

GAUDET MATER ECCLESIA
POPE JOHN'S OPENING SPEECH TO THE COUNCIL

The following is a translation of Pope John XXIII's speech at the solemn inauguration of the Second Vatican Council, October 11, 1962. The text is the official Latin version, but significant variants in this text from the original Italian are also noted. The sub-headings are in the Latin text. For ease of later reference, I have numbered the paragraphs.

1. Mother Church rejoices that, by a singular gift of divine Providence, the longed-for day has finally dawned on which, under the protection of the Virgin Mother of God, whose maternal dignity is celebrated today, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council is solemnly opened here beside the tomb of St. Peter.

Ecumenical Councils in the Church

2. All the Councils which have been celebrated over the centuries--both the twenty Ecumenical Councils and the innumerable and not insignificant provincial and regional Councils--clearly prove the vitality of the Catholic Church and are recorded as shining lights in her annals. In calling this vast assembly, the latest and humble successor of the Prince of Apostles who now speaks to you intended a renewed affirmation of the Church's teaching authority which is unailing and perdures until the end of time. This teaching authority, taking into account the errors, needs, and opportunities of our age, is through this Council being exhibited in an extraordinary way to all people throughout the world.¹

3. It is only natural that in beginning this universal Council, the Vicar of Christ who is speaking to you should look to the past and listen to its lively and encouraging voices. For we like to remember the merits of the Supreme Pontiffs of quite ancient and more recent times, who have handed on the witness of those

venerable and solemn voices as expressed in the meetings of the Councils, in both East and West, from the fourth century, through the Middle Ages, down to modern times. With uninterrupted fervor those voices proclaim the triumph of that divine and human society, the Church of Christ, which takes her name, her grace, and her total meaning from the divine Redeemer. But if these are grounds for spiritual joy, we cannot deny that very many sorrows and afflictions have obscured this history over the long series of its nineteen centuries. For the prophecy which the aged Simeon once made to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was and remains true: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and the resurrection..., and as a sign which shall be contradicted" (Lk 2:34). And Jesus himself, as an adult, clearly showed how throughout time people would act towards him, when he uttered those mysterious words: "He who hears you hears me" (Lk 10:16), and later spoke the words also recorded by St. Luke: "He who is not with me is against me and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Lk 11:23).

4. The very serious matters and questions which need to be solved by the human race have not changed after almost twenty centuries. For Christ Jesus still stands at the center of history and life: people either embrace him and his Church and so enjoy the benefits of light, goodness, order, and peace or they live without him or act against him and deliberately remain outside the Church, so that confusion arises among them, their relationships are embittered, and the danger of bloody wars impends. Whenever they are held, Ecumenical Councils solemnly proclaim this union with Christ and his Church; and they spread everywhere the light of truth, give correct guidance to the lives of individuals, of families,

¹ Italian: "... wished to affirm again the continuity of the Church's teaching authority in order to present it in an extraordinary form to all the people of our age, taking into account the deviations, needs, and opportunities of the modern age."

and of societies, stir up and fortify spiritual energies, and continuously raise minds towards true and eternal goods. The testimonies of this extraordinary teaching authority of the Church, the universal Councils, stand before us as we gaze upon the various ages throughout the twenty centuries of the Christian era. These documents are contained in numerous and imposing volumes and are to be considered a sacred treasure which is contained in the archives of Rome and in the most famous libraries of the world.

The Origin and Reason for the Second Vatican Council

5. With regard to the origin and reason for this great event for which We have decided to gather you here, it is sufficient again to give our humble and personal testimony. First, and almost unexpectedly, we first had the idea of this Council, which we then announced simply to the Sacred College of Cardinals on that memorable January 25, 1959, the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, in his Basilica on the Ostian Way. At first those present were unexpectedly struck silent, as if by a brilliant ray of light from above, and delight showed on the faces and in the eyes of them all. At the same time a powerful fervor was enkindled throughout the world, and everyone began eagerly to look forward to the celebration of the Council.² Meanwhile, three years have been spent in laborious preparation of the Council, during which careful and broad investigations have been made about the state today of the

² Italian: "... it is sufficient as a simple matter of historical documentation to restate our humble but personal witness about the first and unexpected flowering in our heart and from our lips of the simple words, 'an Ecumenical Council.' Words spoken in the presence of the Sacred College of Cardinals on that most memorable January 25, 1959.... It was an unexpected touch: a flash of light from above; a great delight in eyes and hearts. But at the same time a fervor, a great fervor aroused in the whole world, in anticipation of the celebration of the Council."

faith, religious practice, and vitality of Christians and especially Catholics. It is not unjust for Us to see the time spent in preparing the Ecumenical Council as a first sign and gift of heavenly grace.

