

The Second Vatican Council (11 October 1962-8 December 1965): An Attempt at World Unification that Decided the Fate of Catholic Birth Control

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The Second Ecumenical Council, commonly abbreviated Vatican II, lasted from October 11, 1962 to December 8, 1965. The Council was not an ongoing event: it met in four ten-week periods that spread out over these three years. The idea for the council actually arose in the second week of January of 1959. According to David A. Yallop, it came up during a conversation between Pope John XXIII and his pro-secretary of state, Cardinal Domenico Tardini. The two of them were discussing world affairs: the implications of what Fidel Castro was doing to the Batista regime in Cuba; the state of France right after they had elected Charles de Gaulle as president; the Soviet Union's sending of a rocket into orbit around the moon; the revolt in Algeria; the extreme poverty in many Latin American countries; and how Africa was changing, with new nations being created at fast speed. Pope John thought that the Catholic Church was at a crucial point in history in which most of the world was focusing on material things and turning away from spiritual matters. The pope reached the conclusion that reform was needed, and that the Vatican should call an ecumenical council to discuss the current situation in the world, and the role the Catholic Church should play in it. (18-19)

With that idea in mind, on January 25, 1959, at the Basilica of Saint Paul-Outside-the-Walls, accompanied by 17 cardinals, John XXIII presided over a prayer meeting held by Christian churches in order to pray for Christian unity. After the ceremony, unexpectedly, in a short speech, he announced his decision "to summon an ecumenical council to promote the unity of all the Christian communities." (McCarthy 61) McCarthy states about this moment: "The cardinals were so struck by the announcement that they sat like statues. There were no comments and, surprisingly, not even polite applause." (61) This decision, however unpopular at the Vatican and despite the fact that some Vatican officials gave the pope the cold shoulder or what Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro called a "great institutional solitude" (McCarthy 62), would end up being what John XXIII would be best remembered for, according to John W. O'Malley, one of the top experts on Vatican II. (*A History of the Popes* 297) This author asserts that Vatican II was "the biggest meeting in the history of the world... not the biggest gathering, but biggest meeting in the sense of an assembly called together to make decisions." (298) Another event that raised many people's eyebrows was that, "in 1960, Pope John XXIII received in audience Geoffrey Fisher, the archbishop of Canterbury, the first Anglican archbishop ever to be received by a pope." (298) Was this an indication that the Catholic Church was beginning to open their doors towards other religions? Time would tell.

To come up with the agenda for the council, the pope mailed all the prospective attendees and asked them to send items they would like discussed. He received almost 2000 responses. These were reviewed and reworked into draft documents to be considered by the council. The materials sent and the drafts

composed thereafter would be published, filling 19 volumes of more than 500 pages each. (299)

More than 2600 cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and other prelates from almost all over the world attended the sessions. Of all these, only 36% of attendees were from Europe, while, in the past councils, ever since Lateran I in the 12th century, most attendees had come from the old continent. However, there were some countries without representation because “the Communist governments of China, North Korea, and North Vietnam prohibited their entire episcopates from attending, and governments behind the Iron Curtain made participation difficult or impossible for their bishops. (O’Malley 299)

John O’Malley, who attended sessions of the Council as a student, graphically describes the beginning of the event. According to him, on October 11 of 1962, at 8:30 in the morning, a procession of “some 2,500 council fathers, fully vested in flowing white garments with white miters atop their heads, [had] descended the great staircase of the palace next to the church and seemed to flow from it through the piazza into St. Peter’s. The Swiss Guards, the Noble Guards, the Palatine Guards, the bishops and patriarchs from the Eastern Catholic churches in their exotic vestments and crowns, and sundry others added color and variety to the scene.” (*What happened at Vatican II* 93) Tens of thousands of people were in St. Peter’s Square, and had been watching the procession; millions more were watching the spectacle on television. (93)

