

opusdei.org

# **"I, secluded in prayer, will always be with you"**

Benedict XVI, speaking without notes, reflected on the importance of Vatican II when meeting with priests from the Rome diocese on February 15.

02/18/2013

*Y our Eminence,*

Dear Brother Bishops and Priests,

For me it is a particular gift of Providence that, before leaving the

Petrine ministry, I can once more see my clergy, the clergy of Rome. It is always a great joy to see the living Church, to see how the Church in Rome is alive; there are shepherds here who guide the Lord's flock in the spirit of the supreme Shepherd. It is a body of clergy that is truly Catholic, universal, in accordance with the essence of the Church of Rome: to bear within itself the universality, the catholicity of all nations, all races, all cultures....

For today, given the conditions brought on by my age, I have not been able to prepare an extended discourse, as might have been expected; but rather what I have in mind are a few thoughts on the Second Vatican Council, as I saw it....

We went to the Council not just with joy but with enthusiasm. There was an incredible sense of expectation. We were hoping that all would be

renewed, that there would truly be a new Pentecost, a new era of the Church ...

Let us begin with the first theme. After the First World War, Central and Western Europe had seen the growth of the liturgical movement, a rediscovery of the richness and depth of the liturgy, which until then had remained, as it were, locked within the priest's Roman Missal, while the people prayed with their own prayer books, prepared in accordance with the heart of the people, seeking to translate the lofty content, the elevated language of classical liturgy into more emotional words, closer to the hearts of the people. But it was as if there were two parallel liturgies: the priest with the altar-servers, who celebrated Mass according to the Missal, and the laity, who prayed during Mass using their own prayer books, at the same time, while knowing substantially

what was happening on the altar. But now there was a rediscovery of the beauty, the profundity, the historical, human, and spiritual riches of the Missal and it became clear that it should not be merely a representative of the people, a young altar-server, saying “ *Et cum spiritu tuo* ,” and so on, but that there should truly be a dialogue between priest and people: truly the liturgy of the altar and the liturgy of the people should form one single liturgy, an active participation, such that the riches reach the people. And in this way, the liturgy was rediscovered and renewed.

I find now, looking back, that it was a very good idea to begin with the liturgy, because in this way the primacy of God could appear, the primacy of adoration. “ *Operi Dei nihil praeponatur* ”: this phrase from the Rule of Saint Benedict (cf. 43:3) thus emerges as the supreme rule of

the Council. Some have made the criticism that the Council spoke of many things, but not of God. It did speak of God! And this was the first thing that it did, that substantial speaking of God and opening up all the people, the whole of God's holy people, to the adoration of God, in the common celebration of the liturgy of the Body and Blood of Christ. ...

And now the second topic: the Church. We know that the First Vatican Council was interrupted because of the Franco-Prussian War, and so it remained somewhat one-sided, incomplete, because the doctrine on the primacy – defined, thanks be to God, in that historical moment for the Church, and very necessary for the period that followed – was just a single element in a broader ecclesiology, already envisaged and prepared. So we were left with a fragment. And one might

say: as long as it remains a fragment, we tend towards a one-sided vision where the Church would be just the primacy. So all along, the intention was to complete the ecclesiology of Vatican I, at a date to be determined, for the sake of a complete ecclesiology. Here too the time seemed ripe because, after the First World War, the sense of the Church was reborn in a new way. As Romano Guardini said: “The Church is starting to reawaken in people’s souls,” and a Protestant bishop spoke of the “era of the Church.” Above all, there was a rediscovery of the concept that Vatican I had also envisaged, namely that of the Mystical Body of Christ. People were beginning to realize that the Church is not simply an organization, something structured, juridical, institutional – it is that too – but rather an organism, a living reality that penetrates my soul, in such a way that I myself, with my own

believing soul, am a building block of the Church as such. In this sense, Pius XII wrote the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* as a step towards completing the ecclesiology of Vatican I....

Even more hotly debated was the problem of Revelation. At stake here was the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, and it was the exegetes above all who were anxious for greater freedom; they felt themselves somewhat – shall we say – in a position of inferiority with regard to the Protestants, who were making the great discoveries, whereas Catholics felt somewhat “handicapped” by the need to submit to the Magisterium. So a very concrete struggle was in play here: what sort of freedom do exegetes have? How does one properly read Scripture? What is the meaning of Tradition? It was a multifaceted struggle which I cannot go into now,

but the important thing, for sure, is that Scripture is the word of God and that the Church is under Scripture, the Church obeys God's word and does not stand above Scripture. Yet at the same time Scripture is Scripture only because there is the living Church, its living subject; without the living subject of the Church, Scripture is only a book, open to different interpretations and lacking ultimate clarity.

