



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 10 October 2012

[\[Video\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This is the eve of the day on which we shall be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and the beginning of the Year of Faith. With this Catechesis I would like, with a few brief thoughts, to start reflecting on the important Church event which the Council was and which I witnessed directly. It lies before us like a great fresco, so to speak, painted with the great multiplicity and variety of its elements under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And as if we were standing in front of a large picture, still today we continue to perceive the extraordinary wealth of that moment of grace, to discover in it particular scenes, fragments and pieces of the mosaic.

On the threshold of the third millennium Blessed John Paul II wrote: "I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council as the great grace bestowed on the Church in the 20th century: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning" (Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 57). I think this is an eloquent image. The Second Vatican Council Documents, to which we must return, freeing them from a mass of publications which instead of making them known have often concealed them, are a compass in our time too that permits the Barque of the Church to put out into the deep in the midst of storms or on calm and peaceful waves, to sail safely and to reach her destination.

I remember that period well: I was a young professor of fundamental theology at the University of

Bonn and it was Cardinal Frings, Archbishop of Cologne — my human and priestly reference point — who took me with him to Rome as his theological consultant; I was then also appointed a Council peritus. It was a unique experience for me: after all the excitement and enthusiasm of the preparations, I could see a living Church — almost 3,000 Council Fathers under the leadership of the Successor of the Apostle Peter — which set herself to learn at the school of the Holy Spirit, the true driving force of the Council. Only rarely in history has it been possible, as it was then, almost “to touch”, to feel tangibly the universality of the Church at a moment of the great fulfilment of her mission to take the Gospel in every epoch to the ends of the earth. In these days, if you look at the pictures of the opening of this great assembly, on television or via the other means of communication, you too will be able to discern the joy, hope and encouragement that participation in this event of light, which shines to this day, gave to us all.

In the history of the Church, as I think you know, various Councils preceded Vatican II. These great ecclesial assemblies were usually convoked to define fundamental elements of faith, above all to correct errors which endangered it. Let us think of the Council of Nicea, held in 325 to oppose the Arian heresy and to reassert clearly the divinity of the Only-Begotten Son of God the Father; or of the Council of Ephesus, in 431, that defined Mary as the Mother of God; of the Council of Chalcedon, in 451, that affirmed the one Person of Christ in two natures, the divine nature and the human. To come a little closer to us, we must mention the Council of Trent in the 16th century that clarified essential points of Catholic doctrine in the face of the Protestant Reformation; or the First Vatican Council that began to reflect on various topics but — because it was interrupted by the occupation of Rome in September 1870 — only had time to produce two documents, one on knowledge of God, the revelation, faith and the relationship with reason, and the other on the primacy of the Pope and on his infallibility.

If we look at the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, we see that in that stretch of the Church’s journey there were no particular errors of faith to correct or condemn, nor were there any specific questions of doctrine or discipline to explain. It is thus possible to understand the surprise of the small group of cardinals in the Chapter Hall of the Benedictine monastery of St Paul Outside-the-Walls when, on 25 January 1959, Blessed John XXIII, announced the Diocesan Synod for Rome and the Council for the universal Church. The first question that arose in the preparation of this great event was, precisely, how to begin it and what specific task to attribute to it. Blessed John XXIII issued a general instruction, in his opening Discourse on 11 October 50 years ago: faith had to speak in a “renewed” and more incisive way — because the world was rapidly changing — but all the while keeping its perennial content intact, without concessions or compromises. The Pope wished the Church to reflect on her faith, on the truth that guides her. However, this serious, in-depth reflection on faith, was to delineate in a new way the relationship between the Church and the modern epoch, between Christianity and certain essential elements of modern thought, not in order to be conformed to it but to present to this world of ours, that is tending to drift away from God, the requirement of the Gospel in its full greatness and purity (cf. *Discourse to the Roman Curia for the Exchange of Christmas Greetings*, 22 December 2005).

The Servant of God Paul VI expressed this well in his homily at the end of the last Council session — on 7 December 1965 — using extraordinarily modern words, when he said that to appreciate this event properly: “it is necessary to remember the time in which it was realized”. In fact, the Pope said “it took place at a time which everyone admits is orientated toward the conquest of the kingdom of earth rather than of that of heaven; a time in which forgetfulness of God has become habitual, and seems, quite wrongly, to be prompted by the progress of science; a time in which the fundamental act of the human person, more conscious now of himself and of his freedom, tends to pronounce in favour of his own absolute autonomy, in emancipation from every transcendent law; a time in which secularism seems the legitimate consequence of modern thought and the highest wisdom in the temporal ordering of society.... It was at such a time as this that our Council was held to the honour of God, in the name of Christ and under the impulse of the Spirit”.

This is what Paul VI said. And he ended by identifying the key point of the Council, God, who “is — and more, he is real, he lives, a personal, provident God, infinitely good; and not only good in himself, but also immeasurably good to us. He is recognized as our Creator, our truth, our happiness; so much so that the effort to look on him, and to centre our heart in him which we call contemplation, is the highest, the most perfect act of the human spirit, the act which even today can and must be at the apex of all human activity from which human beings receive their dignity” (cf. AAS 58 [1966], 52-53).

We see that the era in which we live continues to be marked by forgetting and being deaf to God. I think, therefore, that we should learn the simplest and most fundamental lesson of the Council: namely, that Christianity in its essence consists of faith in God which is Trinitarian Love, and in a personal and community encounter with Christ who orients and gives meaning to life. Everything else flows from this. What is as important today as it was for the Council Fathers is that we see — once again, and clearly — that God is present, concerns us and responds to us. And when, instead, man lacks faith in God, the essential collapses because man loses his profound dignity and what makes his humanity great enough to withstand any form of reductionism. The Council reminds us that the Church in all her members, has the task, the mandate of transmitting God’s word of love which saves, so that we may hear and welcome the divine call which contains in itself our eternal beatitude.

Looking in this light at the riches contained in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, I would like to mention only the four Constitutions, as it were, the four cardinal points of the compass that can direct us. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* points out to us that in the Church at the beginning there is worship, there is God, there is the centrality of the mystery of Christ’s presence. And the Church, the Body of Christ and the pilgrim people in time, has the glorification of God as her fundamental task, as the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* explains. The third document I want to mention is the Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*: the living Word of God convokes the Church and never fails to enliven her as she journeys on through history. And the way in which the Church brings to the whole world

the light she has received from God so that he may be glorified is the basic theme of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*.

The Second Vatican Council is a strong appeal to us to rediscover every day the beauty of our faith, to know it deeply for a more intense relationship with the Lord, in order to live our Christian vocation to the full. May the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and of the whole Church, help us to achieve and to bring to completion what the Council Fathers, motivated by the Holy Spirit, pondered in their hearts: the desire that all might know the Gospel and encounter the Lord Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Many thanks.

To special groups:

I greet all the English-speaking pilgrims, visitors and groups present today, including those from England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Ghana, Australia, India, Japan, Malaysia, Canada and the United States. Upon all of you, I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace!

I then greet with affection the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*, inviting them to think of Mary, invoked in this month of October as Queen of the Holy Rosary. Look to her, dear *young people*, especially you, students at the Schools of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians of Campania and Basilicata, and be ready to renew your "yes" to the plan of love that God has for each one of you. Dear *sick* people, share your suffering with Mary, offering it to her as a gift of salvation for your brethren. Persevere in prayer with Mary, dear *newlyweds*, like the Apostles in the Upper Room, and your families will experience the consoling presence of the Holy Spirit.

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