

Vatican II: The Council that Took a Fresh Look at the Church

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Why the Council was needed

The reforms instituted by the Second Vatican Council were already being discussed and debated in various parts of the Church prior to the Council, but conservative leaders in Rome vehemently opposed them.

An ecumenical council was the necessary vehicle for change, for it possesses the highest level of teaching authority in the Catholic Church. An ecumenical council represents the collective discernment of all the Church's leaders from around the world, in communion with the Pope. Thus, the documents produced by the Council led to many lasting and far-reaching reforms, which many in the Church had sought for a long time.

Off to a slow start

Pope John XXIII announces the Council on January 25, 1959.

1st session: Oct. 11 – Dec. 8, 1962

After the Council is announced, Pope John XXIII invites Bishops from around the world to submit their ideas, so that the Council can address what they see as the most pressing needs of the Church. Preparatory commissions in ten different subject areas are tasked with incorporating all of this feedback into draft documents (*schemata*), which the Bishops will then debate, revise, and ultimately promulgate as Church law.

The preparatory commissions are controlled by a group of conservative officials in the Roman Curia, who ignore all of the reformist ideas that are submitted. When the Bishops gather for the opening of the Council and see the schemata that have been prepared, they discard them, form new commissions, and start over. As a result, not a single document is promulgated during the first session.

The Council starts to produce results

Pope John XXIII dies June 3, 1963. Pope Paul VI is elected June 21 and immediately announces that the Council will continue.

2nd session: Sept. 29 – Dec. 4, 1963

Documents promulgated:

- **Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy** (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*)
- Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication (*Inter Mirifica*)

3rd session: Sept. 14 – Nov. 21, 1964

Documents promulgated:

- **Dogmatic Constitution on the Church** (*Lumen Gentium*)
- Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*)
- Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*)

The Council kicks into high gear

4th and final session: Sept. 14 – Dec. 8, 1965

11 more documents were promulgated in this session.

Oct. 28, 1965

- Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church (*Christus Dominus*)
- Decree on Priestly Formation (*Optatam Totius*)
- Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*)
- Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*)
- Declaration on Christian Education (*Gravissimum Educationis*)

Nov. 18, 1965

- **Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation** (*Dei Verbum*)
- Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*)

Dec. 7, 1965

- Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*)
- Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*)
- Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*)
- **Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World** (*Gaudium et Spes*)