

A Brief History of Vatican II

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Cover: On 25 December 1961 Pope John XXIII signs the document convoking Vatican Council II (photo from Catholic News Service).

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Motu Proprio
Commissiones
Concilii Vaticano secundo apparando
instituiuntur

Ioannes P. XXIII

Superno Dei nutu factum esse reputavimus quod Nobis, ad Pontificale Solium rix erectis, Concilii Oecumenici celebrandi, veluti flos inexpectati veris, subit cogitatio. Ex hoc quippe sollemni circa Pontificem Romanum sacrorum Antistitum coetu novum ampliorem, que, in hisce perturbatis temporibus, Ecclesia, dilecta Sponsa Christi, haurire potest splendorem, novaque opes offertur ut ii, qui christiano nomine decorantur, et sunt nibilo minus ab hac Sede Apostolica seivneti, divini Factoris vocem audientes, ad unicam Christi veniant Ecclesiam.

et singula, uti decreta sunt, ita rata et firma esse et manere volumus ac iubemus: contrariis non obstantibus quibuscumque.

Datum Romae, apud Sanctum Petrum, die V mensis Junii, in festo Pentecostes, anno MCMLX, Pontificatus Nostri secundo.

Ioannes XXIII

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Catholic News Service

On June 5, 1960, Pope John XXIII issued the Motu Proprio (a document prepared "on his own initiative") *Superno Dei nutu*, which set up the preparatory commissions for Vatican II.

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The Proclamation of the Council (1959–1962)

A Surprise Announcement

“Standing before you I tremble somewhat with emotion but am humbly resolute in my purpose to proclaim a twofold celebration: a diocesan synod for the city of Rome, and a general Council for the universal Church.” With these words, on January 25, 1959, less than ninety days after his election as the successor to Pius XII, Pope John XXIII announced his decision to convene a new council during a speech to a small group of cardinals gathered in the Roman basilica of St. Paul’s Outside the Walls for the concluding liturgy of the week of prayer for Christian unity.¹ The pope added that the synod and council “would fortunately lead to the long-desired updating of the Code of Canon Law.”

These were for him “the highest forms of apostolic activity that these three months of contact with the ecclesiastical atmosphere in Rome have suggested” and were announced with no intention other than that of “fostering the good of souls and bringing the new pontificate into clear and definite correspondence with the spiritual needs of the present day.” It was, the pope continued, “a decisive resolution to recall some ancient ways of affirming doctrine and setting prudent guidelines for ecclesiastical discipline, which have produced extraordinarily rich fruit during times of renewal in the Church’s history.”

So this was a firmly held conviction, which John XXIII had developed by thinking about how effective other Councils had been for the renewal of the Church. The pope also affirmed that “the celebration of the ecumenical Council is not only intended for the edification of the Christian people, it is also an invitation to the separated communities in the quest for unity, which joins so many souls from every quarter of the world.”

The conclave had elected Cardinal Angelo Roncalli, Bishop of Venice, as pope on October 28, 1958, in the context of a transitional pontificate, one that would be brief and would help to heal, through its tranquility, the

traumas of the long and dramatic reign of Pius XII. Certainly no one expected any overwhelming surprises from a pope nearly eighty years old, far less a surprise of such magnitude. For his part, John XXIII left no doubt about the definitive character of his decision to convene a council. He even showed that he was fully aware of the extraordinary nature of what he was doing, of this action undertaken as an exercise of papal primacy, requiring no participation from anyone else. It is no accident that the pope spoke of his “decisive resolution” and later remarked in his *Journal of a Soul* that “the ecumenical Council was entirely the initiative” of the pope.²

His announcement was unexpected and surprising for almost all sectors of the Church, which were dominated by the climate of the Cold War between the Soviet bloc and the Western bloc and satisfied with a Catholicism unyielding in its certainties. But the pope had spoken about “times of renewal.” He believed, in fact, that the Church was on the threshold of an historical juncture of extraordinary intensity, in which it was necessary

to specify and distinguish between what belongs to the realm of sacred principles and the perennial gospel, and what changes with the passing of time . . . We are entering a period that might be called one of universal mission . . . and we need to make our own the admonition of Jesus to recognize the “signs of the times” . . . and to discern amid such great darkness the many indications that give good cause for hope.³

But objectively, the relationship between the two blocs was always on the point of erupting into conflict: from the Korean War (1950) to the construction of the Berlin Wall (1961) to the nuclear missile crisis in Cuba (1962), the world seemed to have backed itself into a corner. It is true that the young president elected in November of 1960 in the United States—John F. Kennedy, a Catholic—aroused enthusiasm and opened up the prospects for renewal, but it is difficult to know how significant this was for the decision of the elderly pope.

In the areas characterized by a strong Christian presence, in the Northern Hemisphere, there was a widespread conviction that the churches had no choice but to support the anti-communist efforts of the Western bloc. But this was offset by a growing sense of disquiet nourished by the conviction that the centuries-old reciprocal support between political institutions and churches was in definitive decline. The modern version of Christendom seemed less and less a relevant and convincing model.

To many, the pope’s age itself seemed contradictory in terms of a complex project that would take a long time to implement. Some, like French theologian Congar, maintained that different problems were in different phases of maturation and that, “from the theological point of view, above all in regard to the unity of the Christian Churches, it seemed that the Council was being held twenty years too soon.”⁴

But something new had been happening in Catholicism, something that had been under way for a long while. Because of it, many ideas were changing, though it would still be a number of years before the emergence of bishops guided by ideas grounded in the Bible and tradition, and by a missionary and pastoral consciousness. Many, however, had made strides in their own understanding, and the very proclamation of the Council, with its ecumenical perspective, together with the more humane and Christian atmosphere of John XXIII's pontificate, promised to accelerate the process of renewal.

