

VATICAN II: THE FIRST COUNCIL OF EVANGELISATION



UNPACKING THE EMMAUS SERIES

*Written by John Thornhill SM
Designed and produced by Patrick Lim*

THE EMMAUS SERIES



Questions Catholics ask on their journey of Faith

VATICAN II: THE FIRST COUNCIL OF EVANGELISATION

SESSION 1

Introductory reading

The introduction of Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World

The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the human family in this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are as well the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts ... That is why this community (of God's Church) realises that it is intimately linked with mankind and its history ...

Though mankind today is struck with wonder at its own discoveries and its power, it often raises anxious questions about the current trend of the world, about the place and role of the human person in the universe, about the meaning of individual and collective strivings, and about the ultimate destiny of reality and humanity. Hence, giving witness and voice to the faith of the whole People of God gathered together by Christ, this Council can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with the entire human family, than by engaging with it in dialogue about these various problems.

The Council brings to this dialogue light kindled from the gospel, and puts at the disposal of the human family those saving resources which the Church herself, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, receives from her Founder. The human person deserves to be protected; human society deserves to be renewed. Hence the pivotal point of all that is said in this Constitution will be the human person, whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will. ◇

Questions opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:

Questions

- ◆ It is now over 40 years since Vatican II; it is not easy, therefore, for most people to assess what the Council achieved. For some older Catholics it is a distant memory. But Catholics under 50 years of age have had no experience of what the Church was like before the Council, nor of the impact it had in the life of the Church. From where you stand, what is your assessment of the outcomes of Vatican II, positive and negative?

- ◆ This Council was called by Pope John XXIII. What impression do you have of Pope John, and of his Church leadership?

Viewing of DVD

- ◆ Introduction
- ◆ Chapter 1:
What is a Council?
- ◆ Chapter 2:
Pope John's Leadership and the People's Response

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15.

Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

A reading related to the theme

Ecclesiam Suam, the first Encyclical of John XXIII's successor, Paul VI

It was written during the second session of Vatican II, indicating what Paul VI hoped the Council would achieve in the life of the Church.

If the Church becomes what the Lord wants it to be, then within the Church there arises ...a clear awareness of mission ... the duty of evangelisation ... An attitude which is only concerned to preserve the faith is insufficient ... The preservation and defence of the faith does not exhaust the responsibilities the Church has by reason of the gifts it has received. (n.64)

The Catholic Church must take up with renewed seriousness, the role of partner in dialogue – ready to carry on a dialogue with all people of good will ... There is no one who is a stranger to its heart, no one in whom its ministry has no interest ...

The Church recognises the overwhelming complexity of such a task. It recognises the numerical disproportion between those who are its members and those who are not. It knows the limitations of its own resources. It knows, too, its own human weakness and failings. It recognises, before all else, that faith is a gift of God, and that God alone defines in our history the times and dimensions of salvation.

But the Church knows that it is the seed, the leaven, the salt and light of the world. It sees clearly enough the astounding novelty of modern times; but with a sincere confidence it stands upon the path of history and says to all men and women: 'I have that for which you search, that which you lack'. □

A final reflective sharing

This final sharing of personal responses to the questions given below is the most important phase of the session, and should be entered into generously, in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15.

It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:

- 1. An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately;*
- 2. The sharing is brought to a conclusion, with each participant expressing, in a few words, what is their personal response to each question – in view of all that has been discussed in the session.*

Questions

- ◆ Far more than a moment of authoritative Church teaching, a Church Council is an *event* that may unfold in the life of the Church over a considerable period. Do you see this being realised in today's Church?
- ◆ What are some of the significant things you have learnt in this session?

VATICAN II: THE FIRST COUNCIL OF EVANGELISATION

SESSION 2

Introductory reading

Novo millennio ineunte (2000)

John Paul II's Apostolic Letter, marking the new millennium.

'I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Mt 28:20). This assurance has accompanied the Church for two thousand years ... from it we must gain a new impetus in Christian living, making it the force which inspires our journey of faith. Conscious of the Risen Lord's presence among us, we ask ourselves today the same question put to Peter in Jerusalem immediately after his Pentecost speech: 'What must we do?' (Acts 2:37).

We put this question with trusting optimism, but without underestimating the problems we face. We are certainly not carried away by the naïve expectation that - faced with the great challenges of our time - we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula, but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: 'I am with you'.

It is not therefore a matter of inventing a 'new program'. The program already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live ... and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a program which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication. (n.29) ◇

Questions opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:

Questions

- ◆ Has what we have seen in the first session given you a better understanding of what the Church is going through in our time?
- ◆ Some of the group have probably tried to read Vatican II documents. Did you find them easy to understand?

