

An Introduction and Overview of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II)

Revised July 18, 2026

Vatican II was the 21st Ecumenical Council of the Church.

An Ecumenical Council is a meeting of all (or the vast majority) of the Bishops of the World (though other non-voting participants may be present), convened by the Pope to address a critical issue in the Church.

Ecumenical Councils:

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| 0. The Council of Jerusalem, 33 | 11. Third Lateran Council, 1179 |
| 1. First Council of Nicaea, 325 | 12. Fourth Lateran Council, 1215 |
| 2. First Council of Constantinople, 381 | 13. First Council of Lyons, 1245 |
| 3. Council of Ephesus, 431 | 14. Second Council of Lyons, 1274 |
| 4. Council of Chalcedon, 451 | 15. Council of Vienne, 1311-1313 |
| 5. Second Council of Constantinople, 553 | 16. Council of Constance, 1414-1418 |
| 6. Third Council of Constantinople, 680-681 | 17. Council of Basle/Ferrara/Florence, 1431-1439 |
| 7. Second Council of Nicaea, 787 | 18. Fifth Lateran Council, 1512-1517 |
| 8. Fourth Council of Constantinople, 869 | 19. Council of Trent, 1545-1563 |
| 9. First Lateran Council, 1123 | 20. First Vatican Council, 1869-1870 |
| 10. Second Lateran Council, 1139 | 21. Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965 |

Vatican II spanned the pontificates of Popes St. John XXIII and St. Paul VI.





Introduction: Vatican II is one of the more controversial and divisive issues in the Church today, and sadly, it shouldn't be.

Most people who debate about Vatican II are either reacting to or promoting teachings about the Council that don't even come from the Council itself.

Vatican II provides for a powerful blueprint and vision for the [new evangelization](#).

What is the Real Vatican II?

Many think that Vatican II caused problems, and not a lot of good came from Vatican II. But as we read and understand the documents, they provide a blueprint for the mission of the new evangelization for the Church of the third millennium.

Our goal is to answer the question What did Vatican II really do and say?

The prayer that opened every session of the Vatican II when all 2500 bishops of the Council gathered:

[We stand before you, Holy Spirit, conscious of our sinfulness, but aware that we gather in your name. Come to us, remain with us, and enlighten our hearts. Give us light and strength to know Your will, to make it our own, and to live it in our lives. Guide us by Your wisdom, support us by Your power, for You are God, sharing the glory of Father and Son. You desire justice for all. Enable us to uphold the rights of others. Do not allow us to be misled by ignorance or corrupted by fear or favor, unite us to yourself in the bond of love, and keep us faithful to all that is true. As we gather in your name, may we may we temper justice with love, so that all our decisions may be pleasing to you, and earn the reward promised to good and faithful servants. You live and reign with the Father and the Son, God forever and ever, Amen.](#)

This presentation will be in three parts.

1. What did Vatican II really say and do? We examine some of the misinterpretations of the Council and then delve into the true teaching of the Council and the documents of the Council itself.
2. We will examine the **four constitutions**, the most important and main documents of the Council.
3. How do we move forward? What's the vision of Vatican II for the Church of the third millennium?

Vatican II met in St. Peter's Basilica in **Vatican City from 11 October 1962 to 8 December 1965**, during the pontificates of **Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI**. In 2025, we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the opening of the Council, and the last 60 years have been tumultuous regarding the interpretation and implementation of the Council and some of the things that have happened in the life of the Church.

It's been said that it takes 100 years before one understands what a council said.

Why is there such a wide difference in interpretation of Vatican II?

Cause vs. Occasion

We have seen abuses in the liturgy, poor catechesis in the Church, and other abuses over the last 60 years, and many people want to blame Vatican II for this. Was as Vatican II really the **cause** of these things, or was it merely their **occasion**?

In a letter from **Pope Saint Paul VI** from October 11, 1976, to a bishop who was making some of these claims that Vatican II was causing all the problems, the Holy Father said:

But it remains true that some priests and members of the faithful mask with the name "Conciliar" those personal interpretations and erroneous practices that are injurious, even scandalous, and at times sacrilegious, but these abuses cannot be attributed either to the Council itself or to the reform that has legitimately issued therefrom, but rather to a lack of authentic fidelity in their regard ...

So, these things were not from the Council itself, but a lack of fidelity to the true teachings of the Council. The Holy Father concludes:

You want to convince the faithful that the proximate cause of the crisis is more than a wrong interpretation of the Council, and that it flows from the Council itself.



What happened *after* the Council? What were some of these false interpretations and misrepresentations of the Council? What did the Council truly say in itself?

In 1985, 20 years after the closing of the Second Vatican Council, during the pontificate of **Pope Saint John Paul II**, whose pontificate was almost entirely about faithfully implementing the vision of Vatican II for the new evangelization, called most of the bishops of the world together again for an extraordinary **synod** to talk about implementing the Council. How is it going? What are we seeing? What did the Council truly teach and say, and what are some of the things that have happened? The synod fathers said:

Among the internal causes, there must be noted a **partial and selective reading of the Council, as well as a superficial interpretation of its doctrine** in one sense or another.

