

THE TWENTY-FIRST CROSSROAD

Christ's Church has existed now for almost two thousand years. Church history tells us that within this vast length of time only twenty ecumenical councils have taken place. We are indeed fortunate that the twenty-first ecumenical council will convene during our life-time. For as Lorenz Jaeger, Archbishop of Paderborn and a member of the preparatory commission for the Second Vatican Council, has stated, "councils are always held at the great crossroads in the Church's history." Christianity is now approaching one of these great crossroads.

Centuries have often gone by from one ecumenical council to another as indeed happened between the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century and the First Vatican Council in the nineteenth. And in our own time, ninety years have elapsed since the Piedmontese army forced the First Vatican Council to a premature close in 1870. Perhaps as a result of this great lapse of time, we of the twentieth century have often come to look upon ecumenical councils as instruments which have been very useful and necessary to the Church in past ages, but which are no longer needed in the present set-up of the Church. Some have felt that the definition of papal infallibility in matters of faith and morals, the high-point of the First Vatican Council, makes future ecumenical councils superfluous. If the pope cannot err when he speaks *ex cathedra*, what need is there for the lengthy discussions which often occur in an ecumenical council?

What surprise then to many Christians when on January 25, 1959, Pope John XXIII announced to a group of cardinals at the Basilica of St. Paul's-Outside-the-Walls his intention to convoke in the very near future the Second Vatican Council! He had only been in office three months when he made this announcement. True, people were quickly growing accustomed to his "different" way of doing things, but this announcement was completely unheralded and unexpected. Certainly this is the boldest action taken by Pope John since he commenced his reign as the spiritual leader of the world. Many are of the opinion that the Second Vatican Council will be the most significant event of the twentieth century.

Pope and Council

Perhaps due to the fact that there have been so few ecumenical councils in the long history of the Church, the Code of Canon Law, which contains the official norms and statutes by which the Church is governed, is very brief when treating of ecumenical councils. Out of the 2,414 canons contained in the Code, only eight legislate about councils. However, these eight canons contain noteworthy information and deserve our attention. Canon 222, the first canon in the Code to treat of ecumenical councils, is divided into two parts. The first part states that only the pope can convoke an ecumenical council. The history of previous ecumenical councils tells us that such was not always the case, since the first eight ecumenical councils of Christian antiquity were all called by the emperors. Often the popes approved this action taken by the emperors, or even advised it, but the actual convocation was the work of the emperors. Then the pope would almost always send his legates to the council to affirm its decisions. However, there were times when even this was not done. A good example of this is the First Council of Constantinople held in 381. This Council was convoked by Emperor Theodosius, who had not taken any consultation with Pope Damasus. As a result, the Pope was not represented at the Council, nor was it considered to be one of the Church's ecumenical councils until the sixth century when the decrees of the Council were pronounced authoritative by Popes Vigilius, Pelagius II and Gregory the Great.

The second section of this canon relates that the pope has the right to preside over an ecumenical council, either in his own person or through others appointed by him. This canon goes on to state that the pope dictates those matters which are to be put before the discussion of the council, as well as the order in which they are to be discussed. The pope also has the right to transfer, suspend or dissolve the council and to confirm its decrees.

The significant role which the supreme pontiff plays in an ecumenical council can be seen from this first canon alone. However, the Code throws even more light on the pope's role in canons 227 through 229. These canons inform us that no decree of an ecumenical council has definitive obliging force unless confirmed by the pope and promulgated by his order. An appeal cannot be made to an ecumenical council from a judgment of the pope. Finally, should it happen that the pope die during the celebration of a council, the council immediately stops until the new pope judges it good to resume and continue the council.

