Voices of Vatican II
Study Guide
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FOR DISCUSSION

The “Voices of Vatican II” video describes the “incredible sense of expectation, of hope” at the council on its opening day. There was “hope for a new Pentecost.” Why do you think such excitement was in the air? How is the Second Vatican Council a source of hope now?

At the council’s beginning, Pope John XXIII remarked that “the substance” of the church’s ancient doctrine is one thing, and “the way it is presented is another.” What did he mean? Consider what it means for you or a parish to present (to communicate) the substance of faith in more understandable ways, whether through words, actions or attitudes.

Online resource: Pope John XXIII’s opening speech to Vatican II.

An Ecumenical Council Begins

The Second Vatican Council reaches in countless ways into the lives of 21st century Catholics, though its four autumn sessions between 1962 and 1965 took place long before many of them even were born. For example:

- Relationships between Catholics and other believers are marked by the council’s accent on dialogue. Catholics aim to respect, love and understand members of other Christian communions and world religions, people who often include relatives and friends.

- Lay men and women fulfill vital roles in the church and the world, reflecting the council’s insistence that they have their own part to play in “the mission of the whole Christian people” (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 31).

- The education of future priests prepares them to find Christ in Scripture and the sacraments, and “in the people to whom they are sent, especially the poor, the children, the sick, the sinners and the unbelievers” (Decree on Priestly Training, 8).

- Celebrations of the Mass and other sacraments are marked by the council, which called for the “fully conscious and active participation” of all the people in the liturgy (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 14).

- Scripture nourishes the church’s preaching, and the laity as well as clergy and others study Scripture in groups and meditate on it when praying. This reflects the council’s teaching that God meets and speaks with his people in Scripture (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 21).

St. John XXIII announced plans in January 1959 to convocate the Second Vatican Council, the 21st ecumenical council of the church’s long history. An ecumenical council calls all the church’s bishops together. With the pope’s approval, its decisions are binding.

Past ecumenical councils often devoted themselves to doctrinal issues. But the Second Vatican Council typically is described as a pastoral council, since it so greatly focused on the lives and mission of the church’s people.

Looking ahead to the council, St. John XXIII wrote in December 1961 that it would be “a demonstration of the church, always living and always young,” a church that “feels the rhythm of the times” and “radiates new light,” yet remains “identical in herself, faithful to the divine image impressed on her” by Christ.
When the council began Oct. 11, 1962, he insisted its “salient point” would not be “discussion of one article or another” of church doctrine. However, he added, “the substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way it is presented is another.”

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI observes in *Voices of Vatican II* that when the council began the church remained “robust” but seemed “more a thing of the past than the herald of the future.” As a young theologian, he served the council as an expert adviser.

When more than 2,200 bishops from a multitude of nations entered St. Peter’s Basilica on the council’s opening day, it was visible in a fresh, striking way that the church is an international body. It is a church, Cardinal Francis Arinze remarks in *Voices of the Council*, that is “not a stranger anywhere.”

During the council’s 168 general meetings and 10 plenary sessions, it completed work on 16 documents that still profoundly influence the church’s internal life and activities in the world.
FOR DISCUSSION

What might happen in any community (a parish; a school) when people follow Blessed Paul VI’s advice — that is, when people who are “almost strangers” take steps “to understand and deal with each other” and, as a result, to “become friends”? How might the community change? Will tensions decline? Will the community become stronger?

A new pope greeted participants in the ecumenical council when its second session began Sept. 29, 1963. The much loved St. John XXIII, who convoked Vatican II, died of cancer June 3, 1963. Eighteen days later a conclave of cardinals elected a new pope, Paul VI.

He was to preside over the council’s three remaining sessions, which completed work on all its 16 documents. But its documents were not all that mattered to him. Addressing the council when its 1963 session concluded, he pointed out the important relationships formed among its members, bishops from around the world.

“Let us rejoice my brothers, for we have learned to understand one another and to deal with one another, and though we were almost strangers … we have become friends,” the pope told the council fathers.