The first thing that the synod identified is that there hasn't been a full and complete reading and understanding of the Council, but a lot of partial and selective readings. It continues:

On the one hand, there have been disappointments because we have been too hesitant in the application of the true doctrine of the Council. On the other hand, **because of a partial reading of the Council, a unilateral presentation of the Church as a purely institutional structure devoid of her mystery has been made... These and other deficiencies show the need for a deeper reception of the Council.** And this requires four successive phases: a deeper and more extensive knowledge of the Council, its interior assimilation, its loving reaffirmation and its implementation. Only interior assimilation and practical implementation can make the conciliar documents alive and life-giving.



Twenty years after the Council, the Church was already seeing this partial reading and misinterpretations of the Council, and so there was already a call for a deeper reading and reception of the Council so that we can ascertain the true meaning, teaching, and interpretation of the Council itself.

Pope Benedict XVI was elected pope after John Paul II in 2005, and, like Saint John Paul II, was very much present at the Council itself. Father Joseph Ratzinger was one of the up-and-coming theologians who was present, advising the bishops (peroti). Pope Benedict XVI, having lived through the Council and worked side by side with Saint John Paul II, had a few things to say about Vatican II and its proper interpretation.



Shortly after becoming pope, in December of 2005, he gathered the world's cardinals together in the Vatican for the annual and traditional Christmas address to the cardinals of the Church, where he brought up the politics of the Second Vatican Council and the crisis of its misinterpretation, called the Pope Benedict Christmas party smackdown. He talks about two opposing interpretations that came out after the Council regarding the interpretation of the Council. He says:

Why has the implementation of the Council in large parts of the Church thus far been so difficult? Well, it all depends on the correct interpretation of the Council or - as we would say today - on its proper hermeneutics, the correct key to its interpretation and application. The problem in its implementation arose from the fact that two contrary hermeneutics or interpretations came face to face and quarreled with each other. One caused confusion; the other, silently but more and more visibly, bore and is bearing fruit.

Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, 2005

Of these two opposing interpretations of the Council, Pope Benedict goes on to say, one is called a **hermeneutic of rupture and discontinuity**, and the other is a **hermeneutic of continuity and reform**, and it is their quarreling that has caused much of the turmoil and confusion surrounding the Second Vatican Council.

So, we must separate that hermeneutic of rupture and discontinuity, which is not the true vision and spirit of the Council, from this hermeneutic of continuity and reform, which is the true teaching of the Council for the

reforming of the Church, for mission, and for the new evangelization, which is the true spirit, teaching, and interpretation of the Second Vatican Council.

The hermeneutic of rupture and discontinuity became wildly popular immediately after the Council. This hermeneutic or interpretation of the Council is that Vatican II was a break from the past. One has a pre-Vatican II Church, an old, traditional Church that had kind of lost its relevance, and now Vatican II is issuing this new, entirely different Church that is going forward in the modern world.

This could not be farther from the truth of what Vatican II really did and said.

About this hermeneutic of rupture and discontinuity Pope Benedict said:

The hermeneutic of discontinuity risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church. (That's why it's a hermeneutic of rupture.) It asserts that the texts of the Council, as such, do not yet express the true spirit of the Council. It claims that they are the result of compromises in which, to reach unanimity, it was found necessary to keep and reconfirm many old things that are now pointless...

So, in other words, there were just certain things the Bishops had to compromise about and had to reaffirm some of that old stuff. But really, the spirit of the Council, the intention was to get rid of all that and to start anew. That's basically what they're claiming. He goes on:

In a word, it would be necessary not to follow the texts of the Council, but its spirit. In this way, obviously, a vast margin was left open for the question on how this spirit should subsequently be defined and room was consequently made for every whim. Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, 2005

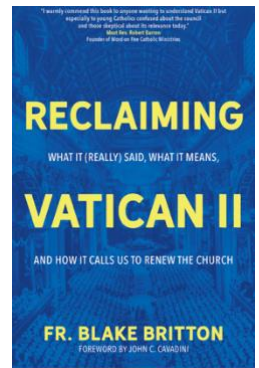
This was the wildly popular interpretation of the Council that was pushed by many theologians and many teachers in seminaries and Catholic universities immediately following the Council, that what Vatican II really said and really intended is not in the text.

So, if you're reading *Lumen Gentium* on the Church, *Dei Verbum* on Divine Revelation, or *Sacrosanctum Concilium* on the liturgy, just ignore them. That's not really what the Council had to say. The true teaching of the Council is the spirit of Vatican II.

But where on earth do you find that "spirit" if it's not in the text? Those who support the hermeneutic of discontinuity would say, "We're still discovering that spirit as we move along." This is insane. As Pope Benedict XVI said, that opens the door for every kind of silly and crazy whim that you can imagine. This is where the liturgical abuses and issues with catechesis and certain other things that have gone on came from.