6. Illumined by the light of this Council, the Church, we trust, will grow in heavenly riches and, drawing from it the strength of new energies, will look to the future without fear. For by means of appropriate improvements and wise provisions for cooperation, the Church will bring individuals, families and nations to turn their minds to the things that are above. Therefore, because of the celebration of this Council, wholehearted thanksgiving should be given to the supreme Giver of all good things, and the glory of Christ the Lord, unconquered and immortal King of ages and of peoples, should exultantly be proclaimed.

The Opportuneness of the Council

7. There is, Venerable Brethren, another subject which it is useful to propose for your consideration. To increase the holy joy which affects us in this solemn hour, we wish to state openly and firmly in this vast assembly the happy circumstances in which this Ecumenical Council is beginning.

8. It often happens, as we have learned in the daily exercise of the apostolic ministry, that, not without offense to Our ears, the voices of people are brought to Us who, although burning with religious fervor, nevertheless do not think things through with enough discretion and prudence of judgement. These people see only ruin and calamity in the present conditions of human society. They keep repeating that our times, if compared to past centuries, have been getting worse. And they act as if they have nothing to learn from history, which is the teacher of life, and as if at the time of past Councils everything went favorably and correctly with respect to Christian doctrine, morality, and the Church's proper freedom. We believe We must quite disagree with these prophets of doom who are always forecasting

disaster, as if the end of the world were at hand.

9. In the present course of human events, by which human society seems to be entering a new order of things, we should see instead the mysterious plans of divine Providence which through the passage of time and the efforts of men, and often beyond their expectation, are achieving their purpose and wisely disposing of all things, even contrary human events, for the good of the Church.³ This is easy to see if careful attention is given to today's very serious questions and controversies concerning political and economic matters. All these things so preoccupy people that they turn their cares and thoughts away from the religious affairs which are the concern of the Church's teaching authority. This way of acting is certainly not without fault and it is rightly to be condemned. But no one can deny that these new conditions at least have this advantage, that those countless obstacles have been taken away with which the children of the world used once to impede the free activity of the Church. In fact, one has only to leaf through the annals of Church history and it will be at once clear that even the Ecumenical Councils themselves, whose histories are written in golden pages in the Church's registers, were often celebrated amid very serious difficulties and sufferings caused by the undue interference of civil authorities. The princes of this world often did indeed sincerely intend to protect the Church, but quite often this did not occur without spiritual damage and danger, since they were often led by political motives and indulged their own interests too much.

10. Today we do indeed confess our great sorrow that very many of the Church's pastors are not among you, men quite dear to

³ Italian: "In the present order of things, divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relationships which, by the efforts of men and even beyond their own expectations, are tending towards the fulfilment of its own higher and unanticipated designs; and everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church."

Us, but who for the sake of faith in Christ are in prison or otherwise prevented and the memory of whom moves Us to address most fervent prayers to God. Nevertheless, it is a hopeful thing and a matter of great comfort to Us to see that the Church, finally free from so many profane hindrances of a past age, can from this Vatican Basilica, as if from a second Apostolic Cenacle, and through you raise her majestic and solemn voice.

The Council's Principal Task: Defending and Promoting Doctrine

11. The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this, that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be more effectively defended and presented. This teaching embraces the whole human person, body and soul, and it commands us pilgrims, who dwell on this earth, to strain eagerly towards the heavenly homeland. This shows how this mortal life is to be ordered in such a way that, as we meet our duties towards our earthly and heavenly cities, we can reach the goal set for us by God. For all human beings, individually or joined together in society, are required constantly and throughout their lives to seek heavenly things, and to achieve this they must make use of earthly things but in such a way that the use of temporal goods does not threaten their eternal happiness. It is quite true that Christ the Lord once said: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his justice" (Mt 6:33). That word "first" states where we must above all direct our energies and thoughts; but the other words in this command of the Lord must never be neglected: "and all these things shall be given to you besides" (Ibid.). And indeed there have always been and still are in the Church people who, while devoting themselves fully to the attainment of evangelical perfection, at the same time offer their own cooperation to social tasks; and from the example of their lives and from their saving charitable efforts what is highest and noblest in human society receives no small strength and growth.

12. But for this teaching to reach the

many fields of human activity which affect individuals, families, and social life, it is first of all necessary that the Church never turn her eyes from the sacred heritage of truth which she has received from those who went before; and at the same time she must also look at the present times which have introduced new conditions and new forms of life, and have opened new avenues for the Catholic apostolate.

13. For this reason the Church has not witnessed inertly those wonderful discoveries of human genius and the development of knowledge which we use today, nor has she been unable to evaluate them rightly. But while carefully following all this, she has not ceased to warn people that, beyond the sight of visible things, they should turn their eyes to God, the source of all wisdom and beauty, lest those to whom it was said, "Subdue the earth and dominate it" (see Gn 1:28), ever forget that most serious command: "The Lord your God you shall worship, and him alone you shall serve" (Mt 4:10; Lk 4:8), and lest fleeting fascination with things should impede genuine progress.

