CATHOLICISM IN CRISIS: SATAN’S ASSAULT ON THE CHURCH

Session #3: Vatican II and Its Aftermath

A. John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council

Pope John XXIII was one of the most beloved popes in history; as one scholar writes, "In a period of less than five years he almost single-handedly transformed the Catholic Church from a clericalistic, monarchical, unecumenical, and theologically rigid body to a community of radical equality in Christ—laity, religious, and clergy alike—open to dialogue and collaboration with other Christian communities, with unbelievers, and with the world at large" (Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Popes*). The Holy Father was known for his humor, friendliness, and unfailing optimism; during his short papacy he wrote several important encyclicals, including *Ad Petri Cathedram* ("To the Chair of Peter"), which promoted ecumenism; *Mater et Magistra* ("Mother and Teacher"), which—on the 70th anniversary of Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, balanced the idea of subsidiarity with that of socialization (namely, that higher agencies, especially governments, must fulfill those duties beyond the scope of lower agencies); and *Pacem in Terris* ("Peace on Earth"), which stated that the foundation of world peace is the recognition of human rights and responsibilities.

The most important act of John’s papacy was the convening of the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II. He intended it to be a pastoral council, which would present the Church’s teaching in an updated manner (as expressed by the Italian word *aggiornamento*). By “opening the windows of the Church” to let in some fresh air, John deliberately disagreed with “prophets of gloom who are always forecasting disaster,” and confidently predicted a new Pentecost. (In this optimistic spirit, he ignored or downplayed the message of Fatima, including the Third Secret, which was not—contrary to widespread expectations—revealed in 1960.) Pope John lived to see only the first of Vatican II’s four sessions, dying of cancer in June, 1963 (an event causing great worldwide grief).

B. The Council Documents and Their Implementation

Vatican II’s four sessions each lasted two-three months, taking place in the fall of each year from 1962 – 1965. Nearly 3000 bishops attended, along with official observers from Orthodox Churches and Protestant denominations; theologians advised committees of bishops as they prepared official documents, which were then voted on by the bishops as a whole. Seven major documents and nine minor ones were issued. The major ones include (1) the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), which calls the Mass “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed . . . and the source from which all her power flows”; (2) the “Constitution of the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et Spes*), which teaches that the Church is part of the world and must be of service to it; (3) the “Decree on Ecumenism,” which acknowledges other Christian communities as part of the Body of Christ; (4) the “Constitution on Divine Revelation,” which says that God speaks through Scripture, Tradition, and the teaching authority of the Church, all united by the Holy Spirit; (5) the “Declaration on Religious Freedom,” which insists that coercion has no place in the proclamation of the Gospel; (6) the “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” which acknowledges that God can speak through other religions, and which absolves the Jewish people of responsibility for the death of Christ; and (7) the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (*Lumen Gentium*), which describes the Church as a mystery, a sacrament, and as the People of God, with the pope and bishops exercising a ministry of service and collegiality (unity in authority), while the laity participate fully in the Church’s mission.
The ecclesiology (understanding of the Church) of the Vatican II documents has certain common principles: (1) The Church is a mystery or sacrament, a “reality imbued with the hidden presence of God.” (2) The Church is the entire people of God, not just the hierarchy. (3) The entire people of God share in the Church’s mission. (4) This mission includes involvement in the social, political, and economic order. (5) The Church exists at both the local and universal levels. (6) The Body of Christ consists of more than just the Catholic Church—though the fullness of Christ’s presence “subsists” only in the Catholic Church. (7) The mission of the Church includes proclaiming the Gospel, celebrating the sacraments, witnessing to the truth, and serving all those in need. (8) Authority must be exercised as a form of service. (9) Religious truth must be respected wherever it’s found, even outside the Church. (10) The Church’s nature and mission must always be understood within the context of the Kingdom of God.

Vatican II was truly inspired by the Holy Spirit, and it led to many important forms of renewal (including a simplification of the Mass and other sacraments, a call for greater participation by the laity in the life of the Church, the restoration of the permanent diaconate, and the restoration of the catechumenate). However, along with this renewal, many serious problems arose.

C. Paul VI and a Whirlwind Unleashed

The Vatican II documents contain no Modernist statements, and are in accord with traditional Catholic doctrine—but the Modernists were very successful in ensuring that the news media presented only their interpretation of what the Council had done. The so-called “spirit of Vatican II” confused many orthodox clergy and laity, and led to changes and experiments that went far beyond anything the Council Fathers had envisioned. In The Decline and Fall of the Catholic Church in America, sociologist David Carlin asserts that the Church in America was hit by a “perfect storm” of three simultaneous events: Vatican II (which shook the faith of Catholics who wrongly assumed the Church would never change in even the slightest way), the “arrival” of Catholics as equal members of American society (blinding them to society’s increasingly anti-religious nature), and an overall 1960s rebellion against all forms of authority. These trends contributed to a huge decline in the number of seminarians, to thousands of priests and nuns abandoning their vows, and to lay persons adopting many of the same values (divorce, contraception, and abortion) as other Americans; “openness to the world” brought with it a spirit of indiscipline.