One might easily get the impression that because of the prominent

position of the supreme pontiff in an ecumenical council, this assembly could quickly become a "tool" used by the pope. We must remember, however, that an ecumenical council is a most significant institution in the organization of the Church. As Henri Daniel-Rops points out in *The Second Vatican Council*, "when brought together in circumstances which the Church finds difficult or which require that decisions be taken, an ecumenical council can bring to the aid of the infallible *magisterium* (the Church's teaching authority) the support which derives from collective thought, from general experience." The ecumenical council is, therefore, a true collaboration even though it is only the pope who can call a council and decide those matters which are to be discussed. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 gives us an example of this. The Church at this time was confronted with the Monophysite heresy which taught that there is only one nature in Christ. The Council of Chalcedon was called to combat this heresy. Pope St. Leo the Great sent two legates to preside over the Council and also sent his "Letter to Flavius" in which he spoke of the Incarnation in an orthodox manner, avoiding all erroneous notions. This letter was enthusiastically accepted by the Conciliar Fathers who worked collectively for even greater clarity and precision which would minimize any possibility for false interpretation. Their final draft was sent back to Pope St. Leo who found it to be a better statement than his own.

In his constitution *Dei Filius*, Pope Pius IX teaches that in an ecumenical council "the holy principles of religion are more fully defined, are expressed with increased fullness; in it is ecclesiastical discipline restored and more soundly established so that the members are rejoined to their head, whence flows the strength of the entire mystical body of Christ."

Participants in the Council

In canon 223 we learn who are to be called to an ecumenical council and have a deliberative vote in it: cardinals; patriarchs; primates; archbishops; residential bishops (that is, every bishop who governs a diocese) even if they are not yet consecrated; abbots and prelates *nullius* (those who are responsible directly to the pope); abbots who are superiors of monastic congregations; and superiors general of exempt clerical religious institutes. Titular bishops who are called to the council also have a deliberative vote unless something else is stipulated in the convocation itself. Theologians and canon lawyers who may perhaps be invited to the council have only a consultative vote. As one would imagine from such a list, the number who will attend the Second Vatican Council will be large. An estima-

tion which has been confirmed by an official announcement sets the number in excess of 2,800. Italy alone will furnish over 300 prelates while North and South America will send almost 600 representatives. There will be three times as many Conciliar Fathers at the Second Vatican Council as participated in the First Vatican Council.

Ecumenical

Canon 223 also tells us in an indirect way what makes a council ecumenical. A council is ecumenical at the moment of its summons, if all the bishops of the Catholic world have been officially invited, as Archbishop Jaeger states. But this is not to say that every bishop in the Catholic world actually takes part in the proceedings at the council. This, of course, would be impossible. But there must be a sufficient number of bishops present at the council so that the Catholic world will be represented. *The Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* discusses this very point:

But since it is clearly impossible that all bishops actually can come, it is evident that the quality of ecumenicity cannot be based upon the effective participation of all or of almost all. It is not even required that the number of those present exceed the absentees. The history of several councils which are, beyond question, ecumenical—and Trent is an example—is alone enough to prove that. How many bishops must be present to constitute a quorum? Neither theology nor Canon Law offers a categorical and generally applicable reply to this query. But here is, at least, a general indication: following upon the universal convocation, there ought to be at the actual meeting bishops or prelates from different countries in such number and variety that, having due regard to the circumstances, one can, speaking truly and morally, say that the assembly really constitutes a representation of the whole Church. In the case of serious doubt about the ecumenicity of this or that council, the Church itself has the right peremptorily to settle this question of dogmatic fact.

It is a matter of divine law that every bishop who has jurisdiction in a particular diocese must be invited. The Church considers the presence of her bishops in an ecumenical council so serious that she requires them to swear, in an oath which they take before their consecration, that they will take their place in a council should they be called on to do so. The reason for this is that bishops are successors of the apostles, and have the fullness of the priesthood. They form, together with the pope, the teaching power

of the Church, which represents the highest ecclesiastical authority. Although, as we have seen from canon 223, the class of those who must be invited to a council has been widened to include others who hold ecclesiastical offices bearing quasi-episcopal jurisdiction, only bishops who have actual jurisdiction in a particular diocese are members of a council by divine right, by nature, without having to justify their presence. As Henri Daniel-Rops points out, others have a right to a seat at a council only as a result of custom, or because of their own dignity, or because they share in some way in the jurisdiction proper to a bishop. But the episcopal character is essentially required of anyone who would sit in an assembly of the teaching and governing Church. This episcopal character makes them at the council witnesses to the faith. They alone are the teachers of the faith. And when they are assembled in an ecumenical council, they are the judges in matters of the faith. Bishops are the proof of the Church's universality and catholicity, for the episcopate is one even though it extends over the entire world. In a very true sense, then, councils are of bishops.