How Doctrine is to be Promoted Today

14. On these bases it is clear, Venerable Brethren, what is expected of the Ecumenical Council with regard to doctrine. The twenty-first Ecumenical Council, which uses the effective and significant assistance of experts in the sacred sciences, in the apostolate, and in administration, wishes to transmit whole and entire and without distortion the Catholic doctrine which, despite difficulties and controversies, has become the common heritage of humanity. Although it has not been well received by all, it is nonetheless presented to all men of good will as a very rich treasure. But our task is not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with an antiquity; eagerly and without fear, we must devote ourselves to the task our age demands, pursuing the path which the Church has followed for twenty centuries.

15. Nor is the primary purpose of our

work to discuss some of the chief articles of the Church's doctrine or to repeat at length what the Fathers and ancient and more recent theologians have handed on, things which we have every right to think are not unknown to you but reside in your minds. To have only such discussions there would have been no need to call an Ecumenical Council. What instead is necessary today is that the whole of Christian doctrine, with no part of it lost, be received in our times by all with a new fervor, in serenity and peace, in that traditional and precise conceptuality and expression which is especially displayed in the acts of the Councils of Trent and Vatican I. As all sincere promoters of Christian, Catholic, and apostolic faith strongly desire, what is needed is that this doctrine be more fully and more profoundly known and that minds be more fully imbued and formed by it. What is needed is that this certain and unchangeable doctrine, to which loyal submission is due, be investigated and presented in the way demanded by our times. For the deposit of faith, the truths contained in our venerable doctrine, are one thing; the fashion in which they are expressed, but with the same meaning and the same judgement, is another thing. This way of speaking will require a great deal of work and, it may be, much patience: types of presentation must be introduced which are more in accord with a teaching authority which is primarily pastoral in character.⁴

⁴ Italian: "The salient point of this Council is not, therefore, a discussion of one or another article of the Church's fundamental doctrine, a diffuse repetition of the teaching of the Fathers and of ancient and modern theologians, which is presumed to be well known and familiar to all. For this a Council was not necessary. But from a renewed, serene, and tranquil adherence to the whole teaching of the Church, in its entirety and precision, as it still shines forth in the acts of the Councils of Trent and Vatican I, the Christian, Catholic, and apostolic spirit of the whole world expects a leap forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciences in more perfect conformity with fidelity to authentic doctrine, with this doctrine being studied and presented through the

How Errors are to be Repressed

16. As the Second Vatican Council begins, it is clearer than ever before that the truth of the Lord remains forever (Ps 116:2). Indeed, as age succeeds age, we see the uncertain opinions of men take one another's place and new-born errors often vanish as quickly as a mist dispelled by the sun. The Church in every age has opposed these errors and often has even condemned them and indeed with the greatest severity. But at the present time, the spouse of Christ prefers to use the medicine of mercy rather than the weapons of severity; and, she thinks she meets today's needs by explaining the validity of her doctrine more fully rather than by condemning. Not that there are no false doctrines, opinions, or dangers to be avoided and dispersed; but all these things so openly conflict with the right norms of honesty and have borne such lethal fruits that today people by themselves seem to begin to condemn them and in particular those forms of life which disregard God and his laws, excessive confidence in technological progress, and a prosperity consisting only in the comforts of life. More and more they are coming to know that the dignity of the human person and his appropriate perfection are a matter of great importance and most difficult to achieve. What is especially important is that they have finally learned from experience that imposing external force on others, the power of weapons, and political domination are not at all sufficient for a happy solution of the most serious questions which trouble them.

17. In these circumstances, the Catholic Church, as she raises the torch of religious truth in this Ecumenical Council, wishes to show

forms of inquiry and literary formulation of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the formulation in which it is clothed is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great account, with patience if necessary, measuring everything by the forms and proportions of a teaching authority primarily pastoral in character."

herself to be the most loving mother of all, kind, patient, and moved by mercy and goodness towards her separated children. To the human race, laboring under so many difficulties, she says, as Peter once did to the unfortunate man who begged him for alms: "Silver and gold have I none, but what I have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, arise and walk" (Acts 3:6). In other words, the Church today does not offer passing riches or promise a merely earthly happiness. She distributes the goods of heavenly grace which, since they raise people to the dignity of children of God, are so effective a protection and aid for them to live a more human life. She opens the sources of her plentiful doctrine, by which people illumined by the light of Christ can thoroughly understand what they themselves really are, what dignity distinguishes them, what goal they must pursue. Finally, through her children she expands everywhere the spaces of Christian charity, than which nothing is more fit to uproot the seeds of error and nothing more effective to promote concord, a just peace, and fraternal unity among all.

