

SOLENNE OPENING OF THE
VAT VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNTH

"E"

SPEECH OF THE HOLY PADRE JOHN JOHN XXIII

Thursday, 11

Session I

Venerable Brothers,

1. The Mother Church rejoices because, by a special gift of Divine Providence, the so desired day has now arisen in which the Second Vatican Council solemnly begins here at the tomb of St Peter, the Virgin Mother of God, whose maternal dignity is celebrated with joy today, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council solemnly begins.

Ecumenical Councils in the Church

2. 1. All the Councils – both the twenty Ecumenical and the innumerable and to be underestimated Provincial and Regional – who have been celebrated in the succession of centuries, clearly attest to the vitality of the Catholic Church and are inscribed as shining lights in its history.

2. In addressing this great assembly, the most recent and humble Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, who speaks to it, has proposed to reaffirm once again the Ecclesiastical Magisterium, which never fails and endures until the end of time; the Magisterium which with this Council presents itself in an extraordinary way to all men who are in the world, taking into account the deviations, needs and opportunities of the contemporary age.

3. Initiating this universal Council, the Vicar of Christ, who is speaking to you, looks, as is natural, to the past, and almost perceives its inciting and encouraging voice: in fact, willingly he thinks back to the merits of the Supreme Pontiffs who lived in more ancient and more recent times, and who from the assemblies of the Councils, held both in the East and in the West from the fourth century to the Middle Ages and to the last times, have transmitted the testimonies of this solemn voice. They relentlessly acclaim the triumph of that human and divine Society, that is, of the Church, which assumes from the Divine Redeemer the name, the gifts of grace and all its value.

4. If this is a source of spiritual joy, we cannot deny that in the long series of nineteen centuries many pains and bitterness have obscured this history. It was and is true what the old Simeon in a prophetic voice said to Mary the Mother of Jesus: "He is here for the ruin and resurrection of many..., a sign of contradiction."¹ And Jesus himself, who grew up in age, clearly indicated how in time men would behave towards him, pronouncing those mysterious words: "He who hears you hears me²." This also said, "He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me scatters."³[3] As we see written in St. Luke, who also relates the preceding expressions.

5. After almost twenty centuries, the very serious situations and problems that humanity must face do not change; in fact, Christ always occupies the central place of history and life: men or adhere to him and his Church, and thus enjoy the light, goodness, the just order and the good of peace; or they live without him or fight against him and they remain deliberately outside the Church, and for this reason there is confusion among them, the mutual relations become difficult.

6. Whenever they are celebrated, the Ecumenical Councils solemnly proclaim this correspondence with Christ and his Church and radiate through everywhere the light of truth, direct the lives of individuals, of domestic coexistence and of society, arouse and strengthen spiritual energies, raise souls permanently to true and everlasting goods.

7. While we contemplate the successive epochs of humanity during these twenty centuries of the Christian era, before Our eyes parade the testimonies of this extraordinary Magisterium of the Church, that is, of the universal Conciliums. This documentation is contained in several volumes of great grandeur, and is to be considered as a sacred treasure, which is preserved in the archives of the City of Rome and in the most famous libraries of the world.

Origin and cause of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council

3. 1. As for the origin and cause of the great event for which we liked to bring you together, it is sufficient to report once again the testimony, certainly humble, but that We can attest as experienced: the first time we conceived this Council in the mind almost suddenly, and later we communicated it with simple words before the Sacred College of the Cardinal Fathers in that auspicious January 25, 1959, the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, in his Patriarchal Basilica. The souls of the bystanders were immediately suddenly moved, as if a ray of supernatural light shone, and all transpired it softly on the face and in the eyes. At the same time, an enormous interest was ignited throughout the world, and all men began to await the celebration of the Council with impatience.

2. In these three years, an intense work has been carried out to prepare the Council, with the program of investigating more accurately and amply what was in our age the condition of the Faith, of religious practice, of the incidence of the

Christian and above all Catholic community.

3. Not wrongly this time spent in preparing for the Council seems to us to have been almost a first sign and gift of heavenly grace.

4. Enlightened by the light of this Council, the Church will increase, as we hope, with spiritual riches and, drawing from it the vigor of new energies, will look with confidence to the times to come. In fact, by introducing appropriate amendments and wisely initiating a commitment to mutual help, the Church will obtain that men, families and nations will truly turn minds to supernatural realities.

5. It is therefore the duty of conscience to fervently thank the Supreme Giver of all good for the celebration of this Council, and to magnify with exultation the glory of Christ the Lord, who is victorious and immortal King of the ages and peoples.