What was the significance of the announcement on January 25? Was one to expect the conclusion of the Rome council interrupted way back in 1870 by the conflict between France and Prussia? Would it be an occasion to reaffirm Roman Catholicism's understanding of itself, in substantial continuity with the almost supernaturally aloof personality of Pope Pius XII? Or was there room for something different? And, if so, what would the Council be able to do? The enthusiasm with which public opinion had greeted the announcement had nothing to do with these questions, but at the same time it shed light on an unsuspected reservoir of readiness and longing.

Who was this pope who, less than one hundred days after his election, called the Church to council from the four corners of the earth, launching the Roman Church into an adventure so daunting that the very prospect of it had made his predecessors turn aside? Born on November 25, 1881, into an extended family of sharecroppers in Sotto il Monte (in the province of Bergamo), Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli received a traditional upbringing. His family environment, with many children and scant economic means, was characterized by a robust sense of rural piety. "May our work cry aloud to the clergy and to all the people, the work by which we desire to 'prepare for the Lord a perfect people, make straight his paths, that the crooked ways be made straight, and the rough ways become smooth, that everyone may see the salvation of God.'"

This is how Roncalli—after his surprising choice of the name John—summarized the aims of his pontificate on October 28, 1958. A few days later, on the occasion of his coronation, he emphasized his commitment to being a good pastor, according to the description in the tenth chapter of the gospel of John, adding that "the other human qualities—knowledge, shrewdness, diplomatic tact, organizational abilities—can help the pope to carry out his office, but they can in no way substitute for his task as a pastor."

The Church was like a household for Roncalli, and the study of history had always fascinated him, so he had considered with some interest the significant role that the councils of earlier centuries had played in the life of the Christian community. This interest was, however, unusual in the general intellectual context of the Italian clergy at the time. He might have been more directly influenced to think of the opportunity for a new

council by the intellectual currents circulating through the Christian world during the entire first half of the twentieth century. These ranged from the projects of the Eastern Orthodox Churches to the proposals favored by Pius XI and Pius XII to reconvene and conclude the Vatican council suspended in 1870. Roncalli, however, was not himself involved in these projects.

The turning point came with the awareness, conferred on him by his election to the papacy, that he was in a position of singular responsibility. On January 20, the “rather hesitant and uncertain” pope had informed secretary of state Cardinal Tardini, for the sake of protocol, of his “program for the pontificate: a Roman synod, an ecumenical Council, and the updating of the Code of Canon Law, assuming a full consensus and mandate.”⁵

The convocation of the new council was essentially the fruit of one of the pope’s personal convictions, which had long been growing within him. It was reinforced by other people, and finally, it became an authoritative and irrevocable decision within three months of his election to the pontificate.

The announcement of January 25 was irreversible; in the following months and years, Catholicism, the other Christian traditions, and even the secular world would have to come to terms with Roncalli’s decision. The Catholic Church had entered a new and unforeseen phase of its history. Previously known as an element of continuity and identity for Western society, the Roman papacy began to provide an impulse toward change and renewal, even of society itself.

An Unexpected Response

The proclamation of the Council was greeted by a wide response from very different social and cultural circles, far beyond Roman Catholicism’s ordinary domain of Western Europe and North America. This was one of the first indications of the universal impact that John XXIII’s papacy and the Council would have. It is almost impossible to get an overall view of the first reactions and comments sparked by the announcement. The news spread all over the world in just a few hours, arousing attention, interest, and expectations with such a range of both fundamental and subtle differences that even the most accurate account cannot fully document them. The immediate general impression was that a profound change was taking place in the heart of Catholicism; everyone had a different idea of which outcomes and developments were most important, but what is really striking is the hope and expectation created in so many circles.

In view of this climate it is astonishing that *L’Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican’s newspaper, published only the press release from the secretariat of state, and that *La Civiltà Cattolica*—the Jesuits’ authoritative biweekly

magazine—completely ignored the announcement during the first quarter of 1959, apart from reproducing that same meager press release in its news summary. The first sign of interest appeared in the edition of April 25, 1959, with a collection of comments on the announcement taken from the press. But the magazine did not dedicate a full article to the announcement during the whole of 1959.

According to a letter sent to Milan Archbishop Montini from an authoritative observer, Giuseppe De Luca: “The Rome that you know and were exiled from [by Pius XII’s decision to send Montini to Milan] shows no sign of changing, even though it seemed that it must sooner or later. After their initial fright, the old buzzards are coming back. Slowly, but they’re coming back. And they are coming with a thirst for new carnage and fresh revenge. That macabre circle is tightening around the *carum caput* [John XXIII]. Without a doubt, they are back.”⁶

It was bitterly clear that an “institutional isolation” would characterize the pontificate of John XXIII, when the pope’s institutional collaborators, and above all the congregations of the Curia, would create opposition to the pope’s intentions, leaving him alone. John XXIII’s isolation is well documented in a retrospective letter by Italian Benedictine Fr. Cipriano Vagaggini, who from firsthand experience pointed out

a few details that might be able to confirm what is known from other sources.

1. I recall that when the first meeting of consultants for the Liturgical Commission was held at the Vatican, Fr. Bugnini, the commission’s secretary, introduced us to Archbishop Felici, secretary for the Council. Among the other things he said, Archbishop Felici told us something I have never forgotten. He said that when Pope John announced the Council, the Roman Curia asked that the topics for discussion be determined by sending a detailed questionnaire to the bishops, theologians, etc., asking them what they thought about the questions posed. This was, naturally, a way of drastically limiting from the outset the questions that could be considered at the Council. Archbishop Felici told us that Pope John did not permit this, but said that the parties concerned must simply be asked what were, in their judgment, the questions that should be considered at the Council. This is, in fact, what was done.

