Allen

Introduction

This is a diary from 1959. It's from my student days in Rome. And it records that on the 25th January 1959 I walked to St Paul's basilica, and there that same day Pope John XXIII announced that there would be a General Council of the Church to be held in the near future. The Pope's announcement caused great interest. The last general Council of the Church, known as the Vatican Council, had been held in 1870 – nearly a century before.

The 2nd Vatican Council took nearly four years to prepare. It opened 50 years ago today, 11th October 1962. There were four sessions of the Council, meeting in the autumn of each year until 1965. It's probably impossible at this distance in time to gauge the excitement – even the importance – of Vatican2. At the time General de Gaulle of France called it the “greatest event of the 20th century”. Charles Malik, Secretary General of the United Nations, went further. He called it the “greatest event in several centuries”.

This evening we will look back on Vatican2 but we will also look forward – look forward into the Year of Faith Pope Benedict XVI has asked to keep and which begins today. We'll do this with the help of the readings for the Vigil of Pentecost. A Council of the Church and a Year of Faith both need the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

1) Genesis 11, 1-9

On 11 October 50 years ago the 2nd Vatican Council was due to get off to an early start. I was up at 5.25 in the morning and shortly afterwards off to St Peter's.

Nearly all the Catholic bishops in the world were also making their way to St Peter's – about 2,500 of them. They were shown into the two long corridors of the Vatican Museum. There they vested in cope and mitre ready for the start of the Council.

I'd been given a little job to do for the English bishops so I was with them there in the Vatican. I took the opportunity to walk the whole length of those two long corridors. There were bishops from all parts of the world: white and black and yellow; fat and thin; tall and short; old and not-so-old. As I walked along, the languages changed. It was a babble of different tongues, like at the tower of Babel.

That morning gave me one of the most formative moments of my life. Walking among all the bishops gave me a profound sense of the Catholicity (the universality) of the Church which has stayed with me ever since.

When all was ready the bishops were led down the Scala Regia and out into St Peter's Square, to go in procession through the main entrance into St Peter's basilica. I found myself in the front of that procession. It was four kilometres long! As we came into the square the papal MC was calling out "Seni, seni!" Nowadays not many people will know that "Seni" is the Latin for "six abreast". Even then "Seni" wasn't a word you used every day.

The poor MC wasn't having much success in being understood. He got more and more frustrated. "Seni, seni!" Anyway, the procession got into order and in we went into the basilica. Pope John XXIII came last, carried on his sedia gestatoria.

So began the opening Mass of the 2nd Vatican Council. Pope John presided over the tomb of St Peter and he spoke for what must have been a good hour. It was hot inside the basilica and people started to nod off. If you were to nod off now hardly anyone would notice. But when you are wearing a tall white mitre and your head starts to nod, then everyone can see. All round the basilica tall white mitres started to go down – and down – and down – until they suddenly jerked upright again! After all most of the bishops had travelled from far countries only the day before, and this was still early in the morning.

I'll say something about Pope John's opening speech later. Just for now, let me say how Vatican2 was just the opposite of the Tower of Babel.

First, it's hard to imagine it now, but at the Vatican Council all spoke the same language – Latin. Up to 50 years ago all Latin rite priests were trained in Latin. The lectures at the Gregorian University I attended were in Latin. So were the exams, orals as well. Communications between the Holy See and the universal Church were conducted in Latin. So the Bishops made their speeches at the Council in the universal language of the Western Church. They may have differed in their pronunciation but it was the same Latin language. So they understood one another.

And second, all the bishops at Vatican2 were of the same mind, in the sense that they all shared and loved the Catholic faith. But as their Latin pronunciation differed, so did their outlook. Again, I'll say something of this later. But enough to note now that Vatican2 was certainly not another tower of Babel.

2) Exodus 19: 3-8

"A kingdom of priests, a consecrated nation." In his speech opening the Council Pope John looked back over the 2000 years of the Church's history. Then he said: "by the light of this Council, we confidently trust that the Church will become greater in spiritual riches. Gaining strength and new energies from the Council, she will look to the future without fear. By bringing herself up to date wherever needed ... the Church will make ... all people really turn their minds to heavenly things."

Pope John was certainly optimistic. He disagreed with those he called “the prophets of gloom” ... “people [some of them in the Church] who can see nothing but calamities and ruin in these modern times.”