Here the battle – as I said – was difficult, and an intervention of Pope Paul VI proved decisive. This intervention shows all the delicacy of a father, his responsibility for the progress of the Council, but also his great respect for the Council. The idea had arisen that Scripture is complete; everything is found there; consequently there is no need for Tradition, and so the Magisterium has nothing to say. At that point the Pope transmitted to the Council, I



believe, fourteen formulae for a phrase to be inserted into the text on Revelation and he gave us, the Council Fathers, the freedom to choose one of the fourteen formulae, but he said that one of them needed to be chosen in order to complete the text. I remember more or less the formula “ *non omnis certitudo de veritatibus fidei potest sumi ex Sacra Scriptura* ,” in other words, the Church’s certainty about her faith is not born only of an isolated book, but has need of the Church herself as a subject enlightened and guided by the Holy Spirit. Only then does the Scripture speak with all its authority. This phrase, which we selected in the Doctrinal Commission from the fourteen formulae, is decisive, I would say, for showing the Church’s absolute necessity, and thus understanding the meaning of Tradition, the living body in which this word draws life from the outset and from which it receives its light,

in which it is born. The fact of the canon of Scripture is already an ecclesial fact: that these writings are Scripture is the result of an illumination of the Church, who discovered in herself this canon of Scripture; she discovered it, she did not create it; and always and only in this communion of the living Church can one really understand and read the Scripture as the word of God, as a word which guides us in life and in death....

Finally, ecumenism. I do not want to enter now into these problems, but it was obvious – especially after the “passions” suffered by Christians in the Nazi era – that Christians could find unity, or at least seek unity, yet it was also clear that God alone can bestow unity. And we are still following this path. Now, with these themes, the “Rhine alliance” – so to speak – had completed its work.

The second part of the Council was much more extensive. There appeared with great urgency the issue of today's world, the modern age, and the Church; and with it, the issues of responsibility for the building up of this world, of society, responsibility for the future of this world and eschatological hope, the ethical responsibility of Christians and where we look for guidance; and then religious freedom, progress, and relations with other religions. At this moment, all the parties of the Council really entered into the discussion, not just America, the United States, with its powerful interest in religious freedom. In the third session the Americans told the Pope: we cannot go home without bringing a declaration on religious freedom voted by the Council. The Pope, however, had the firmness and the decision, the patience, to take the text to the fourth session, for the sake of greater discernment and the fuller

consent of the Council Fathers. I mean: it was not only the Americans who intervened forcefully in the unfolding of the Council, but also Latin America, well aware of the extreme poverty of its people, on a Catholic continent, and the responsibility of the faith for the situation of these people. Likewise, Africa and Asia saw the need for interreligious dialogue; problems arose which we Germans – I have to admit – had not foreseen. I cannot describe all of this now. The great document *Gaudium et Spes* analyzed very well the issue of Christian eschatology and worldly progress, and that of responsibility for the society of the future and the responsibility of Christians before eternity, and in this way it also renewed a Christian ethics, the foundations of ethics. But – let us say unexpectedly – alongside this great document there arose another document which responded in a

more synthetic and more concrete way to the challenges of the times, and this was the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* From the beginning our Jewish friends were present, and they said, primarily to us Germans, but not to us alone, that after the tragic events of the Nazi period, the Nazi decade, the Catholic Church had to say something about the Old Testament, about the Jewish people. They said: even if it is clear that the Catholic Church is not responsible for the *Shoah* , it was Christians for the most part who committed those crimes; we need to deepen and renew Christian awareness of this, even though we know full well that true believers have always resisted these things. Thus it was clear that our relationship with the world of the ancient People of God needed to be an object of reflection.

Understandably, too, the Arab countries – the bishops of the Arab countries – were unhappy about this:

they feared somewhat a glorification of the State of Israel, which naturally they did not want. They said: fine, a truly theological statement about the Jewish people is good, it is necessary, but if you speak about that, speak of Islam too; only then will there be a balance; Islam too is a great challenge and the Church also needs to clarify her relationship with Islam. This was something that, at the time, we did not much understand: a little, but not much. Today we know how necessary it was.