According to Archbishop Felici, the Roman Curia also asked Pope John that the head of each pre-conciliar and conciliar commission be the prefect of the corresponding Roman dicastery. For example, the prefect of the Holy Office would head the commission on doctrine, the prefect of the Congregation of Rites would head the commission on the liturgy, etc. The secretary of each of these commissions would also be the secretary of the corresponding dicastery. This was an attempt to put the entire organizational structure into the hands of the

Roman Curia. Archbishop Felici told us that Pope John gave his permission that the prefect of the individual commissions be the prefect of the respective Roman dicastery, but he wanted the commission secretaries to be selected from outside of the Roman Curia. And that is what took place.

2. After Pope John had proclaimed the Council at St. Paul's Outside the Walls, a secretary of one of the cardinals (perhaps Cardinal Fietta) told me the following. A few days before the meeting, the cardinals had been notified that the pope would be going to St. Paul's, and they were asked to be present because the pope was going to speak to the cardinals and the monks in the monastery's chapter room, and he had important things to say. The secretary brought this to the cardinal's attention and encouraged him to attend. The cardinal replied: "What sort of important thing could he say on such an occasion? He will give an exhortation to the monks, nothing more." He didn't go, and of course he was chagrined when he heard about the announcement of Vatican Council II. This episode proves that at least a large part of the Roman Curia did not know about the pope's intentions before the official proclamation. If it had been known, it would have spread immediately throughout the Curia.

3. One more episode demonstrates that even the most competent circles of the Curia knew nothing about the pope's intention to convene a council. I was at the pontifical college of Sant' Anselmo when it happened. The day after the official announcement, one of my confreres, who was a consultant for the Holy Office and worked rather frequently at the Curia, went over to that congregation. That evening when he returned he was utterly amazed and excited, saying that everyone at the congregation was agitated and couldn't understand how a pope could suddenly announce a council without first consulting the appropriate sections of the Curia and preparing for what was not at all an easy task. The moral of the story is that when Pope John announced Vatican Council II, not even the congregation of the Holy Office was aware of what was happening.

These are minor details, but they demonstrate how it was Pope John personally who wanted to call the Council; how the Roman Curia, or at least much of it, was unaware of this; and how the Curia then tried to take control of Council proceedings, but without support from Pope John.⁷

The pope's initiative may have received public appreciation from the bishops rather slowly, but it found a particularly ready reception and a sympathetic attitude among the sectors that had been hoping for, conceiving, and experimenting with the liturgical, biblical, and ecumenical renewal of Catholicism. The inner circles of these movements likewise quickly perceived in the new pope a welcoming and fully sympathetic attitude, in

stark contrast with the cold and somewhat mistrustful attitude of his predecessor. While it is relatively easy to find out the reactions of the most prominent groups, it is almost impossible to make an account of all the comments made through the most disparate means of communication, from diocesan and parish newspapers to radio stations and television networks.

The announcement did not escape the vigilant attention of the mayor of Florence, Giovanni La Pira, who called it an event “of immense supernatural and historical significance.” A few months later he noted that “the Council itself is the essential ‘political’ event upon which depend peace among peoples and their future political, social, cultural, and religious organization.”⁸

An “Ecumenical” Council?

John XXIII’s announcement was a turning point in the laborious quest for Christian unity, providing an unforeseen catalyst. That the pope should be the one to take the initiative for unity among the churches and to outline the process in terms of cooperation toward creating “a single flock,”⁹ and no longer in terms of returning to the past, was unexpected almost to the point of being unbelievable. It provoked disparate reactions and required a complete rethinking of ecumenical strategy.

Even in relation to this aspect of the announcement, before the reactions of the “qualified experts” and their circles, there was a manifestation of interest from many non-Catholic Christians who intuitively saw in John XXIII a fraternal attitude rather than the old hostility. Toward the end of March 1959 the representative of the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople at the World Council of Churches, Metropolitan Iakovos of Malta, arrived in Rome. Pope John received him as a special representative of Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, who had responded immediately to the pope’s message of January 1, 1959.¹⁰ There was, moreover, a very lively interest in the prospects for the Council on the part of the other Orthodox Churches. A Greek newspaper emphasized early on that “we now find ourselves facing a new situation.” The Coptic Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate of Antioch also expressed their attentive consideration of the pope’s initiative.

The most rapid reaction to the announcement came from the Geneva headquarters of the World Council of Churches—a consortium of the Christian Churches removed from Rome, the “separated brothers and sisters”—through the initiative of Willem A. Visser ’t Hooft, a pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church and secretary general of the WCC. As early as January 27 Visser’t Hooft expressed a “very particular interest” in John XXIII’s gesture toward Christian unity; two weeks later the executive commission of the WCC made this declaration its own. The Geneva group was not only attentive to the new vibrations emanating from Rome, but it

also had a lively interest in keeping Rome from monopolizing a new ecumenical phase. It asked itself what the meaning of the expression *ecumenical council* might be; that is, whether it implied the direct participation of other Christian Churches or simply an invitation to a common search for unity.

The Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury took the initiative of sending a cleric, I. Rea, with a letter for John XXIII; this was a prelude to the archbishop's consequent visit to Rome. But the announcement from Rome also provoked uncertainty and reservations, which were based upon a lack of trust toward the Catholic Church and its usual dogmatic and institutional positions. It was thought crucial that any excessively easy agreement be avoided, because in the enthusiastic climate of a revived emphasis on harmony at all costs, this might leave unresolved the problems that needed to be faced with sincerity and realism.