This procession had taken over an hour to complete. Immediately after that, High Mass was celebrated after the “Veni, Creator”, by Cardinal Eugene Tisserant, dean of the College of Cardinals. No wonder when Pope John XXIII started delivering his opening speech in Latin -the official language of the council, but a language many of the clerics had not mastered-, to many of them the speech “sounded bland and unexceptional . . . Not all ears were therefore as attentive as they might otherwise have been. Pope John XXIII’s speech was entitled “Gaudet Mater Ecclesia” (Mother Church Rejoices), and, in it, the pope declared that the council was to be “predominantly pastoral in character.” It was to “make use of the medicine of mercy rather than of severity.” However, John XXIII’s diary reveals that there was a clear atmosphere of opposition between two groups: a conservative faction, led by Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani (who controlled the Holy Office) and his “friends”, and a more liberal crowd, led by Belgian cardinal Leon-Joseph Suenens, composed by influential theologians that had been disciplined by the Holy Office during the last years of Pius XII. John XXIII and Albino Luciani supported the latter. (O’Malley 300) Albino Luciani’s group was called “liberal” because of their tolerance and openness towards other religions and ideas. These two groups would grow bigger in time, as well as more antagonistic towards each other, and would play a pivotal role in the heated debate regarding Luciani’s papal election first, and his premature and unexpected death 33 days later.

When John XXIII announced the council, he indicated two special purposes for it: first, to promote “the enlightenment, edification, and joy of the entire Christian people”; second, to extend “a renewed cordial invitation to the faithful of the separated communities to participate with us in this quest for unity and grace, for which so many souls long in all parts of the world,” (O’Malley 297-298) These

two purposes would form the basis of “the Constitution on the Liturgy, the first document approved by the Council in December 1963”. This text listed four goals of the council: “to revitalize Catholics in their spirituality; to adapt church observances to the requirements of the age; to unite all Christians; and to strengthen the church’s mission to all peoples.” (McCarthy 62) The Constitution on the Liturgy, as well as all the other documents that would come out of the council, would however be most debated “off hours, in the monasteries, hostels, and hotels where the bishops were staying”, where they could dispense with Latin and speak in their own vernacular languages, as Molly Worthen states in her Great Course “History of Christianity II” (lecture 28).

John XXIII already demonstrated in practice his desire for universal fellowship in the first two days of the council, when “he received in audience several groups. Among them were the observers, who included not only Protestants but, among others, representatives of the Patriarchate of Moscow, the Coptic Patriarchate of Alexandria, the Syrian Patriarchate of Antioch, the Ethiopian Church, the Armenian Catholicate of Cilicia, and the Russian Church in exile.” The day following that audience, at a reception, “Cardinal Bea addressed the same group as ‘my dear brothers in Christ.’ The observers, though wary, were stunned by the warmth of their welcome.” (O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* 96-97) The days of intolerance and persecution of non-Catholics by the Vatican were over, at least officially. In Franco’s Spain, this was certainly not the case.

The Second Vatican Council debated not one, but many subjects. In addition, all these discussions produced different kinds of documents: Apostolic constitutions, which are addressed to the Church as a whole; decrees, which are addressed to people who belong to religious orders; declarations, which declare particular Church positions with respect to non-Christians, for example; and encyclicals, which are documents drafted by a pope to address a specific aspect of Catholic teaching or a world issue meant to be circulated among bishops and priests of a region, country, to all the members of the Catholic church, or even to the whole world. The following chart shows a classification of the documents of Vatican II according to their importance and classification:



Richard R. Gallardetz and Catherine Clifford, *Keys to the Council: Unlocking the Teaching of Vatican II*: Liturgical Press, 2012. (16)

Thomas Noble asserts that John XXIII’s encyclicals “indicated the direction he wished to go.” (100) He then briefly describes the main topic of each of them this way:

- a. *Ad cathedram Petri* (1959) called for a spirit of love and consideration in dealings with “separated brethren.”
- b. *Mater et Magistra* (1961) updated the social teaching of Leo XIII and Pius XI, condemning greed and acquisitiveness and calling on rich nations to help poor ones.
- c. *Pacem in terris* (1963) stressed the basic human right to freely profess religious faith, welcomed the progress in workers’ rights, condemned Marxist ideology but noted social advances in even communist states, abandoned Cold War rhetoric, called for an end to colonialism and national self-determination, and called the nuclear arms race “irrational.” (101)