Ecumenical Execution and Ecumenical Authority

Thus far, we have seen that a council is ecumenical as regards its summoning if all the bishops of the Catholic world have been officially invited. It is also possible to distinguish two other kinds of ecumenicity: as regards the execution of a council and as regards its authority. A council is ecumenical as regards its execution if after the number of bishops sufficient to represent the entire Church is assembled they act for all the other members who were also invited, although unable to attend perhaps due to ill health or certain political conditions. The resolutions of the bishops who are in attendance are said to embody the consent of the entire Church. In other words, the bishops who attend the council's proceedings act for the entire Church even though the Church in certain areas is not represented at the council.

The third type of ecumenicity, that namely, which has to do with the council's authority, is the most important of the three. It results from the ecumenical summons and the ecumenical execution and can, should necessity demand it, act as a substitute for these two. Nothing, however, can replace this type. Without it, therefore, no council can be ecumenical. The Councils of Constantinople (held in 381 and 553) afford an example. Both lacked the ecumenical summons and the ecumenical execution. However, both these Councils are Ecumenical Councils because their decrees were ultimately ratified by the pope and thus accepted by the Church as a

whole. To have ecumenical authority a council must be the authorized organ of the entire Church with the participation of the pope. For without papal participation, this assembly of bishops would lack its visible head and center of unity. We have already seen that in the early ages of the Church the calling of councils was made by the emperor. But, as Archbishop Jaeger states in *The Ecumenical Council, the Church and Christendom*, there has never been a juridically ecumenical council without the pope, though his participation has been in different ways in the various ecumenical councils:

The decisive authority of Councils rests on the infallibility of their decisions. The theological basis of this is that the episcopal body in union with the Pope is the successor of the Apostolic College. Admittedly, the bishops cannot introduce new revealed truths, as the apostles did, but they possess, as a body, the infallibility Christ promised his Church. When assembled in Council in accord with their visible head, they are kept from error by the assistance of the Holy Spirit. The Church of the living God is called by St. Paul "the pillar and ground of truth" (I Tim. 3:15). The bishops as successors of the apostles exercise their teaching function in the most solemn manner when assembled at a Council, and all believers are bound to accept their decisions in matters of faith. For that reason, the early Church held the conviction that ecumenical Councils were infallible.

The Laity's Part in the Council

From what we have said, one might justifiably come to the conclusion that the laity have no part to play in this assemblage of bishops and other ecclesiastical dignitaries we call an ecumenical council. In a formal sense, this is true. Laymen do not have a right to intervene in the council. This was especially the case after the Council of Trent as a result of certain political lay influence which made itself felt during the proceedings of that historic Council. However, in another less formal sense, the laity do play a part in the ecumenical council. We must remember, even when speaking of ecumenical councils, that the laity are also a part of the Church. We can say then that due to the fact that the laity are members of the mystical body of Christ, united under their bishops and the whole hierarchy, they are considered to be associated with the proceedings of the ecumenical council and do participate in the council in an indirect sense or in a spiritual sense. Even though the laity are actually not present at the proceedings of the council, yet the decisions of the council affect them, for the matters which a council discusses are most often the concern of the laity. Certainly each

bishop who takes part in an ecumenical council knows at least in a general way the ideas and needs of his particular flock. Can we not conclude that these will influence him in some measure when he takes part in the council's discussions? Along these lines, Dominican Fr. Spiazzi tells us that:

the Church is present at the council in the person of theologians and other specialists—and this does not exclude laymen as such—who, although not part of the teaching and deliberating body, nevertheless make a contribution to it by their wishes and their advice (which can be of major importance in the consultative and scientific field). Insofar as action and human causality of it are concerned these may be determining in the council's work.

We might point out here that the Vatican has been very solicitous in assisting the press in order to bring to the public correct information regarding the approaching Council. Pope John has established a special secretariate for this very task. According to Archbishop Felici, Secretary of the Central Commission, special means of information are set up in order to minimize false reports about the Council. The wisdom of this action is apparent since the Council will not have its desired effect unless the public feels confident that the information they have about its proceedings from the Vatican sources is honestly and correctly propounded.