A few months after the first announcement of the Council, it became clear that while the pope's effort to imbue the Council itself with a special significance for inter-Christian relations had been very well received by public opinion, it was coming up against serious obstacles, both in Rome and in the most authoritative non-Catholic circles, from the World Council of Churches in Geneva to the Greek Orthodox patriarchates. Some Catholics had trouble overcoming the age-old hostilities toward the "heretics" (Protestants) and the "schismatics" (Eastern Orthodox), and others feared that the pope's initiative concealed intentions of domination and pointed toward the absorption of other Christians into the Roman Church.

It is surprising that in spite of the overwhelming secularization—at least in the West—that made the very notion of a council difficult to grasp, John XXIII's announcement unleashed a great outburst of attention, interest, and above all, anticipation from public opinion. The people—believers and nonbelievers, Catholics and non-Catholics—instinctively understood that the elderly pope's initiative was a highly significant act and saw in it a sign of hope, a sign of confidence in the future and in the prospects for renewal. They also showed a willingness—unsophisticated, perhaps, but authentic—to become involved, a willingness that they felt was welcomed. Almost without any assistance, the pope's initiative reached millions of people and convinced them of their own potential for liberation and innovation. The Cold War climate between the ideologically opposed capitalist and communist blocs had introduced habits of watching over and even suppressing manifestations of spontaneity. But on this occasion, the control mechanisms were overwhelmed by a spontaneous and enthusiastic response to the announcement, which promised liberation from ideological barriers and unleashed new hope.

One interesting reverberation of the January 25 announcement can be seen in the reports made from Rome by the diplomatic representatives accredited to the Holy See or to the Italian republic. Some of them, like those at the U.S. embassy, were preoccupied with the uncertain fate of the

Italian government and practically ignored the announcement. But a number of others, like those at the embassy of the federal republic of Germany, began asking what the practical effects of these ecumenical aspirations would be. The highest Soviet officials in Moscow were raising some rather sophisticated questions.¹¹

What Kind of Council?

Not even the full text of the January 25 announcement responded to the many questions that it raised. The information on the nature of the upcoming council was very sparse and left a lot of room for the most disparate hypotheses and flights of fancy. It is also true that John XXIII did not give birth to a fully formed council, like Minerva springing from the brain of Jupiter. Its aims and nature were gradually sketched out, tested, and deepened in terms of their weight and implications as the pope continued to reflect upon them. His thought was also affected by the response and criticism from the Church and from other Christians, by the development of world events, and finally by the beginning of preparations for the Council itself.

During the two months following the announcement, debate on the upcoming Council was undertaken with some difficulty. It seemed that no one really knew what to say. Was it perhaps that no one dared to express points of view that the pope might not like? Or was there still some hope that the idea would simply fade away? Was this a matter of real disorientation over an unforeseen eventuality? People who had thought they were imprisoned in a rigid system of Church life and theological reflection now found that they were alive and free, but it was difficult for them to regain the exercise of that liberty. Nevertheless, something was beginning to happen.

It was only at the end of April 1959 that Pope John formulated the fundamental aim of the Council: to increase Christians' commitment to their faith, "to make more room for charity . . . with clarity of thought and greatness of heart."¹² Having established that, he did not hesitate to characterize the upcoming Council in absolutely traditional terms. That is, it would be a free and responsible council of bishops, and thus it would be able to conduct effective deliberation—but it would do so with the *sui generis* participation of representatives from the non-Catholic Christian Churches.

This created the necessity of continually distinguishing between the Council and the Curia. The Curia was responsible for the daily business and ordinary management of Church life, and this had to be distinguished clearly from the Council and preparations for it. This was another means of emphasizing the pope's intention that the Council be situated in a context outside of the ordinary and that the powerful structure of the Curia be

prevented from taking control of it. The pope wanted a council that would mark the end of an era; a council, that is, that would usher the Church out of the post-Tridentine era, and to a certain extent out of the centuries-old Constantinian phase, and into a new phase of witness and proclamation. The major permanent elements of tradition judged most suitable would be enlisted to nourish and guarantee fidelity to the gospel during such an arduous transition.

With the approach of the Feast of Pentecost—the liturgical commemoration of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles—John XXIII began to refer to the Council as a “new Pentecost.”¹³ The image of a new Pentecost would come to be habitually associated with the conciliar assembly, to the point of being included in the pope’s prayer for the Council, in which he asked the Holy Spirit to renew “your wonders in our own age, as in a new Pentecost.” Nevertheless,

little by little, the hopes raised by the proclamation of the Council were obscured as though by a thin layer of ashes. There was a long silence, a sort of blackout, interrupted only occasionally by some cheerful statement from the pope. But these declarations were rather vague, and seemed to retreat from the stance of the original announcement. This was widely noticed, even though the pope himself declared publicly that his intentions had not changed.¹⁴

This note from the middle of 1959 by French Dominican theologian Congar is a good example of the perception and assessment of the situation in Rome during those months. Thus the decision to form a “pre-preparatory commission” for the Council, made public on May 17, 1959, came as a surprise. Plans for the Council had not been abandoned, after all. This was all the more important in that preparations had already begun for the synod of the Diocese of Rome, which had been announced together with the Council.

Who Was Involved in the Council Preparations? (1959–1960)

A restricted initial group responsible for preparing for the Council had been formed as early as February 6, 1959. Using as a model the preparations for the Vatican Council of 1870, this was made up of a restricted commission of cardinals with a support staff of specialists in the areas of doctrine, canon law, Church discipline, and the separated churches. The papal declaration issued on Pentecost established the composition of the commission and determined its tasks.¹⁵ Almost all of the ten members were Italians who worked in Rome, and all of the congregations of the Roman Curia had been guaranteed representation. The presidency was assigned to Cardinal Domenico Tardini, the secretary of state; the secretary of the

commission was an obscure auditor of the Vatican tribunal (the Roman Rota), Pericle Felici. Not even the analogous commission named by Pius XII to prepare for a future council had been so completely monopolized by the Curia.

