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Vatican Council II: “The polar star guiding the Church’s journey”

In his 7 January general audience, Pope Leo XIV began a new catechetical cycle dedicated to the Second Vatican Council.

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*Brothers and sisters, good morning
and welcome!*

After the Jubilee Year, during which we paused to reflect on the mysteries of Jesus' life, we are beginning a new cycle of catecheses dedicated to the Second Vatican Council and to a rereading of its Documents. This is a valuable opportunity to rediscover the beauty and importance of this ecclesial event. At the conclusion of the Jubilee of the Year 2000, Saint John Paul II stated: "I feel more than ever the duty to point to the Council as the great grace from which the Church benefited in the twentieth century" (*Apostolic Letter Novo millennio ineunte*, 57).

Alongside the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, in 2025 we commemorated the sixtieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. Although the time that separates us from this event is not great, it is also true that the generation of bishops, theologians, and believers of Vatican II is no

longer with us today. Therefore, while we feel called not to extinguish prophecy and to continue seeking paths and ways to implement its insights, it will be important to come to know it once again at close range — and to do so not “by hearsay” or through secondhand interpretations, but by rereading its documents and reflecting on their content. Indeed, this is a Magisterium that even today remains the polar star guiding the Church’s journey. As Benedict XVI taught, “the conciliar documents have not lost their relevance with the passing of the years; on the contrary, their teachings prove particularly pertinent in light of the new situations of the Church and of today’s globalized society” (First Message after the Mass with the Cardinal Electors, 20 April 2005).

When Pope Saint John XXIII opened the conciliar assembly on 11 October 1962, he spoke of it as the dawn of a

day of light for the whole Church. The work of the many Fathers who were convened, coming from Churches on every continent, in fact paved the way for a new ecclesial era. After a rich biblical, theological, and liturgical reflection that had spanned the twentieth century, the Second Vatican Council rediscovered the face of God as Father who, in Christ, calls us to be his children; it looked at the Church in the light of Christ, the light of the nations, as a mystery of communion and a sacrament of unity between God and his people; it initiated an important liturgical reform by placing at the center the mystery of salvation and the active and conscious participation of the whole People of God. At the same time, it helped us to open ourselves to the world and to welcome the changes and challenges of the modern age through dialogue and shared responsibility, as a Church that wishes to open its arms

to humanity, to echo the hopes and anxieties of peoples, and to cooperate in building a more just and more fraternal society.

Thanks to the Second Vatican Council, “the Church becomes word; the Church becomes message; the Church becomes dialogue” (Saint Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam suam*, 34), committing herself to seeking the truth through the path of ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, and dialogue with people of good will.

This spirit, this inner attitude, must characterize our spiritual life and the Church’s pastoral action, because we still need to carry out more fully ecclesial reform in a ministerial key and, in the face of today’s challenges, we are called to continue being attentive interpreters of the signs of the times, joyful proclaimers of the Gospel, and courageous witnesses to

justice and peace. Monsignor Albino Luciani, the future Pope John Paul I, as Bishop of Vittorio Veneto, wrote prophetically at the beginning of the Council: “There is, as always, a need to bring about not so much organizations or methods or structures, but a deeper and more widespread holiness. [...] It may be that the excellent and abundant fruits of a Council are seen after centuries and mature through the laborious overcoming of contrasts and adverse situations.”^[1]

Rediscovering the Council, therefore, as Pope Francis has affirmed, helps us “to give primacy once again to God, to what is essential, to a Church that is madly in love with her Lord and with all the men and women whom He loves” (Homily on the 60th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, 11 October 2022).

Brothers and sisters, what Saint Paul VI said to the conciliar Fathers at the conclusion of the Council's work remains for us today as a guiding criterion. He affirmed that the hour had come to set out, to leave the conciliar assembly in order to go out to meet humanity and bring it the good news of the Gospel, in the awareness of having lived a time of grace in which past, present, and future were brought together: "The past, because the Church of Christ is gathered here, with her tradition, her history, her councils, her doctors, her saints. The present, because we part to go to today's world, with its miseries, its sufferings, its sins, but also with its prodigious achievements, its values, its virtues... The future is there, finally, in the urgent call of peoples for greater justice, in their will for peace, in their thirst, conscious or unconscious, for a higher life: precisely the life that the Church of

Christ can and wishes to give them” (Saint Paul VI, Message to the Conciliar Fathers, 8 December 1965).

So it is for us as well. By drawing near to the Documents of the Second Vatican Council and rediscovering their prophecy and relevance, we welcome the rich tradition of the Church’s life and, at the same time, we question the present and renew the joy of hastening to meet the world in order to bring the Gospel of the Kingdom of God; a Kingdom of love, justice, and peace.

^[1] A. Luciani – John Paul I, *Notes on the Council*, in *Opera omnia*, vol. II, Vittorio Veneto 1959–1962.

Discourses, writings, articles, Padua 1988, 451–453.

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