When we began to work also on Islam, we were told that there were also other world religions: the whole of Asia! Think of Buddhism, Hinduism.... And so, instead of a declaration as initially conceived, concerning only the People of God in the Old Testament, a text was created on interreligious dialogue, anticipating what only 30 years later would be demonstrated in all its

intensity and importance. I cannot enter now into this theme, but if one reads the text, one sees that it is very dense and prepared truly by people who were familiar with the realities, and it indicates briefly, in a few words, what is essential. Likewise it indicates the foundation of dialogue, in difference, in diversity, in faith, on the unicity of Christ, who is one, and it is not possible for a believer to think that religions are all variations on a single theme. No, there is one reality of the living God, who has spoken, and there is *one* God, *one* incarnate God, thus *one* word of God, that is truly God's word. But there is religious experience, with a certain human light from creation, and therefore it is necessary and possible to enter into dialogue, and thus to become open to one another and to open everyone to the peace of God, the peace of all his sons and daughters, the peace of his entire family.

Therefore, these two documents, on religious freedom and *Nostra Aetate* , linked to *Gaudium et Spes* , make a very important trilogy whose importance has been demonstrated only after decades, and we are still working to understand better the interlinked realities of the unicity of God's revelation, the unicity of the one God incarnate in Christ, and the multiplicity of religions, by which we seek peace and also hearts that are open to the light of the Holy Spirit, who illumines and leads to Christ.

I would now like to add yet a third point: there was the Council of the Fathers – the real Council – but there was also the Council of the media. It was almost a Council apart, and the world perceived the Council through the latter, through the media. Thus, the Council that reached the people with immediate effect was that of the media, not that of the Fathers. And while the Council of the Fathers was



conducted within the faith – it was a Council of faith seeking *intellectus* , seeking to understand itself and seeking to understand the signs of God at that time, seeking to respond to the challenge of God at that time and to find in the word of God a word for today and tomorrow – while all the Council, as I said, moved within the faith, as *fides quaerens intellectum* , the Council of the journalists, naturally, was not conducted within the faith, but within the categories of today's media, namely apart from faith, with a different hermeneutic. It was a political hermeneutic: for the media, the Council was a political struggle, a power struggle between different trends in the Church. It was obvious that the media would take the side of those who seemed to them more closely allied with their world. There were those who sought the decentralization of the Church, power for the bishops and then,

through the expression "People of God," power for the people, the laity. There was this threefold question: the power of the Pope, which was then transferred to the power of the bishops and the power of all – popular sovereignty. Naturally, for them, this was the part to be approved, to be promulgated, to be favoured. So too with the liturgy: there was no interest in liturgy as an act of faith, but as something where comprehensible things are done, a matter of community activity, something profane. And we know that there was a tendency, not without a certain historical basis, to say: sacrality is a pagan thing, perhaps also a thing of the Old Testament. In the New Testament it matters only that Christ died *outside* : that is, outside the gates, in the profane world. Sacrality must therefore be abolished, and profanity now spreads to worship: worship is no longer worship, but a community

act, with communal participation: participation understood as activity. These translations, trivializations of the idea of the Council, were virulent in the process of putting the liturgical reform into practice; they were born from a vision of the Council detached from its proper key, that of faith. And the same applies to the question of Scripture: Scripture is a book, it is historical, to be treated historically and only historically, and so on.

We know that this Council of the media was accessible to everyone. Therefore, this was the dominant one, the more effective one, and it created so many disasters, so many problems, so much suffering: seminaries closed, convents closed, banal liturgy ... and the real Council had difficulty establishing itself and taking shape; the virtual Council was stronger than the real Council. But the real force of the Council was present and, slowly but surely,

established itself more and more and became the true force which is also the true reform, the true renewal of the Church. It seems to me that, 50 years after the Council, we see that this virtual Council is broken, is lost, and there now appears the true Council with all its spiritual force. And it is our task, especially in this *Year of Faith* , on the basis of this *Year of Faith* , to work so that the true Council, with its power of the Holy Spirit, be accomplished and the Church be truly renewed. Let us trust that the Lord will assist us. I myself, secluded in prayer, will always be with you and together let us go forward with the Lord in the certainty that the Lord will conquer. Thank you!

---

en-ie/article/i-secluded-in-prayer-will-  
always-be-with-you/ (12/11/2025)