The group's task was to gather material that would permit the start of preparations for the Council's work. The commission was to delineate the topics to be considered at the Council and to formulate proposals for the composition of working bodies that would manage the real and proper preparation for the Council itself. The commission, which was labeled the Pre-preparatory Commission, wanted to prepare a questionnaire that would be sent to all bishops, soliciting their views; their responses would then be analyzed by this same commission. Their outline of likely topics for the Council's work included the priestly and lay ministries, the family, the nature of the Church, relations between Church and state, the adaptation of ecclesiastical organization to the needs of modern times, the missions, relations between bishops and religious, and social doctrine. Support also grew for the opinion that it would be helpful if the various congregations of the Curia would play some role in managing the topics of their expertise. What was entirely missing was an organic, overall vision of the Council's activity.

But the novelty in all this was found in the fact that John XXIII had entrusted responsibility for this phase to the secretariat of state and not to the feared—and sometimes hated—Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office (formerly the Inquisition). By doing this, he prevented the “supreme congregation” from enjoying a monopoly over the Council. This decision clearly showed the pope's preference that the Council not be prepared in the traditionally doctrinaire style and intransigent atmosphere of the Holy Office. It was a decision that entailed a great number of consequences and provoked many reactions.

The pope, moreover, by declining to entrust the preparation for the Council to a commission outside of the Curia, also performed an act of trust and delegation. This was inspired by his desire and hope to attain the Curia's loyalty in regard to the Council. And yet the Roman and Curial composition of the Pre-preparatory Commission was the object of a lively response, especially outside of Italy. Was the Council, then, entrusted to an exclusive group of high-level bureaucrats, the majority of whom were not even formally bishops? These reactions influenced the various phases of the commission's work, especially when it came to the question of consulting the bishops and the Roman Curia; the principle was established that all the bishops, not only some, should be consulted, in contrast with procedures under both Pius XI and Pius XII.

With the failure of the idea of consulting the bishops by means of a questionnaire, the pope invited everyone to indicate the problems and topics that the Council should consider. During the following months about two thousand responses came to the Vatican from all over the world.

The majority of these writings demonstrated surprise and disorientation. Rome was not issuing orders, but was asking for suggestions! Many hoped that the Council would occupy itself with topics of only modest importance; very few had wide horizons and were accustomed to taking bold points of view.

The pope's decision to begin a pre-preparatory phase thus retrieved the announcement of the Council made four months earlier from its condition of uncertainty and confirmed his intention to follow through with it. But some circles were counting on a period of delay that, given the pope's advanced age, might mean setting the Council aside definitively. So it came as a turning point all the more significant in this climate when on July 14, 1959, John XXIII wrote to Cardinal Tardini about the name for the Council; it would be called Vatican II. The pope thus affirmed unequivocally that this would be a new council, not a completion of Vatican I, which had been left unfinished in 1870. And because the Council would be new, its agenda would be entirely free and open. It would not be the continuation of a council convened and then interrupted in a historical context of conflict and pessimism (the pope as a prisoner in the Vatican). It would be a blank page in the centuries-old history of the councils.

The first six months of the time leading up to Vatican II seemed intended above all for putting an end to the surprise and disorientation occasioned by the announcement. The pope confirmed his decision and gradually unveiled how he saw the Council. The Roman Curia also turned an eye toward the matter, cherishing dreams of obtaining control. The Catholic bishops were shocked by the invitation to assume an active role at the level of the universal Church, and it would take some effort to create an atmosphere of inquiry after the long period of passivity experienced during the preceding pontificates. (Fr. Milani would shout, "Obedience is not a virtue anymore!")

The response from the bishops, an enormous amount of material, has received various interpretations. Some point to the later attitudes of the bishops at the Council and say that the first opinions they sent in were inspired by a preconiliar mentality and are devoid of value. Others see in them a somewhat colorless self-portrait of the Church on the eve of the Council. The sorting of the responses was undertaken at the beginning of September 1959 and concluded at the end of January 1960. The work involved was staggering; in order to manage it, an index had to be compiled, "An Analytical Synthesis of the Advice and Suggestions from the Bishops" (*Analyticus conspectus consiliorum et votorum quae ab episcopis et praelatis data sunt*). It divided the material into eighteen parts and was imposing in its own right; it came to more than fifteen hundred pages.

After this, the syntheses were broadly classified by geographical area, and between February 13 and April 1 John XXIII was familiarized with their contents. At last there was produced a brief "Final Synthesis of the Advice and Suggestions from the Most Reverend Bishops and Prelates of

the Whole World for the Future Ecumenical Council.” This concluded the work of the Pre-preparatory Commission. On the basis of this synthesis, the secretary of the Pre-preparatory Commission composed during July 1960 “Questions Posed to the Preparatory Commission of the Council” (*Quaestiones commissionibus praeparatoriis Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II posita*). There were fifty-four topics divided into eleven categories.

The theological circles that had grasped most quickly the novelty of John XXIII’s pontificate and his proclamation of the Council were engaged in putting the ideas into order. They were frequently dumbfounded at the idea that room for renewal had really been opened up. Non-Catholic Christians seemed to be divided between their initial good-natured anticipation and the cautiousness that followed. Can Rome change? they seemed to ask themselves, incredulous and perhaps mistrustful. In any case, plans for the Council had not been aborted, and a complex and contentious phase of preparation was under way.