Opportunity to Celebrate the Council

4. 1. There is also another thing, Venerable Brethren, which is useful to propose to your consideration on the subject. To increase the holy joy that at this solemn hour pervades our souls, that is, let us observe before this grandiose assembly that the opening of this Ecumenical Council falls precisely in favorable circumstances of time.

2. It is often, in fact, as we have experienced in fulfilling the daily apostolic ministry, which, not without offense to Our ears, are referred to the voices of some who, although ignited with zeal for religion, however, evaluate the facts without sufficient objectivity or prudent judgment. In the present conditions of human society they are not able to see anything but ruins and troubles; they are saying that our times, if they are confronted with past centuries, are completely worse; and they go so far as to behave as if they had nothing to learn from history, which is a teacher of life, and as if in the times of the previous Councils everything proceeded happily as regards Christian doctrine, morality, the just freedom of the Church.

3. To us it seems that we must resolutely disagree with these prophets of doom, who always proclaim the worst, as if the end of the world were to loom.

4. In the present state of human events, in which humanity seems to enter into a new order of things, the mysterious plans of Divine Providence, which are realized in later times through the work of men, and often beyond their expectations, and with wisdom dispose everything, even the adverse human events, for the good of the Church, are quite to be seen.

5. This is easy to infer when you carefully consider the problems and dangers of the political and economic nature of today. They thus keep men occupied from

diverting their interests and concerns from the religious fact, which is pertinent to the sacred Magisterium of the Church. This way of acting is certainly not mistaken, and must be rightly reprobated. However, no one can deny that these new induced situations have at least this advantage, that those innumerable impediments with which the children of the century were once to be wrong to hinder the free action of the Church are thus eliminated. It is enough to leaf through the ecclesiastical annals to note clearly that the Ecumenical Councils themselves, whose events are recorded in golden characters in the history of the Church, have often been celebrated not without very serious difficulties and reasons of pain due to the undue interference of civil power. Sometimes, in fact, the Princes of this world sincerely proposed to assume the protection of the Church, but many times this did not happen without spiritual harm and danger, because more often they were guided by political calculations and were too concerned with their own interests.

6. We confess that today we are afflicted with great sorrow because among you many Pastors of the Church, dear ones, who are dear ones, who for the Faith of Christ are kept in chains or are impeded by other obstacles, and whose remembrance urges Us to raise for them to God very ardent prayers; however, not without hope and Our great consolation we see today the fact that the Church, finally dissolved by so many profane impediments of the past ages, the Church, will be the case of authority and majesty.

The Council's main task: defending and spreading doctrine

5. 1. What most interests the Council is that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine is to be guarded and taught in a more effective way.

2. This doctrine embraces the integral man, composed of soul and body, and to us, who dwell on this earth, commands to tend as pilgrims to the heavenly homeland.

3. This shows how we must order this mortal life, so that, by fulfilling our duties, to which we are bound to the earthly and heavenly cities, we can reach an end for us established by God. In other words, all men, both individuals and as a society, as long as this life permits, have the duty to aim relentlessly at achieving the heavenly goods, and to make this of earthly realities, in such a way that the use of temporal goods does not prejudice their eternal happiness.

4. It is certainly true that the Lord has pronounced this exhortation: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness."⁴ This "first" expresses where our strengths and our concerns must be directed first of all; but we must not neglect the other words that follow in this command of the Lord: "and all these things will be given to you in addition"⁵[5]. In fact, in the Church there were always and there are those who, while dedicating themselves with all their strength to the practice of evangelical perfection, at the same time make their contribution

to civil progress, because from the examples of their lives and from their charitable initiatives it receives not a little vigor and increase as there is higher and nobler in human society.

5. But in order for this doctrine to reach the many fields of human activity, which touch individuals, families and social life, it is necessary first of all that the Church never to turn away one's eyes from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the ancients; and together she needs to look at the present, which has involved new situations and new ways of living, and has opened new ways to the Catholic apostolate.

6. For this reason the Church has not remained indifferent to those marvelous discoveries of the human ingenuity and to that progress of the ideas of which we enjoy today, nor has it been incapable of honestly appreciating them; but, following these facts with vigilant attention, he does not cease to admonish men so that, above the attraction of visible realities, turn their eyes to God, the source of all wisdom and beauty, so that they, to whom it has been said. "Lord your God and to him only worship" [7], for the fleeting charm of things does not prevent true progress.

How doctrine must be developed today

6. 1. This is said, Venerable Brethren, it becomes clear what was left to the Ecumenical Council with regard to doctrine.