Pope John set out the “greatest concern of this Ecumenical Council: the sacred deposit of Catholic doctrine should be guarded and more efficaciously taught.” But then he went on to say: “The substance of the ancient teaching of the ‘depositum fidei’ [of the Church] is one thing: the manner in which it is presented is another.” The Church’s teaching had to be “pastoral”.

And he set the tone for the deliberations of the Council. Speaking of errors that the Church had condemned in the past he said: “Today however [the Church] prefers to use the medicine of mercy rather than of severity.”

And the aim of the Council? Unity. “... the unity of mankind.”

We have to keep Pope John’s opening speech in mind when we look at what the Council tried to achieve. The reading from Exodus spoke of “A kingdom of priests, a consecrated nation.” The most important document Vatican2 produced was the document on The Church [Lumen gentium]. It was the most debated and most amended of all the Council documents. It was finally approved in 1964.

Until this time, most documents about the Church had emphasised the importance of the Pope and the Bishops and their authority. That had to be done against the Protestant background of the times. But now the emphasis was put on all the faithful, whether cleric or lay. “A kingdom of priests, a consecrated nation.”

So the second chapter of the document on the Church was all about “The People of God”. And the People of God included all believers. Pope, bishops, priests, lay people all belong together in the People of God. It was only in the next chapter that Vatican2 went on to speak of the bishops and their place in the Church. St Augustine of Hippo comes to mind here. Many centuries before he had said to his people: “For you, I am a bishop. With you, I am a Christian.”

In the years since the Council this new emphasis on the People of God has been hugely important. Sometimes it’s been taken to excess. Pope Benedict when he was still a cardinal pointed out that the understanding of the Church as ‘the People of God’ has to be balanced by our understanding of the Church as ‘the Body of Christ’.

But a proper appreciation of the Church as ‘the People of God’ is one of the greatest achievements of Vatican2. “A kingdom of priests, a consecrated nation.”

3) Ezekiel 37: 1-14

That graphic reading is all about the people of God in the Old Testament, the Israelites. But it can light up for us the way the bishops in Vatican2 worked.

There were many bishops at the Council from what we call the Missions – Churches particularly in Asia and Africa which were still young and vigorous. Way into the third session of the Council, it became clear that there was to be no special document on these Churches. Instead the Council prepared a brief Statement about the Missions which many bishops found completely inadequate.

But how to do something better? Bishop Donal Lamont found a way. Bishop Lamont was an Irish Carmelite, a missionary bishop in Rhodesia [Zimbabwe]. In the Council Bishop Lamont said the Statement on the Missions had a lot to offer but it was far from perfect. It could be improved. It was a prop on which something far more useful could be mounted.

But, he said, the statement as it stood was lifeless. It was like the sun baked bones that lay strewn along the valley in the prophet Ezekiel's vision. "Ossa sicca" cried our Bishop Lamont in the Council, "Dry bones – ossa sicca!" He followed that up with Ezekiel's own rhetoric. "Can these bones live?" And all the bishops present said "No!" and general laughter broke out. Bishop Lamont and the missionary bishops got the recognition they needed. The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity was issued in 1965.

Not all differences in the Council were worked out as friendly or humorously as that. Sometimes there were tussles between bishops as they tried to wrench the microphone away from one another. There were no recorded instances of beard pulling though, as there were in earlier Church Councils!

But there was some tough talk as bishops from different theological or cultural outlooks clashed on matters of emphasis. Documents were sent back time and time again for re-drafting. They were worked and re-worked until a consensus was agreed. In the end, Pope Pius IX's advice to the bishops of Vatican1 won through: "You will find the Holy Spirit inside the Council, not outside!" Even using human instruments, the 'Breath of the Holy Spirit' put flesh on dry bones. And every text of Vatican2 is faithful to the deposit of faith – the Church's teaching.

4) Joel 3: 1-5

"I will pour out my spirit" says Joel, speaking for the Lord. So much has been said about the changes brought about by Vatican2 that the real vision has sometimes seemed lost. That vision is found in chapter 5 of the document on the Church [Lumen gentium]. The chapter is entitled "The call of the whole Church to holiness".

It's an inspired chapter. The universal call to holiness is a special emphasis of Vatican2. The bishops at Vatican2 saw the call to holiness as coming from two sources: from the Church and from Christ Jesus himself.