The Official Preparations (1960–1962)

Preparing for an assembly composed of thousands of participants was a very complex task. On June 5, 1960, a central commission and ten commissions for the different thematic areas were named in Pope John’s Motu Proprio *Superno Dei nutu*. The commissions were vested with the competencies of the Curial congregations and were headed by the cardinals who led the respective congregations.¹⁶ The most striking exception to this institutional arrangement was the inclusion among the preparatory commissions (in addition to one on the apostolate of the laity—the activity of ordinary Christians for the spreading of the gospel) of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, which the pope had created a few weeks earlier at the suggestion of a German archbishop and Cardinal Bea.¹⁷

With some difficulty a series of nominations withdrew the composition of this apparatus from the complete monopoly of the Curia and the networks already established in Rome. This permitted the participation of bishops from all over the world, theologians from schools other than that of Rome, and even some of those who had been hit with sanctions under Pius XII. But it is undeniable that the Rome networks, which had the advantage of working on their own home territory, continued to exercise a predominant influence during this phase.

In the absence of a comprehensive vision, the preparatory work—which consisted of the selection of questions to be considered and the production of documents to be submitted for the approval of the Council—was scattered over countless topics, which were frequently of secondary importance. There was a prevailing tendency to piece together the various recommendations using the doctrinal and disciplinary teachings of the most recent popes, and especially those of Pius XII, in the conviction that the

Council would endow them with its solemn authority. It seemed, in fact, that the work of the Council would proceed rapidly, in just a few weeks, without any tension or tumultuous debates.

After a little more than two years of work based on the “Questions” of 1960, the preparatory body had produced more than seventy projects, many of them quite wordy and dedicated to the most disparate topics imaginable. John XXIII put an end to this phase on February 2, 1962, with his *Motu Proprio* “*Concilium*,” in which he fixed the upcoming October 11 as the date for the Council assembly to begin its work. The formal convocation of the Council took place on December 25, 1961, with the Apostolic Constitution “*Humanae Salutis*.” The silent opposition was disappointed once again.

In the meantime the features of the Council had begun to come into view, and three of these were especially prominent. First, this would not be a Council expressly dedicated to unity among the divided Christian traditions (Protestant, Anglican, and Orthodox), as rumor had had it and as the pope’s expression “ecumenical council” had seemed to imply. Nevertheless, Pope John had repeatedly emphasized that the Council must signal a fundamental shift in the willingness of Catholics to participate in ecumenical efforts for unity among all the Christian Churches. Fostering this willingness would above all require the renewal of Catholicism itself. The Secretariat for Christian Unity instituted in 1960 was the linchpin of this approach.

A second characteristic involved the pastoral approach of the Council, which the pope affirmed each time he spoke of it. What did he mean? He seemed to mean that, rather than the classical pairing of doctrine and discipline, or faith and morals, used to indicate the topics that fell under Church teaching, he preferred an overall consideration of what was needed in the life of the Church, both within itself and in its relationship to society. This was a strictly evangelical attitude inspired by solidarity toward all and constantly motivated by the effort to make the Church reflect Christ, the good shepherd, in every one of its acts. It had the effect of discouraging the definition of new dogmas and the thunderous proclamation of new condemnations in the area of discipline. A fraternal approach would be sought instead, one inspired by the example of Jesus.

Finally, the third characteristic concerned the practical freedom of the Council, in which the bishops would be the real main characters, leaving behind the attitude of passivity that had characterized the Catholic episcopacy, especially after the definitions of the primacy and infallibility of the pope. This was in contrast, however, to the bishops’ lack of good information about the preparatory work, which was covered with a shroud of secrecy and carried out using the Latin language.

While the official preparations were under way, interest in the Council was slowly growing through reflections, studies, and meetings taking place on many levels. Increasingly lively attention was being paid to the Council

as a historic occasion for recovering the elements of a Christian experience rooted in the life of the people, elements that had been marginalized by the imposing predominance of ecclesiastical institutions. Above all, it was an occasion for revitalizing the task of evangelization and witness. These spontaneous responses were not connected, but they were convergent, and they were full of dynamism, generosity, and expressive power—and were frequently underestimated or ignored by the official commissions.

It is extraordinary that those involved in the preparations, since they trusted in the representative character of the institutional apparatus, did not seek out opportunities to establish contact between the official preparatory bodies and the spontaneous activity that the announcement had occasioned. This would have avoided many of the surprises that unsettled a large part of the Roman contingent, especially during the first weeks of the Council's activity.

One month before the start of the Council, on September 11, 1962, a radio message from the pope expressed his conviction that the Council had come "at the right moment," that is, at one of the "historic moments for the Church, in which it is ready to make a new leap toward the loftiest heights." The Council was called to be "a renewed face-to-face encounter with the risen Christ, the glorious and immortal king, and a continuation, or better, a more energetic revival of the response of the entire modern world to the word of the Lord." The pope emphasized how the "precious links in the chain of love" that has united all Christians for centuries "present themselves now to the attention of all who are not heedless of the new breezes being stirred up here and there by the plans for the Council, in anxious longing for fraternal reconciliation in the arms of our common ancient mother."

But the statement that found the widest and deepest response in public opinion was that "the Church presents itself to underdeveloped countries as what it really is, and wants to be: the Church of all, and particularly of the poor." While the process of decolonization was intensifying in Africa and Asia, and many third-world bishops were preparing to participate in the Council on an equal footing with those of the rich world, John XXIII was affirming the Church's commitment to embodying the message of the gospel among these peoples as well, with special attention for the least advantaged (the "underdeveloped," as they were called back then).