As the council’s final session got under way in mid-September 1965, this pope established the world Synod of Bishops. Whenever the synod assembles, bishops representing the church throughout the world address an important church concern. The synod’s October 2014 extraordinary assembly on the family captured worldwide attention. A general synod assembly was planned for October 2015 on the same compelling theme.

In establishing the Synod of Bishops, the pope hoped to nurture his relationship with the world’s bishops, lest he be “deprived of the consolation of their presence” and counsel. During the council he grew accustomed to their presence. Now he wanted to tighten the bonds of union with them.

Today this pope of the council is known as Blessed Paul VI. When the Mass for his beatification was celebrated in Rome Oct. 19, 2014, Pope Francis called him “the great helmsman of the council.”
A Voice of Vatican II: Religious Liberty,
John Courtney Murray, SJ

Among those who played invaluable roles at the Second Vatican Council were its many experts, known in Latin as periti. They served as consultants to individual bishops or helped draft the documents brought before the council for deliberation. One U.S. expert was Jesuit Father John Courtney Murray.

A theologian known for his expertise on the relationship of church and state, Father Murray aided the council’s work on the church’s role in the modern world. Above all, he is remembered as a chief architect of the council’s 1965 Declaration on Religious Freedom. He died in 1967.

The council declaration affirms the freedom to exercise religion in civil society, unimpeded and without coercion by government, individuals, social groups or “any human power.” It holds that everyone has the right to religious freedom. This right, founded in human dignity, is enjoyed both by individuals and communities. The declaration states that “no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in associations with others, within due limits” (2).

Father Murray wrote soon after the council that the declaration cleared the way to “a new straightforwardness in relationships between the church and the world.”
A Voice of Vatican II: Christian Unity,
Rev. Albert C. Outler

Little doubt remained that Christian unity would rank among the Second Vatican Council’s foremost concerns after representatives of other Christian communions and churches were invited to attend. One well-known U.S. council observer was the Rev. Albert Outler, a United Methodist theologian and ecumenist at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. In 1965 he characterized Vatican II as “the beginning of a genuine new epoch in church history.”

The Methodist leader recalled the council’s Decree on Ecumenism in a 1986 speech. He thought the council “opened up a new era of cordial coexistence between Roman Catholics and other Christians; it moved us beyond grudging tolerance toward truly mutual love.” The decree “fostered dialogue and shared prayer, Bible study and common action in Christian causes,” he observed.

Two decades after the council, though lamenting a lack of “creative programs” to hasten “the day of organic reunion” among Christians, he commented that the council had “committed the Roman Catholic Church to a new ecumenical vision and horizon.” He died in 1989.

Blessed Paul VI spoke in September 1964 to council observers. Clearly, the council welcomed the observers with respect, joy and charity, the pope observed. This, he stressed, was “no small matter,” given “the polemics of the past.”

Referring to dialogue between divided Christians, the pope said that while the Catholic Church could not “abandon certain doctrinal exigencies,” it nonetheless was “disposed to study how difficulties can be removed, misunderstandings dissipated” and how “the authentic treasures of truth and spirituality” found among other Christians can be respected.
Exploring a Council Theme: Dialogue

When leaders in varied fields ask Pope Francis for advice, he says he always encourages them to “dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.” In July 2013 he warned political, economic and cultural leaders in Brazil that today “we either take the risk of dialogue, we risk the culture of encounter or we all fall.”

In “The Joy of the Gospel,” a major 2013 message known as an apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis invited Catholics “to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization,” bringing the Gospel to today’s world. Evangelization, he said, involves dialogue with governments, society and “believers who are not part of the Catholic Church” (238).

When he urges the church’s people to practice dialogue, Pope Francis reflects an important Vatican Council II theme. The council called Catholics to dialogue among themselves and with others.

The council’s Constitution on the Church in the Modern World discusses dialogue. When Catholics extend “respect and love” to people “who think or act differently” than they do in “social, political and even religious matters,” a way is paved to entering into “dialogue with them,” it explains (28).