The way we attain holiness and the perfection of charity depends on our situation and duties, using our strengths and talents as a gift from Christ. Our basic attitude must be to accept all things as coming from the loving hand of God, and to aim to do all things in accordance with God's will and out of love for him.

The Council mentions different paths to holiness: of bishops, priests, clerics, married persons, and those who suffer. Holiness is first of all a gift of grace. But we must cooperate with this grace, completing what God has begun in us. [n. 42]

What helps us? The sacraments, especially the Eucharist, participation in the liturgy, prayer, self-denial, service of our brothers and sisters, and the practice of all the virtues. All we do is to be ruled by charity.

The Council mentions some exceptional expressions of love, which not all Christians are called to, namely Martyrdom and the three evangelical counsels of Virginité, Poverty, and Obedience. The chapter sums it all up like this: "all the faithful of Christ are invited to strive for holiness and perfection. Indeed they have an obligation to so strive."

5) Romans 8: 22-27

This passage of St Paul's letter to the Romans gives a vivid picture of how the Holy Spirit works. The Holy Spirit certainly worked through Vatican2. This is the place to give a short summary of the main achievements of the Council and how they affect us still. This means looking at the Council's documents and giving just two or three sentences on each!

First, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen gentium]. Its approach was above all pastoral. It sees the Church as a Communion. Bishop Holland went to the heart of the matter when he came back from the Council and spoke in Salford Cathedral. What he wanted to see from the Council was that we should be "one single family, one community, all consciously united in the bonds of truth and love."

Then, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation [Dei Verbum]. There are not two sources of revelation, scripture and tradition. No. Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture together make one sacred deposit of the Word of God. All the faithful are encouraged to read the Scriptures frequently and so learn the "excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:8).

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [Sacrosanctum Concilium]. The Liturgy is the true worship of God by people who share the priesthood of Christ. The public worship of the Church is therefore for all the faithful. The Liturgy may now be celebrated in the language of the people. The Lectionary has been revised. Ministries (such as the ministries of reader, of Holy Communion) have been formed.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World [Gaudium et Spes]. This – the longest document of Vatican2 – deals with fundamental questions everyone is called to answer at some time. Who am I? What am I here for? And so on. Only in the person of the Word made flesh do we see who we are. It is Christ who binds us together and leads us to the Father.

Those were the four Constitutions. There were also nine Decrees – on Communications; Ecumenism; Eastern Churches; Bishops; Priestly Formation; Religious Life; Laity; Priests; and Missions. And three Declarations – on Education; non-Christians; and Religious Freedom.

I won't go into these except to say this about the Decree on Ecumenism: before the Council we viewed other Christians as separated brethren with the emphasis on separated. After the Council they are still separated brethren but the emphasis is now very much on brethren. And the Declaration on non-Christians has transformed our relations particularly with the Jewish community.

There is only one way to discover the riches of Vatican2 and that is to read the documents. That is an important step forward in the Year of Faith. Over to you!

6) John 20: 19-23

“Here I am Lord ... I will go, Lord, if you lead me ... I will hold your people in my heart.” Vatican2 was a missionary Council. It was outward looking. It wanted the unity of all mankind. Pope Benedict has called this Year of Faith with that same idea. He wants us Catholics to rediscover the gift of our faith and to seek new ways of proclaiming that faith.

The faith is our greatest treasure. But our faith is not meant to be kept to ourselves. We are to profess our faith and share it. During this Year of Faith we are asked to reflect seriously on our journey with God; to examine in what ways God is inviting us to change and to grow.

We have so much to help us. We have the holy sacrifice of the Mass. We have the other Sacraments, including Penance. We have the Word of God. We have the companionship (the communion) of family, of parish, maybe of school and college. What am I going to do to grow in faith in this Year of Faith? A good question to consider as we pray.

We're going now to pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament exposed on the altar. That will finish in 20 minutes with Benediction. Pope John XXIII chose the 11th October to open Vatican2 because in the calendar then it was the feast of the Motherhood of Our Lady. During the Council his successor Pope Paul VI gave Our Lady the title 'Mother of the Church'. So before exposition let's sing in prayer to Mary, Mother of the Church and our Mother. 'O Mother blest'