Finally, during the summer—breaking the seal of silence that had obscured all of the preparatory work—the bishops were sent an initial group of seven schemata or "outlines" on the sources of revelation, the deposit of faith, the moral order, the liturgy, the family, social communications, and Church unity.¹⁸ Many of the reactions the bishops sent to Rome expressed dissatisfaction, emphasizing the disparity between the perspectives indicated by the pope and the orientation of these schemata. Only the schema on the liturgy met with widespread agreement.

During those summer months the fear began to spread that the outdated tendencies of the preparation were suffocating the Council. Would the bishops be able to respond to the plans prepared in Rome? Both Cardinal Suenens of Belgium and Cardinal Léger of Canada met with the pope to express this concern in no uncertain terms.

How the Assembly Worked

In the meantime the model of the First Vatican Council held one hundred years earlier was used to prepare the rules of order for the conciliar assembly.¹⁹ Given the elevated number of members (more than two thousand) their geographical diversity, and their general lack of experience with assemblies, the working procedures they would be using were of enormous significance, and, as would soon become clear, would condition the functioning of the assembly to an unexpected degree. The rules of order provided for two levels of activity: that of the plenary assembly (general congregations) for the discussions, and that of the working groups (eleven commissions plus two administrative bodies) for the elaboration of the documents embodying the Council's decisions. The final step would be the approval of the decisions in the solemn sessions, the official sessions of the conciliar assembly in which the definitive vote would be conducted.

The work was to be directed by a Council of Presidents (of ten, later twelve, cardinals), assisted by a general secretary. Each commission was to be headed by a cardinal designated by the pope, who would also nominate eight bishops, one-third of the twenty-four members, while the other two-thirds—or sixteen bishops—would be elected by the Council. There were also provisions for the participation of experts—periti—who would carry out administrative and consultative functions but would not have the right to speak at the plenary sessions.

Since the spring of 1960 the German Jesuit Cardinal Bea had raised the question of inviting observers from the non-Catholic Christian Churches. There were no precedents for this. A number of centuries earlier the Greek-speaking Orthodox Church had been involved in the Councils of Lyons and Florence but as a full participant rather than an observer; at the Council of Trent the Protestants had participated for a short period of time, since the separation was already too deep at that point for more extensive involvement; on the occasion of Vatican I the Eastern Orthodox Christians and the Protestants had ignored Pius IX's clumsy invitation. But now the sophisticated efforts of the Secretariat for Christian Unity had led to the insertion of a chapter in the rules of order according to which observers from among the "separated Christians," after informing their respective communities, could participate in the solemn sessions and the general congregations (and eventually in the work of the commissions as well).

Moreover, the desire that the Catholic bishops of the countries behind the Iron Curtain (Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, the Baltic states, Russia) also be free to participate in the Council gave John XXIII the idea of asking the Vatican's representative in Turkey to establish discreet contact with the Soviet ambassador. The aim of this was to convince the Soviet government of Moscow not to oppose the participation of these bishops at the Council. It was an innovative and courageous initiative, since there had been no relations between the Vatican and Moscow for decades, and an intransigent anti-communism reigned in Catholic circles. The initiative not only succeeded, it also unleashed a historical process of "thawing" between the West and the East, later known as *Ostpolitik*.

The plans submitted for examination at the Council were first of all discussed at the general congregations to decide what could and could not be proposed. If the voting that concluded this preliminary discussion was favorable, a chapter by chapter examination of the document was begun. During this phase the bishops—the "Council fathers"—could propose amendments (additions, modifications, cancellations) that were then validated by the competent commissions, which could accept them, integrating them into the text, or reject them. The revised text was returned to the general assembly for examination and was then voted upon, first by chapters, and then in its entirety. Voting would permit an affirmative response (*placet*), a negative one (*non placet*), or one of conditional approval (*placet iuxta modum*); a text would be approved when it had obtained a vote of consent from two-thirds of those present. Latin was the only language admitted, and an offer to set up a translation system was refused. Everything was kept secret.

The plenary sessions—always held in the morning—would begin with the celebration of the Mass and the enthronement of the Book of the Gospel, which symbolized the guiding presence of Christ, and would meet in the immense Vatican basilica of St. Peter. It was the only place that, once properly furnished, would be able to provide seats for the more than two thousand participants. The commissions, on the other hand, would work during the afternoons in different locations, sometimes even outside of Rome (especially during periods when the assembly was not meeting). Providing for the thousands of Council participants—not only the bishops, but also the official and unofficial experts, the observers, and the many journalists sent from around the world—had created serious logistical problems in Rome, producing an inconvenient dispersal that would be counteracted through the spontaneous creation of meeting points, such as the informal discussions held during long bus trips, which fostered the exchange of opinions.

In the meantime the Roman synod had been celebrated one year after its announcement, from January 24–31, 1960, in the cathedral of St. John Lateran. The formal decrees of this assembly of the clergy of the Diocese of

Rome were approved on June 28. It was the first diocesan synod of Rome in the entire modern era! The essential significance of the synod was that it revealed the pope's character as Bishop of Rome and the authentically diocesan nature of the Church of Rome. These were two obvious facts, but it had seemed that the Church had forgotten about them, since Rome was frequently seen as an extraterritorial reality in respect to the Church.

The synod itself ended in failure. It lacked a structure capable of understanding and channeling John XXIII's deepest intuitions. Its preparation and celebration were of a markedly clerical character, and it was never able to harness the evangelical power of the city. The diocese was unprepared and was bogged down in a centuries-old condition of fragmentation. It must be added that, for many, Rome, as the center of Christianity, could not be compared to any other diocese or subjected to normal pastoral procedures. On the other hand, leaving aside the synod itself, more than a decade later the Roman Church began to reap the benefits of the impulse toward renewal fostered by John XXIII. For his part, in spite of concerns that a negative assessment of the synod would reflect poorly on the plans for the Council—which is exactly what some were hoping—the pope did not conceal his own reservations, as can be gathered from the speech he gave to the Roman clergy on November 24, 1960. He recalled, with just a touch of irony, that imperfections had not been lacking “from the initial encounter on January 24 in our sacrosanct Lateran basilica, to the more solemn one on June 29 at the tomb of St. Peter. But we were able, with the Lord's help, to obtain a good result, even if in some ways it was not a perfect one.”