“Love and good will” indeed are basic for dialogue but must not “render us indifferent to truth,” the constitution cautions. Yet, it continues, it remains “necessary to distinguish between error … and the person in error, who never loses the dignity of being a person” (No. 28).

The council’s Decree on Ecumenism points to dialogue as a pathway to greater unity among Christians. Its Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions encourages the church to pursue dialogue with the Jewish community and with world religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam.
Jesuit Father John W. O’Malley, a theologian at Georgetown University in Washington, considers dialogue “an essential and distinctive” council characteristic. Addressing an October 2012 symposium for the 50th anniversary of the council’s opening, Father O’Malley called dialogue “a synonym for conversation.” Its “first purpose is simply to understand the other.”

Many commentators emphasize that dialogue does not mean surrendering one’s own beliefs, though in dialogue people who are divided in significant ways attempt to understand each other accurately, perhaps for the first time. Thus, dialogue heals painful misunderstandings.

Each dialogue partner speaks, but dialogue also requires the art of listening. Dialogue does not deny the ways people differ, but it tries to identify all they share that is good.
The Council Heads Toward the Future

It takes many decades to integrate an ecumenical council fully into the church’s life. Swiss Cardinal Georges Cottier confirms this in the *Voices of Vatican II* video. “We still have to make the most of” Vatican II, which has not yet “given us all its fruits,” he comments. Cardinal Cottier served as a *peritus*, or expert, at the council.

When the 50th anniversary of the council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy arrived in 2013, Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta said that “we have barely scratched the surface in grasping” its “theological and pastoral richness.” For one thing, “so much remains to be done in the area of liturgical formation for clergy and laity alike,” he observed.

Why would it take such a long time -- perhaps a century or more -- to reap the full riches of an ecumenical council like Vatican II? Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople shared his view on this during a 2012 celebration at the Vatican marking the council’s opening.

“The essential theology and principal themes of the Second Vatican Council (the mystery of the church, the sacredness of the liturgy and the authority of [a] bishop) are difficult to apply in earnest practice and constitute a lifelong and churchwide labor to assimilate,” the patriarch explained. Thus, he said, the door “must remain open for deeper reception” of the council.

Father James Provost, a well-known U.S. canon lawyer who died in 2000, noted in 1997 that “it took around two centuries to receive the early ecumenical councils or even for [the 16th century Council of] Trent to take firm root in Catholic life.”

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**FOR DISCUSSION**

The Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church spoke of the Christian family as a “domestic church.” A family resembles the larger church because it is a community of love that prays and worships; a community of hospitality whose members support each other and serve others in need (*Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, 11). Do you think this is a council teaching that might be received more fully in the future and contribute more greatly to family life? Why?
Overview of Council Documents

The Second Vatican Council approved its first two documents in 1963 during its second autumn session. Twenty-first century Catholics experience the council in direct, ongoing ways through one of them, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. The council touches them whenever they participate in the Mass.

The constitution calls Catholics to participate actively, both “internally and externally,” in the sacraments (19). During Masses today, few Catholics appear as “silent spectators,” to use the constitution’s words (48). Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI comments in *Voices of Vatican II* that the council rediscovered a need in worship for “a real dialogue between priest and people.”

The other 1963 document was the Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication, encouraging the church to find ways of making “proper” and “effective” use of the “technical inventions” used by the modern communications media (1; 13-15). Before ending in December 1965, the council approved eight more decrees addressing specific concerns like the roles of bishops, priests and laity, and the renewal of religious orders.

Three declarations treating religious freedom, Christian education and non-Christian religions also were approved, as were three additional constitutions, including dogmatic constitutions on the church and divine revelation.