Promoting Unity in the Christian and Human Family

18. This concern of the Church in promoting and defending the truth derives from the fact that, in the plan of God "who wills all persons to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tm 2:4), unless they are assisted by the whole of revealed doctrine, people cannot come to that absolute and most firm unity of minds with which true peace and eternal salvation are linked. Unfortunately, the whole family of Christians has not yet fully and perfectly attained this visible unity in the truth.

19. But the Catholic Church considers it to be her duty to work actively to fulfil this mystery of that unity for which Christ Jesus ardently prayed the heavenly Father on the eve of his sacrifice. She enjoys the sweetest peace, knowing that she is most closely linked with these prayers of Christ; indeed she is sincerely joyful when she sees that those prayers are

multiplying salutary and abundant fruits even among those who are outside her bounds. For, if we rightly consider the matter, this very unity which Christ implored for his Church seems to shine with a triple ray of heavenly and salvific light: the unity of Catholics among themselves which must always be kept most firm and as a splendid example; the unity of pious prayers and most ardent desire by which Christians separated from this Apostolic See desire to be linked with us; the unity, finally of esteem and respect for the Catholic Church shown by those who still profess the different non-Christian forms of religion. In this respect, it is a source of great grief that a huge part of the human race--even though all who are born are themselves also redeemed by Christ's Blood--still do not share in the sources of heavenly grace which exist in the Catholic Church. This is why the Catholic Church, whose light illuminates all things and whose strength of supernatural unity redounds to the benefit of the whole human family, is rightly described in the splendid words of St. Cyprian:

The Lord's Church, surrounded by light, sheds her rays over the whole earth. One, however, is the light which is spread everywhere, nor is the unity of the body shattered. She spreads her branches all over the world by her great abundance; she sends ever farther her flowing rivers. But one is the head, and one the origin, one the mother ever and again fruitful. Of her are we born; by her milk are we nourished, by her spirit do we live (*De Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate*, 5).

20. Venerable Brethren, such is the intention of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. While it focuses the Church's chief energies and earnestly strives to have people accept more favorably the message of salvation, it is, as it were, preparing and consolidating the path that can bring about that unity of the human race which is the necessary foundation if the earthly city is to be ordered into a likeness of the heavenly city, "whose king is truth, whose law is love, and whose length is eternity" (St. Augustine, *Epistle 138*, 3).

Conclusion

21. And now "our voice is directed to

you" (2 Cor 6:11), Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate. Here we are, gathered as one in this Vatican Basilica, where the hinge of the Church's history turns, where heaven and earth are linked in the closest of covenants, here at the tomb of St. Peter, at the graves of so many of our holy predecessors, whose ashes in this solemn hour seem to thrill in mystic exultation. The Council which is now beginning rises in the Church like a day shining with the most splendid light. It is only the dawn, but already how delightfully are our hearts affected by the first rays of the rising sun! Everything here breathes holiness and stirs up joy. For we see the stars by their brilliance increasing the majesty of this temple. According to the Apostle John's testimony (Rev 1:20), you are those stars, and with you we see shining around the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles the golden lampstands, that is, the Churches entrusted to you (*Ibid.*). At the same time we see the very distinguished men who have come to Rome as representatives of their nations from the five continents of the earth, present here with great respect and most gracious expectation.

22. That is why it can be said that heaven and earth are uniting in the celebration of the Council. The saints of heaven are here to protect our work; the faithful are here to continue to pour out their prayers to God; all of you are here so that, readily obeying the heavenly inspirations of the Holy Spirit, you may eagerly set to work so that your efforts will appropriately respond to the desires and needs of the various peoples. For this to happen requires of you a serene peace of mind, fraternal harmony, moderation in your proposals, dignity in your discussions, wisdom in all your deliberations. God grant that your effort and your work, towards which are turned not only the eyes of the peoples but also the hopes of the whole world, may abundantly fulfil the common expectations.

23. Almighty God, not trusting in our own strength, we place all our confidence in you. Look kindly upon these Shepherds of your Church. May the light of your heavenly grace be

present to us as we take counsel and make laws. Graciously hear the prayers which, with one faith, one mouth, one heart, we pour out to you.

24. O Mary, Help of Christians and Help of Bishops, whose love we recently experienced in a special way at the shrine of Loreto where we venerated the mystery of the Incarnation, by your help dispose all things towards a joyful, favorable, and prosperous

outcome. And with your spouse, St. Joseph, and with the holy Apostles, Peter and Paul, and St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, intercede for us with God.

25. To Jesus Christ, our most loving Redeemer, immortal King of peoples and ages, be love, power, and glory for ever and ever. Amen.