Preparation for What Sort of Council?

The preparations for Vatican II were extravagant and excessive. Not only did they last longer than the celebration of the Council itself, but they were prominently characterized by an institutional approach. The pope was the supreme moderator, the Roman Curia was the chief agent, and the bishops and theologians—especially the European ones—gradually became involved to a considerable extent.

Reconstruction of the events of the pre-preparatory and preparatory phases on the basis of abundant published and unpublished documents has brought to light the complexity of this work, which absorbed considerable energy, beginning with the enormous volume of responses sent to Rome during the general consultation of 1959–60. John XXIII wanted to clear the way for a real and proper celebration of the Council in an atmosphere of complete freedom, and he repeatedly asserted that the preparations constituted an area of the Catholic Church's life distinctly different from the daily exercise of ordinary governance. It was a thinly veiled suggestion that the Curia avoid interfering.

Was it reasonable to expect that consultation with the bishops would result in proposals capable of realizing John XXIII's startling project? Or did the surprise that greeted the announcement make it less realistic to expect a significant response? It must also be recognized, however, that it would not have been possible to convene an assembly of more than two thousand participants without a prior phase of involvement and thorough preparations. The vision of a new Council, and not a completion of the interrupted Vatican I, was the guiding principle for the pope's project, and everyone needed some time just to get used to the idea itself.

What was the meaning of what the pope identified was to be the Council's dominant characteristic—the pastoral approach? This idea was for a long time trivialized and understood in the sense of focusing the Council on a nontheological, purely operational level—on “little shop-keeping details.” It was only on the eve of the opening of the Council that progress was

made toward solid acceptance of the pastoral approach in the sense of the subordination of every other aspect of the Church's life to the demanding image of Christ as the good shepherd.

More than any other form of testimony, the years of preparation are themselves the most convincing documentation of the Church's lack of preparation for the commitment to participation and shared responsibility required by the celebration of a council, and of the condition of anguished immobility afflicting Catholicism. Almost without realizing it, Catholicism had drifted along a path of centralizing all decision-making in Rome, and, to an even greater extent, of concentrating this in the person of the pope. This situation was heading toward the creation of a monolithic structure. Experiencing Catholicism as the besieged fortress of truth was a position of apparent strength but substantial weakness. Any dynamic and vital



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On Christmas Day 1961 Pope John XXIII signed the document convoking Vatican II, saying he convened the Council so the Church could contribute positively to the solution of modern problems.

impulse ran the risk of being looked upon with suspicion and deprived of the necessary room to express itself and grow.

While the management of the Council was quickly concentrated in institutional hands in Rome and shrouded in an almost impenetrable secrecy, parallel preparations were also taking place. These were carried out by countless anonymous participants from all parts, sustained and motivated by the deluge of public actions and declarations coming from John

XXIII. He had never stopped shaping the image of the Council as a universal summons to all Christians, though on different levels, to seek unity and renewal. It was above all this frequently anonymous, informal, widespread, spontaneous preparation that made it possible for the Council to be an event of efficacious renewal.

The liturgical movement had for decades criticized the passivity of the faithful—the spectators of a sacred drama—during liturgical celebrations and had argued for the need for the people's active participation in worship and the corollary necessity for the use of their mother tongues, since Latin was no longer understood by the laity, or even by the clergy. The movement for the promotion of the laity insisted upon an ever greater appreciation of the importance of the non-ordained in the heart of the Church.

For its part, the biblical movement brought back into view the centrality of the word of God, and at the same time, efforts for the renewal of theology appealed for a return to the sources (ressourcement). The ecumenical movement wanted to leave behind the era of Roman intransigence toward particular manifestations of unity. Finally, there was a widespread conviction that Catholicism needed to complete the definitions of the pope's prerogatives made in 1870 with others expressing the theological and sacramental nature of the bishop's office.

Some theologians, especially in the central-western region of Europe, understood the historic occasion that the Council represented. These were theologians like the Dominicans M.-D. Chenu and Ives Congar, and Edward Schillebeeckx, as well as German-speaking Jesuits such as Karl Rahner, and French-speaking Jesuits like Henri de Lubac, and the Swiss theologian Hans Küng. In addition to these there were centers of reflection that had been active for decades. like Le Saulchoir for the Dominicans, Fourvière for the Jesuits, and the theological faculties of Louvain, Tübingen, and Innsbruck. Their common denominator was a sense of urgency that Catholicism must emerge from the tired and sterile period of the Counter-Reformation.

Finally, from a sociological point of view, the preparations seem to have been concentrated in the hands of a restricted group composed exclusively of celibate males, culturally European and of a rather elevated average age. Although this group was imbued with the tension of intellectual differences, its composition made it strongly resistant to the influence of the general social situation. One gets the impression that the great world events that took place from 1959 to 1962 were not adequately reflected within this group. Even John XXIII's most significant actions, such as the issuing of the encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, seem hardly to have impinged upon the atmosphere of the preparations. An example of this can be seen in the drafting of a few documents on the pastoral approach toward communists, who for the majority seemed to be the problem.

What was approaching? Would it be an insignificant meeting of ecclesiastical dignitaries? Or would it be a meeting of global significance and a transition to a new epoch?