Pope Paul VI faced these and many other problems. His response to the “hijacking of Vatican II” (as some have called it) was to continue teaching the Church’s faith in a very clear and orthodox way (upsetting Modernists and their allies), but without disciplining dissident theologians (upsetting traditional Catholics). His papacy had many important accomplishments, such as the lifting of mutual excommunications with the Eastern Orthodox Churches (dating from the 11th century), visits to the Holy Land and the United States, and an address to the United Nations. However, his 1968 encyclical Humanae Vitae (“Of Human Life”), which upheld the Church’s traditional prohibition of artificial contraception and insisted that every act of marital intercourse be open to the possibility of new human life, caused a firestorm of protest and disension. Paul never again wrote an encyclical (though he did issue important documents on evangelization and on the 1971 observance of the 80th anniversary of Leo XIII’s Rerum Novarum).

In 1972, Paul VI sadly remarked that “the smoke of Satan has entered the sanctuary” (and was mocked for defending the Church’s traditional belief in the reality of the devil). It is even claimed that in the short time between John XXIII’s death and Paul’s election, a secret satanic ceremony “enthroned” the devil in the Vatican. Regardless of whether or not this happened, there is no doubt that much of the promises and expectations raised by Vatican II remained unfulfilled.
The seven major documents of Vatican II, in summary form, are:

a. *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*: The Church is a mystery, or sacrament, the whole People of God, in whose service the hierarchy is placed. The authority of pope and bishops is to be exercised as a service and in a collegial mode. Bishops are not simply the vicars of the pope, and the laity participate fully and directly in the Church’s mission.

b. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*: The Church must read the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel. The Church does not exist alongside or apart from the world; the Church is part of the world, and its mission is to serve the whole human family in order to make the human race’s history more human.

c. *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*: Christian unity is a matter of restoration, not of a return to Rome; other Christian communities are churches within the Body of Christ; and both sides were to blame for the divisions of the Church.

d. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*: The Church proclaims the Gospel not only in word but also in sacrament, or by sacred signs. Since the whole People of God is involved in this worship, the signs must be intelligible.

e. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*: The Word of God is communicated through Sacred Scripture, sacred tradition, and the teaching authority of the Church, all linked together and directed by the Holy Spirit. The sacred realities are always open in principle to a growth in understanding.

f. *Declaration on Religious Freedom (Dignitatis Humanae)*: No one is to be forced in any way to embrace the Christian life or the Catholic faith. This principle is rooted in human dignity and the freedom of the act of faith.

g. *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate)*: God speaks also through other religions, so we should engage in dialogue and other collaborative efforts with them. The Jews have a special relationship to the Church. They cannot be blamed as a people for the death of Jesus.
The nine minor documents of Vatican II, in summary form, are:

a. **Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes):** The Gospel is to be preached also and always to non-Christians, but not as a culturally alien reality. Evangelization is an obligation for every member of the Church.

b. **Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem):** The laity participates in the mission of the Church, but especially in the temporal order.

c. **Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches (Orientalium Ecclesiarum):** The Eastern Catholic, or “Uniate,” churches can be a bridge to the Orthodox East. The integrity of Eastern traditions of liturgy, spirituality, and discipline is to be restored.

d. **Decree on the Bishops’ Pastoral Office in the Church (Christus Dominus):** Bishops are the pastors of their own local churches, and beyond that collaborate with other bishops through episcopal conferences and with the pope and all other bishops through the episcopal college. Authority is always for service.

e. **Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (Presbyterorum Ordinis):** Priests are members of a presbytery in union with a bishop, and with him serve the building up of Christ’s body.

f. **Decree on Priestly Formation (Optatum Totius):** There must be a closer connection between seminary training and the pastoral situation.

g. **Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life (Perfectae Caritatis):** The renewal of religious life (a life lived according to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience) must be based on the Gospel, the original purposes of the community, and the changed condition of the times.

h. **Declaration on Christian Education (Gravissimum Educationis):** Education must be broadly humane and up-to-date, with a concern for personal maturity and social responsibility.

i. **Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication (Inter Mirifica):** The Church must be vigilant toward the media because of the ever-present danger of their abuse, but must also use the media where opportune.