2. The twenty-first Ecumenical Council – which avails itself of the effective and important help of people who excel in the science of sacred disciplines, of the exercise of the apostolate and of righteousness in behavior – wants to transmit intact, not belittled, not distorted, Catholic doctrine, which, although between difficulties and controversies, has become the common patrimony of men. This is not pleasing to everyone, but is proposed as an offering of a fruitful treasure to all those who are endowed with good will.

3. But we must not only guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but, acric, without fear, we must continue in the work that our age demands, continuing the path that the Church has been going on for almost twenty centuries.

4. But our work does not even consist, as a primary purpose, in discussing some of the main themes of ecclesiastical doctrine, and thus recalling in more detail what the ancient and modern Fathers and theologians have taught and which we obviously suppose not to be ignored by you, but imprinted in your minds.

5. To start only such discussions it was not necessary to call an Ecumenical Council. At present, however, it is necessary that in our times the entire Christian teaching be subjected by all to new examination, with a serene and calm spirit,

without taking anything away from it, in that accurate way of thinking and formulating the words that stands out above all in the acts of the Councils of Trent and the Vatican I; it is necessary that the same doctrine be examined more broadly and more deeply and the souls are more fully imbued and informed, as they hope for all the Catholic truths., to which a faithful assent must be given, be deepened and exposed as required by our times. In fact, there is another the deposit of the Faith, that is, the truths that are contained in our venerable doctrine, another is the way in which they are announced, but always in the same sense and in the same meaning. Great importance must be given to this method and, if necessary, applied with patience; that is to say, the form of exposition that most corresponds to the magisterium, whose nature is mainly pastoral, must be adopted.

How mistakes should be combated

7. 1. By opening the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, it is evident as it was never that the truth of the Lord remains forever. We see in fact, in the succession of one age to another, that the uncertain opinions of men are opposed to each other and often the mistakes vanish as soon as they arise, like fog dissipated by the sun.

2. There is no time in which the Church did not oppose these errors; she often condemned them, and sometimes with the utmost severity. As for the present time, the Bride of Christ prefers to use the medicine of mercy instead of taking up arms of rigor; she thinks that one must meet today's needs, expounding more clearly the value of her teaching rather than condemning. Not because there are no false doctrines, opinions, dangers from which to protect themselves and to oppose; but because all of them so openly contrast with the right principles of honesty, and have produced fruits so lethal that today men seem to spontaneously begin to try them again, especially those forms of existence that ignore God and his laws, putting too much trust in the progress of technology, basing well-being solely on the comforts of life. They are increasingly aware that the dignity of the human person and his natural perfection is a matter of great importance and very difficult to achieve. What matters above all is that they have learned with the experience that external violence exerted on others, the power of arms, political dominance are absolutely not enough to solve the most serious problems that torment them.

3. Thus, according to things, the Catholic Church, while with this Ecumenical Council she raises the torch of Catholic truth, wants to show herself to be the most loving mother of all, benign, patient, moved by mercy and goodness towards the children separated from her. To humanity troubled by so many difficulties it says, as Peter already tells the poor who had asked him for alms: "I do not possess silver or gold, but what I have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene, walks!" 8[8]. In other words, the Church offers to the men

of our time not transient riches, nor does it promise only earthly happiness; but she dispenses the goods of supernatural grace, which, by raising men to the dignity of children of God, are of such a valid defense and help to make their lives more human; she opens the sources of her most fruitful doctrine, with which men, enlightened by the light of Christ, are able to understand in depth what they are truly a meaning of the medium; Christian charity, of which nothing else is more valid for eradicating the seeds of discord, nothing more effective in favoring harmony, just peace and the fraternal union of all.

Promoting Unity in the Christian and Human Family

8. 1. This solicitude of the Church in promoting and protecting the truth derives from the fact that, according to God's plan, "who wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"[9], without the help of the whole revealed doctrine, men cannot reach an absolute and most firm unity of the souls, to which true peace and eternal salvation are connected.

2. Unfortunately, the whole community of Christians has not yet fully and perfectly achieved this visible unity in truth. The Catholic Church considers it her duty to work actively so that the great mystery of that unity may be fulfilled which Christ Jesus with most ardent prayers has asked the Heavenly Father in the imminence of his sacrifice; she enjoys very sweet peace, knowing that she is intimately united to Christ in those prayers; more, she sincerely rejoices when she sees that these invocations multiply their most generous fruits even among those who are outside his fellowship. If we consider well, this same unity, which Christ impelled for his Church, seems almost to shine with a threefold ray of supernatural and salvific light, to which they correspond: the unity of Catholics among themselves, which must be kept very firm and shine as an example; then, the unity that consists in the pious prayers and in the ardent hopes with which Christians separated from this Apostolic See aspire to be united with us; finally, the unity that consists in the pious prayers and in the ardent hopes with which the Christians separated from this Apostolic See aspire to be united with us; and finally the Catholic Church..