The council’s fourth constitution, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, appeared at the council’s 1965 conclusion. Describing the church as the “people of God gathered together by Christ” (3), it envisions a church both confident in faith and engaged in dialogue with the world (58).
In *Voices of Vatican II*, Cardinal Francis Arinze encourages viewers to find some “quiet time” to read the documents of the council. But which Vatican II documents should you read first? Perhaps the following synopses of all the council documents — providing their English and Latin titles — will help you answer that question. You may view a document online simply by clicking on its title.

**1963**

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*). This constitution addresses “the reform and promotion of the liturgy.” The goal “before all else” in liturgical renewal, it states, is full, active participation by all the people. “Noble simplicity” should characterize the liturgy, it says. It encourages “religious singing by the people,” fostered “intelligently.” It points to Christ’s presence in the liturgy, especially in “the Eucharistic species,” but also in his minister and “in his word” when Scripture is read. He is present, too, when the assembly prays and sings, having promised to be wherever two or three gather in his name.

Decree on the Media of Social Communications (*Inter Mirifica*). Society’s fate increasingly depends on proper use of the communications media, the decree observes. It recognizes the capacity of these media to serve the good, but also to be employed harmfully. Media personnel, media users, government authorities and church communicators are asked to assure that the press, TV, radio and films serve the human family well. The decree encourages “a truly Catholic press,” along with Catholic TV and radio stations to be known for “standards of excellence.” The media, it says, can help the church fulfill the obligation “to preach the Gospel.”

**1964**

Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*). The constitution presents the church as a mystery, a communion of baptized believers who are called the people of God. The roles of bishops, priests, deacons, religious and the laity all are addressed. Though they have different roles, they share “a common dignity.” All in the church are called to holiness and the fullness of Christian life, it stresses. The collegial bond of the world’s bishops is discussed; every bishop must be concerned for the whole church. The constitution calls attention to the dignity and responsibility of the church’s lay members.

Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*). Restoring unity among the world’s Christians is described in this decree as “one of the principal concerns” of the council. The decree sets before Catholics “the ways and means” of fostering Christian unity. It urges Catholics “to avoid expressions, judgments and actions” that misrepresent other Christians,
thus making “mutual relations with them more difficult.” The decree recognizes “the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brethren.” The decree ushered in a new ecumenical era for Catholics.

Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*). Though the Eastern Catholic churches in union with Rome live and worship in different rites, they pose no harm to Catholic unity, the decree explains. Vatican II, it says, holds the “ecclesiastical and spiritual heritage” of the Eastern churches in “high regard” and unhesitatingly looks on it “as the heritage of the universal church.” In encouraging Eastern Catholic churches to retain their traditions, the decree signaled the end of a period of Latinization among them. The decree also turns attention to Eastern Christians not in union with Rome, urging action to promote greater unity with them.

1965

Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church (*Christus Dominus*). This decree calls bishops to serve as “good shepherds who know their sheep and whose sheep know them.” It encourages bishops to present doctrine in a way that responds to the “difficulties and questions” that trouble people today. Spelling out the significance of the bishop’s role and authority, it also addresses his relationships with the priests and people of his diocese. Moreover, it examines his relationships with the pope and the world’s other bishops, who “are bound together” and who all “should manifest a concern” for the entire church.

Decree on Priestly Training (*Optatam Totius*). The church renewal sought by the council depends greatly “on the ministry of its priests,” the decree states. The education of future priests should pay particular attention to studying the Bible and should prepare them well for pastoral work, developing their “ability to listen,” for example. Their other theological studies should be renewed “through a more living contact with the mystery of Christ” and salvation history. The decree envisions a seminary education that introduces “knowledge of other religions,” prepares future priests for celibate life and readies them for lives of service.

Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*). Renewing religious orders of women and men calls for rediscovering an institute’s “original spirit,” this decree emphasizes. The way religious communities live, pray and work “should be suitably adapted,” it says, though “even the best adjustments made in accordance with the needs of our age will be ineffectual” if it is forgotten that religious life is meant to unite its members with God. Religious-order members “must be poor both in fact and in spirit,” the decree states. Superiors in religious communities should respect their members’ human dignity and gladly listen to them.
Voices of Vatican II – Study Guide

St. John Paul II

“Concerning priests, the council teaches that ‘their ministry itself by a special title forbids them to be conformed to this world. Yet at the same time this ministry requires that they live in this world among men’ (Presbyterorum Ordinis, 3). In the priestly vocation of a pastor there must always be a special place for these people, the lay faithful and their lay state, which is also a great asset of the church. Such an interior place is a sign of the priest’s vocation as a pastor.”