Molly Worthen, in her Great Course *History of Christianity II*, highlights three key areas that were discussed at Vatican II: “religious pluralism, authority in the church, and human sexuality.” (275) Regarding religious pluralism –which was already partially discussed earlier-, she mentions a statement of far-reaching consequences that the council issued that “absolved Jews of the blame for the death of Jesus. This was a big deal, since blaming the Jewish people for murdering the Messiah had been a major justification for anti-Semitism over the centuries.” (275) With respect to the question of authority in the church, Worthen refers to the end of the age in which the Pope’s word was infallible (instituted in the council of 1870). The council put limits to what the pope could do, and “affirmed the power of bishops to balance the pope, the idea of collegiality.” (276) Other aspects that Worthen emphasizes in the area of papal authority are: the role of laypeople during Mass (they were permitted to take an active role in it for the first time); the endorsement of the use of vernacular languages in the liturgy (no more Latin that hardly anybody understands!); the loosening of restrictions that had marked ordinary Catholic life (like the prohibition of eating meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all the Fridays of Lent); and the recognition of nuns’ rights to “get involved in social justice campaigns and educating other women.” (276)

There is a topic that has not been discussed in the literature of Vatican II as it should have been because of being a delicate and controversial subject: sexuality and, in particular, birth control. This was a very contentious theme during the council, and caused further division among bishops, theologians, and the like. The fact is that birth control was becoming a major topic of discussion among, not only Catholics, but by people of all faiths in the 60s. It is in this context that Pope John XXIII, in 1962, “had set up the Pontifical Commission on the Family. Birth control was one of the major issues it was directed to study.” (Yallop 22) However, “on 23 September 1962, Pope John XXIII was diagnosed with stomach cancer. The diagnosis, which was kept from the public, followed nearly eight months of occasional stomach hemorrhages, and reduced the pontiff’s appearances.” (Wikipedia) As a result of this, the pope would die “of peritonitis caused by a perforated stomach at 19:49 local time on 3 June 1963 at the age of 81, ending a historic pontificate of four years and seven months. He died just as a Mass for him finished in Saint Peter’s Square below, celebrated by Luigi Traglia, a cardinal-priest who had been raised to the rank of domestic prelate of His Holiness during the pontificate of Pius XI (1922-1939), the first pope to be the sovereign of Vatican City since “its creation as an independent state on 11 February 1929.” (Wikipedia)

Pope Paul VI would succeed John XXIII, and he decided to enlarge the Commission on the Family “until its membership reached sixty-eight. He then appointed a considerable number of consultants to advise and monitor the commission.” (Yallop 22) In addition to that, Paul VI appointed a smaller commission of 20 cardinals and bishops to watch them closely. This smaller commission was headed by Cardinal Ottaviani, “the epitome of the reactionary element within the Church.” (Yallop 23) Any conclusion of the bigger commission had to go through the smaller one for approval before it could reach the pope. Then, on April 23, 1966, the Commission on the Family, after having “conducted an

exhaustive and exhausting examination on the artificial-birth-control issue”, had reached a final conclusion and written their report:

In essence it advised the pope that consensus had been reached by an overwhelming majority of its members (64 to 4), as well as by theologians, legal experts, historians, sociologists, doctors, obstetricians, and married couples, that a change in the Catholic Church’s stand on artificial birth control was both possible and advisable. (Yallop 24)

The report was then submitted to the smaller commission of cardinals and bishops. Forced “to record their own views on the report, six of the prelates abstained, eight voted in favor of recommending the report to the pope, and six voted against it.” (Yallop 24) Though this majority seemed to point in the direction of a crucial change, Cardinal Ottaviani, the most powerful person in the Catholic Church next to the pope, was determined not to allow this to pass, so he “contacted the four dissenting priests from the pontifical commission . . . [and] persuaded them to enlarge their dissenting conclusions in a special report. Thus the Jesuit Marcellino Zalba, the Redemptorist Jan Visser, the Franciscan Ermenegildo Lio, and the American Jesuit John Ford created a second document.” (25)