3. In this regard – although all the men who are born have also been redeemed in the blood of Christ – it is truly to be lashed that still a large part of the human race does not yet participate in those sources of supernatural grace that exist in the Catholic Church. It follows that to the Catholic Church, whose light illuminates all things and whose strength of supernatural unity redundancies for the benefit of the whole human community, these beautiful words of St. Cyprian are perfectly applied: "Throughing light, the Church of the Lord spreads its rays over the whole world; however, it is a single light that is radiated everywhere, nor is the unity of the body split. It extends its branches all over the earth by the copious lushness, expands in profusion the streams that spring abundantly; but the head is the only one the origin and the only mother fertile for the fortunate

fruitfulness: from her we are born, we are fed by her milk, we are enlivened by her spirit¹⁰.

Venerable Brothers,

4. This is proposed by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, which, while gathering together the best energies of the Church and strives with zeal to make men receive the proclamation of salvation more favorably, almost prepares and consolidates the way to realize that unity of the human race, which is as the necessary foundation, so that the earthly city may be organized in the likeness of the heavenly city "whose king is the truth, whose law is charity, whose greatness is eternity¹¹.

Conclusion

9. 1. And now "our voice is addressed to you" ¹²[¹²] Venerable Brethren in the Episcopate. Here we are now gathered together in this Vatican Basilica, where the cornerstone of the history of the Church is located: where now Heaven and earth unite in a very narrow embrace, here at the tomb of St. Peter, at the tombs of so many Holy Predecessors, whose ashes in this solemn hour seem almost to exult by an arch quiver.

2. The Council that begins arises in the Church as a shining day of splendid light. It is just the dawn: but as our souls sweetly touch the first rays of the spring sun! This is all about holiness, arouses exultation. For we contemplate stars increase with their light the majesty of this temple, and it is you, according to the testimony of the Apostle John 13[¹³]; and for you shine the golden candlesticks around the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles, which are the churches entrusted to you¹⁴. We also see the very worthy personalities who have gathered in Rome from the five continents, representing their own nations, and who are here with great respect and in courteous expectation.

3. It can therefore be said that the Saints and men cooperate in the celebration of the council: the Saints of Heaven are committed to protecting our work; the faithful who raise prayers to God; and you all, promptly following the supernatural inspirations of the Holy Spirit, to apply yourselves actively so that your efforts respond fully to the expectations and needs of the different peoples. For this to come true, you require the serene peace of mind, fraternal harmony, moderation of initiatives, the correctness of discussions, wisdom in all decisions.

4. May your commitment and work, which are directed not only by the eyes of peoples, but also the hopes of the whole world, correspond broadly to expectations.

5. Almighty God, in you we place all the trust, distrusting our strength. Look kindly to these pastors of your Church. May the light of your supergrace assist us

in making decisions, let us be present in emanating laws; and promptly hear the prayers we turn to you in unanimity of faith, voice, soul.

6. O Mary, Help of Christians, Help of the Bishops, whose love we have recently experienced in a particular way in your temple in Loreto, where we have venerated the mystery of the Incarnation, with your help you put everything into a happy, exhausted, propitious outcome; together with your Bridegroom St. Joseph, with the Holy Apostles Peter Paul and with Saints John the Baptist and Evangelist, intercede for us with God.

7. To Jesus Christ, most lovable our Redeemer, immortal King of peoples and times, love, power and glory for ever and ever. Amen (*AAS* 54 (1962), pp. 785-795).

1[1] *Lk* 2.34.

2[2] *Lk* 10:16.

3[3] *Lk* 11, 23.

4[4] *Mt* 6:33.

5[5] *Mt* 6:33.

6[6] Cf. *Jan* 1.28.

7[7] *Mt* 4,10; *Lk* 4,8.

8[8] *Acts* 3:6.

9[9] *1Tm* 2,4.

10[10] *De Catholicae Ecclesiae unitate*, 5.

11[11] S. AGOSTINO, *Ep. CXXXVIII*, 3.

12[12] *2 Cor* 6:11 Vlg.

13[13] Cf. *Rev* 1.20.

14[14] Cf. *Rev* 1.20.

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