Another question of great interest to the laity is that of the language to be used in the discussions of Vatican II. As Pope John reminded us recently in very emphatic language, Latin is still the official language of the Church. Latin, therefore, will be used at the Council. Actually it is the only language which all those who will participate have in common. However, it has been stated that if anyone has difficulty in expressing himself in the Church's native tongue, he will be permitted to speak in his own native language. This is, however, by way of exception since what is the native tongue of one participant may be a language completely foreign to another.

Objectives of the Second Vatican Council

In his encyclical letter *Ad Petri Cathedram* of June 29, 1959, Pope John named the objectives which he hopes the Second Vatican Council will achieve. These are the development of the Catholic faith, the renewal of the Christian life, and the adaptation of ecclesiastical legislation to modern requirements. Cardinal Montini, Archbishop of Milan, pointed out

that the Second Vatican Council will be the first ecumenical council in the history of the Church that did not have to deal with internal discord or solve disputed doctrinal problems within the Church. Rather, the Church in Vatican II, will take cognizance of exactly what is demanded by her growing life, as well as her own spiritual needs. The Second Vatican Council will, then, be primarily concerned with internal matters of the Church. Some duties of the Council will be to complete the doctrine regarding episcopal authority with consideration given to the relations between the bishops and various religious orders, as well as need for greater participation of the faithful in the Church's life.

Will this Council be a council of reunion with other Christian sects? Vatican officials answer negatively. Pope John feels that the time is not yet ripe for reunion with other Christian sects. We can, therefore, be certain that Vatican II will not be a council of reunion as was the Council of Ferrara-Florence which united the Greek Orthodox with Rome in 1439. This is not to say, however, that questions which lie at the heart of the reunion problem will not be discussed at the forthcoming Council. By discussing such problems the Pope hopes to prepare the way in some measure for possible reunion in the future. He mentions this in *Ad Petri Cathedram*:

That there may be one fold and one shepherd (Jn. 10:16). This irresistible assurance was the compelling motive which led us to announce publicly our resolve to call an Ecumenical Council. Bishops will come together there from every corner of the world to discuss important matters of religion. But the most pressing topics will be those which concern the spread of the Catholic faith, the revival of Christian standards of morality, and the bringing of ecclesiastical discipline into closer accord with the needs and conditions of our times. This in itself will provide an outstanding example of truth, unity and love. May those who are separated from this Apostolic See, beholding this manifestation of unity, derive from it the inspiration to seek out that unity which Jesus Christ prayed for so ardently from his heavenly Father.

Preparation for the Council

The ecumenical council is composed of three phases or periods. In the case of the Second Vatican Council, the first phase, the antepreparatory phase, began not long after the Pope issued his encyclical *Ad Petri Cathedram* of June 29, 1959. This phase, presided over by Cardinal Tardini,

completed its work in less than a year, an amazing feat considering the amount of work involved. To this phase of the Council belongs the preliminary planning of the main questions which are to be discussed in the Council. Thus there was general consultation with all who are entitled to be present at the proceedings of the Council, and the selection of those who would prepare the work of the Council. During the course of this period, more than three thousand documents were sent to bishops, ecclesiastical superiors and other authorities in order to get as much information as possible for the preparation of the Council. More than two thousand answers were promptly received. These were carefully studied and discussed by the Roman Congregation of Cardinals who were able to learn from them the most important problems facing the Church at the present time. These Cardinals, in turn, passed these replies on to the Pope including their own comments and suggestions. The contents of all these letters were condensed into about twenty pages, a succinct yet comprehensive account of a vast amount of material. This was largely the work of four priests presided over by Monsignor Felici, and was completed by May, 1960.

In his *motu proprio*, *Superno Dei Motu* of June 5, 1960, Pope John says, "We ourselves followed this work and research, which was carried through with the utmost care. We considered it our duty to read with particular attention the proposals and wishes of the bishops, the suggestions and recommendations of the authorities of the Roman Curia, and the opinions submitted by the universities." The marginal notes made by the Pope in his own hand will attest to his intense interest and personal direction even in this first very preliminary phase of the Council. The results of this first phase the Pope ordered to be published. This represents the first part of the acts of the Council.