From St. John Paul II’s 1989 Holy Thursday letter to the world’s priests.

Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate). Here the council considers what members of differing religions “have in common.” The church decryes all “hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism directed against Jews,” the declaration states. Because Christians and Jews share so great a “spiritual patrimony,” the declaration encourages dialogues leading to “mutual understanding and respect” between them. It also states that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy” in religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism. The church regards Muslims “with esteem,” it says, urging Christians and Muslims to work together for justice and peace.

Declaration on Christian Education (Gravissimum Educationis). This document declares not only that everyone possesses “an inalienable right to an education,” but that all Christians “have a right to a Christian education.” The declaration’s teaching that “the family is the first school of the social virtues that every society needs” is heard repeatedly in the 21st century church. The roles of Catholic schools, campus ministry and catechetical instruction are among topics addressed. The declaration reaffirms parents as their children’s “primary and principal educators”; it highly esteems the vocation of teachers and other educators.

Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum). This constitution sets forth “authentic doctrine on divine revelation and how it is handed on.” It teaches that “sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God.” All preaching in the church must “be nourished and regulated by sacred Scripture,” it says, and it encourages the work of biblical scholars pursuing greater biblical understanding. The constitution asks that “easy access to sacred Scripture” be provided for all the church’s people, who are invited to read Scripture prayerfully and frequently.

Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem). The decree illuminates the apostolate of lay people both in the church and the world. It exhorts lay men and women “to explain, defend and properly apply Christian principles to the problems of our era in accordance with the mind of the church.” The laity, it says, “have their own share in the mission of the whole people of God,” and the church “can never be without” their apostolate. For, baptized into Christ’s body and strengthened by confirmation, lay people “are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself.”

Declaration on Religious Freedom (Dignitatis Humanae). Here the council declares the human person’s “right to religious freedom,” meaning that others, including governments, must not coerce individuals or communities in matters of belief. A person must neither be forced to act against conscience nor be prevented from acting in accord with conscience, “especially in matters religious,” it says. Protecting human rights is viewed as an essential government duty. The declaration also notes the church’s teaching that one’s “response to God in faith must be
free.” The right to religious freedom, the council affirms, is founded in human dignity and has roots in revelation.

Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*). The decree urges priests to serve as good shepherds who “know their sheep.” It accents priests’ roles in preaching and celebrating the sacraments, and says that a pastor’s role extends “to the formation of a genuine Christian community.” Preaching, it states, should not be “general and abstract,” but should apply the Gospel to life’s “particular circumstances.” Bonds of brotherhood among priests are encouraged, as is a life of holiness, and priests are urged to promote the laity’s dignity. The discipline of priestly celibacy is commended as a gift of God.

Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church (*Ad Gentes*). “The pilgrim church is missionary by her very nature,” this decree states. It points out the “gigantic missionary task” that remains in our times. Love and esteem for others should characterize this task. Missionaries in foreign lands and different cultures need preparation for their roles, it makes clear. They must understand the culture where they will serve. They especially should be prepared for dialogue with non-Christian religions and cultures. The church forbids forcing faith upon anyone, the decree notes. It calls missionary activity the church’s “greatest and holiest task.”

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). This constitution, the council’s lengthiest document, proclaims that “nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo” in the hearts of Christians. The church, it says, must scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the Gospel’s light. Urging the church to pursue respectful dialogue with the world and with people of “all shades of opinion,” it calls the church “an unspent fountain” of virtues the world today needs. The many specific topics addressed here include social justice, atheism, marriage and family, and economic and political life.