We don’t know the arguments that Ottaviani employed to convince the four dissenters to write a second document. This obvious unethical behavior on the part of the five of them gets even worse when we find out that the American Jesuit, John Ford, “believed he was in direct contact with the Holy Spirit with regard to this issue and this divine guidance had led him to the ultimate truth. If the majority view prevailed, Ford declared, he would have to leave the Roman Catholic Church.” (25) This arrogant method of manipulation would end up leading to a disgraceful end.

By the time the two reports were submitted to the Paul VI, most of the members of the initial commission had departed. Yallop declares that the majority of them “waited in their various countries for the papal announcement approving artificial birth control. Some of them began to prepare a paper that could serve as an introduction or preface to the impending papal ruling, in which they provided justification for the change in the Church’s position.” (26) Meanwhile, taking advantage of their absence, Ottaviani manipulated Cardinals Cicognani, Browne, Parente, and Samore, who shared his views on artificial birth control, into meeting daily with the pope to try to convince him to rule against both commissions, and against birth control. Eventually, Paul VI decided that he would retire to Castel Gandolfo, his summer residence, to write the encyclical all by himself. (26)

Right there on the pope’s desk at Castel Gandolfo, among several reports, recommendations and studies on artificial birth control was one by Albino Luciani, according to Yallop. (26) While Vatican II was in session, Paul VI had requested the opinions of various regions of Italy, Vittorio Veneto being one of them, Luciani’s birth region. The patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Urbani, had organized a meeting of all the bishops in the region. “After a day’s debate it was decided that Luciani should draw up the report.” (27)

The decision of giving Luciani this task was based on his knowledge of the subject, which he had been studying for years. He had actually discussed it with physicians, sociologists, theologians, and married couples, and also written about it.

Among this last group was his brother Edoardo, who was struggling to provide for his large family, which would end up with ten children. This was the result of a continuing ban on artificial birth control, so Luciani experienced first-hand the practical consequences of its application. (27)

Yallop states that Luciani's report had been written and submitted by April 1968, after a great deal of consultation with the bishops of the Vittorio Veneto region. Cardinal Urbani signed the report and sent it directly to Pope Paul VI. At a later time, when Urbani was meeting with the pope at Castel Gandolfo, Paul mentioned Luciani's report and praised it greatly. The central point of the report was to recommend to the pope that the Church "should approve the use of the anovulant pill developed by Professor Pincus. *That it should become the Catholic birth-control pill.*" (author's italics) (27-28)

In spite of this report that Paul VI had praised so highly and the two reports submitted to him by the two Council commissions (of 68 members one, and 20 the other, representing a plurality of countries), he ended up siding with the dissident minority of the four cardinals that had been pressured by Ottaviani. The result of this decision was *Humanae Vitae*, which would be published on July 25, 1968. In this document, the pope "declared that the only methods of birth control that the Church considered acceptable were abstinence and the rhythm method: ` . . . in any use whatever of marriage there must be no impairment of its natural capacity to procreate human life.'" (Yallop 28-29)

Though it was stressed that the encyclical was not an infallible document, its repercussions were monumental. Yallop compares this event to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and its disastrous consequences to those of the treatment of Galileo in the 17th century and the declaration of papal infallibility in the 19th. Millions ignored the pope and continued using the pill or whatever method they liked best. Yallop adds: "others tried to follow the encyclical and discovered they had avoided one Catholic concept of sin only to experience another, divorce. The encyclical totally divided the Church." Yallop quotes Dr. André Hellegers, an obstetrician and member of the ignored pontifical commission as saying: "I cannot believe that salvation is based on contraception by temperature and damnation is based on rubber." (29) This is a funny, satirical comment on *Humanae Vitae*, but also an exaggeration. However, it stresses the ridiculous, paradoxical aspect of the papal ruling on contraception.

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