The Commissions

In the same *motu proprio*, Pope John goes on to say that "the time has come to start, with God's help, on the formation of the Commissions for the study of the subjects to be treated by the Council. They will consist of Cardinals, bishops and priests eminent in virtue and learning, from both secular and regular clergy, chosen from different localities, so that the catholicity of the Church may be manifested." The Pope then goes on to name the ten commissions. These are the Theological Commission, the Commissions for Bishops and the Government of Dioceses, the Commis-

Official Name: **SECOND ECUMENICAL COUNCIL OF THE VATICAN**

His Holiness Pope John 22nd
Jan. 25, 1959

ANTEPREPARATORY COMMISSION, May 16, 1959
Pres. Tardini
10 prelates - Curia + 4-man Secretariate

CENTRAL COMMISSION

3 Secretariates Created June 1960

Secr. X'n Unity
Cardinal Bea, S.J.

Comm. Media
Abp. O'Connor

Administrative
Card. di Jorio
7 laymen

Theol.
Comm.

Ottaviani

Bps &
Diocesan
Gov't

Mimmi

Discipline
of
Clergy &
Faithful

Ciriaci

Religious

Valeri

Discipline
of
Sacraments

Masella

Sacred
Liturgy

Cicognani

Studies &
Seminaries

Pizzardo

Eastern
Churches

Cicognani

Missions

Agagianian

Lay
Apostolate

Cento

sion for the Discipline of Clergy and Laity, the Commission for Religious Orders, the Commission on the Discipline of the Sacraments, the Commission for the Liturgy, the Commission for Studies and Seminaries, the Commission for Oriental Churches, the Commission for the Missions, and the Commission for the Lay Apostolate and Catholic Action. In addition to these commissions, two secretariates have been established: the Secretariate for Communications Media and the Secretariate for Promoting Christian Unity. This list represents quite an increase from the five commissions which prepared for the First Vatican Council. Vatican II will, therefore, have far greater depth.

Finally the Pope set up the Central Commission over which he himself will preside. This Commission is composed of the presidents of each of the individual commissions. The purpose of this Commission is to follow the work done by the individual commissions and bring them into accord if that be necessary. It will select from the decisions reached in the different commissions those questions which will be given over to the discussion of the Conciliar Fathers. Thus, until the Central Commission discusses all the questions submitted by the individual commissions and chooses from these, we cannot know certainly the precise questions which will be set before the Council. As one might surmise, the deliberations of this highest commission remain in utmost secrecy. Indeed, secrecy is required of every member who is assigned to any of the preparatory commissions. Each member has taken an oath of secrecy on the day he was appointed to a particular commission.

To these commissions which have to do in a formal way with the Council, we can add the Technical and Economic Secretariate which is responsible for the material organization of this large assembly. Also there is the Ceremonial Commission under the presidency of the Dean of the College of Cardinals, Cardinal Tisserant. The duty of this Commission is to regulate the protocol of the Council, making certain that the ceremonies of the Council are performed with proper liturgical solemnity.

Each of these commissions has a president, a secretary and a definite number of members. Full liberty is granted to each commission in the sense that each can organize itself according as it seems best to the members. If the need arises, the commissions can be subdivided into subcommissions for more efficient operation. An example is the Commission for the Lay Apostolate which is already subdivided into three subcommissions to deal with problems concerning the social realm, Catholic action and works of charity.

Following the Truth in Charity

As we have seen, an ecumenical council is a very complex affair. If it is to run smoothly, much time and energy must be spent on its preparation. Yes, all this is required if a council is to be a success. And all this is being done at this very moment. Yet, something more is required, something far greater than the preparation of the mechanics of a council. This is prayer. Thus, Pope John has not ceased to plead for the prayers of all of us that in the Second Vatican Council the Holy Ghost will come, send forth His light and renew the face of the earth. Prayer is the most important element of an ecumenical council. Only through our prayers will the words of St. Paul be verified during the Second Vatican Council:

We are to follow the truth, in a spirit of charity, and so grow up, in everything, into a due proportion with Christ, who is our head. On him all the body depends; it is organized and unified by each contact with the source which supplies it; and thus, each limb receiving the active power it needs, it achieves its natural growth, building itself up through charity (Eph. 4:15-16).

—Christopher Lozier, O.P.