Viewing of DVD

- ◆ Chapter 3:
Published *History Points to Main Achievement*
- ◆ Chapter 4:
Interpreting the Message of the Council

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15.

Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

A reading related to the theme

Letter of Paul to the Ephesians (1:3-10)

Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ.
Thus he **chose us in Christ** before the world was made
to be holy and faultless before him in love,
marking us out for himself beforehand, to be adopted children,
through Jesus Christ.

Such was his purpose and good pleasure,
to the praise of the glory of his grace,
his free gift to us in the Beloved,
in whom, through his blood, we gain our freedom,
the forgiveness of our sins.

Such is the richness of the grace
which he has showered on us
in all wisdom and insight.

He has let us know the **MYSTERY** of his purpose,
according to his good pleasure which he determined beforehand in Christ,
for him to act upon when the times had run their course:
That he would bring everything together under Christ, as head,
everything in the heavens and everything on earth. †

A final reflective sharing

This final sharing of personal responses to the questions given below is the most important phase of the session, and should be entered into generously, in the spirit of the Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15.

It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:

1. *An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately.*

2. *The sharing is brought to a conclusion, with each participant expressing, in a few words, what is their personal response to each question – in view of all that has been discussed in the session.*

Questions

- ◆ Is the message of Vatican II for the Church now clearer for you? How would you sum it up?

- ◆ Vatican II has been called a 'council of evangelisation'. Have these sessions given you a clearer understanding of the Good News the Church must give to the world?

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION

Most Catholics were unfamiliar, when Vatican II was announced, with the importance of the 21 general councils in the life of the Church – since there had only been one council since the 16th century. If some were non-events, these were exceptions; most councils were 'epiphanies of the Spirit', initiating a long process that – while it was often disturbing – brought lasting benefits to the whole Church. This is reflected in the involvement and concern councils have evoked in rank and file members of the Church.

Vatican II was different from previous councils, not only in its size and worldwide representation, but also in the fact that it was the first council that was not a response to an obvious crisis. John XXIII, however, judged that the time was ripe for the Church to give a new expression to its unchanging faith – leaving behind the style that had been shaped by the Council of Trent, that he judged to be too defensive and authoritarian, not open to the signs of a new vitality and new possibilities. Pope John's consistent message before the opening of the council – sensitive to the 'rhythms of history', seeing it as 'a moment of grace', even 'a new Pentecost' – was little appreciated at the time. Convinced that the Church must respond to the needs of a changing world, Pope John had no blueprint for Church renewal. Nevertheless, it is true to say that his faith and courage 'invented' a new kind of council. The Catholic world responded with astounding enthusiasm. The world at large sensed a great change in the Catholic Church. 4000 journalists were present at the Council's opening.

Today, half a century later, attitudes to the Council are confused and polarised. Fortunately, an authoritative history of the council has now been published, that can help clear up today's confusion. This study makes it clear that the council's main achievement was an authoritative decision to inaugurate a new era in the life of the Church, in accordance with John XXIII's aims. This decision for renewal was not easily arrived at, because a determined minority (less than 10%) were opposed. This minority, whose leaders were members of the Roman Curia, fought to maintain the *status quo*. Because they rejected the majority view of the Council, they argued against the doctrine of 'collegiality' (long taken for granted in the course of the Church's history, and upheld by John XXIII and Paul VI), according to which the 'college' of bishops throughout the world share with the pope in the Church's supreme pastoral authority. This group even claimed that the Roman Curia was above the Council, sharing in the Pope's authority!

The Council produced an immense volume of teaching – 900 pages of Latin texts. The 4 Constitutions are its principal documents. 9 Decrees are of lesser authority, concerning practical implementation. 3 Declarations give authoritative guidance on questions still in a state of development in Church teaching. This teaching should be interpreted in the spirit of John XXIII's intentions for the Council. No blueprint is provided for a renewed Church. This must emerge from a return to the sources of the Church's life – the Scriptures, the Sacramental Mysteries, and the witness of the early Church. In other words, renewal will be found in the Gospel itself – the Mystery of God's generous plan for creation, conceived from all eternity. This

Mystery can become a guiding principal in interpreting the Council's vision if it is recognised that it has three levels of meaning: 1) the eternal divine decision; 2) the disclosure of God's plan in Jesus Christ; 3) the continuing action of God in the Church's liturgy.

Historians, recalling the experience of past Councils, see a pattern in the aftermath of the Council: an initial enthusiasm, expecting new life from structural changes in the Church; a subsequent time of uncertainty and disillusionment when these superficial hopes are not realised; and finally a period to be looked forward to, in which it is recognised that new life will only come from a spiritual renewal brought by a more authentic meeting with the Church's sources of life. ♦

Published by
THE EMMAUS SERIES
Copyright © 2006 John Thornhill SM & Patrick Lim