This hermeneutic of rupture and discontinuity is quite dangerous. **Father Blake Britton**, in his excellent book Reclaiming Vatican II, quotes an observation from **Henri de Lubac**, a theologian who was again present at the Council, that he calls “The Paracouncil”:

Just as the Second Vatican Council received from a number of theologians instructions about various points of the task it should assume, under the pain of disappointing the world, so too the post-conciliar Church was immediately and from all sides assailed with summons to get in step not with what the Council actually said, but what it should have said...this is the phenomenon which we should like to designate as the “paracouncil.”



Henri de Lubac is perfectly paralleling what Pope Benedict XVI has said. We have all this Monday morning quarterbacking going on among many theologians about what they thought the Council should have done, not what the Holy Spirit inspired the Council, the entire gathered magisterium of the Church, to say and do. But what should have been done?

Henri de Lubac goes on to say:

Among many people, whether partisans or opponents or simply docile followers, (all of whom were equally fooled), this paraCouncil, which often deserved the name “anti-Council,” has been mistaken for the true Council; and whatever in the latter's work did not correspond with the former's program has more than once been neglected, or misrepresented.

Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis in Nature and Grace*

It's this paracouncil that everyone in the Church has come to know and has been reacting against for the last 60 years. So whether it's somebody that falls on the more traditionalist side and has issues with some of the liturgical abuses that have gone on, or those on the progressive side and who think Vatican II was saying to implement all these things, both sides aren't reacting to the true Council of itself; 90% of the time they're reacting to this paracouncil.

In Father Britton's book, he talks about three paracouncils that came together in this perfect storm:

1. The paracouncil of the theologians, theologians who were promoting this other interpretation of the Council.
2. The paracouncil of the media. Vatican II was the first ecumenical Council in the life of the Church that took place in the midst of modern media and social communication, so the media ran with this false interpretation of the Council almost immediately.
3. And then the paracouncil of the age; think of the culture in the 1960s and our current culture that desperately wants to misinterpret the true teaching of the Council and the true teaching of the Church.

The Church desperately needs to rediscover the true teaching, interpretation, and implementation of the Council if we want to be serious about the new evangelization. There's no mystery to rediscover Vatican II. The first step is to read the documents themselves.

We return to Pope Benedict's Christmas Address to the Roman Curia where he then talks about a hermeneutic of continuity and reform because this is the solution.

Pope Benedict goes back to Pope Saint John XXIII, who in 1958 or 1959 called for the Second Vatican Council, and it was quite a shock to the Church. Pope Benedict says:

Here I cite only John XXIII's well-known words, which unequivocally express this hermeneutic when he says that the Council wishes "to transmit the doctrine, pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion." And he continues, "Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure as if it were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us."

What John XXIII was saying was quite the opposite of creating a new Church or separating this new Church from the old preconciliar Church. He wanted the Church to understand and live more faithfully all that the Church teaches and believes in our 2000-year history. Why do we need to know that tradition and live that tradition more deeply? So that we can communicate it more effectively to the modern world. That's what the vision of the Council was. So Pope Benedict concludes, saying:

However, wherever this interpretation guided the implementation of the Council, new life developed and new fruit ripened... Today we see that although the good seed developed slowly, it is nonetheless growing, and our deep gratitude for the work done by the Council is likewise growing.

Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, 2005

So what Pope Benedict is saying that where this proper interpretation of the Council, this hermeneutic of continuity and reform, is taking place in the life of the Church, there's fruit and there's growth, because it's the true mission and interpretation of the Council as the Holy Spirit intended it.



When **Bishop Walker Nickless of Sioux City, Iowa**, became bishop shortly after Pope Benedict's Christmas address, he wrote a pastoral letter for the diocese called "***The Church is Always in Need of Reform.***" He had a beautiful vision for his diocese of authentically and correctly interpreting and implementing Vatican II in his diocese, and he says:

Therefore, we must heed the Holy Father's point that one interpretation, the hermeneutic of reform, is valid, and has borne and is bearing fruit. This hermeneutic of reform, as described above, takes seriously and keeps together the two poles of identity (the ancient deposit of faith and life) and the engagement with the world (teaching it more efficaciously). Lastly, the Holy Father, going into greater detail later in the address, explains that the "**spirit of Vatican II**" must be found only in the letter of the documents themselves. The so-called "**spirit**" of the Council (the hermeneutic of rupture and discontinuity detached from the text of the documents themselves) **has no authoritative interpretation. It is a ghost or a demon that must be exorcized if we are to proceed with the Lord's work.**

Bishop R. Walker Nickless, Pastoral Letter *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda*

The hermeneutic of rupture and discontinuity is diabolical and is the devil's attempt to thwart and confuse and divide against this beautiful vision of reform, renewal, and evangelization that the true Council has proposed for the Church for the new evangelization in the third millennium. It is one of the most serious tasks of our time.

This struggle over Vatican II is more than just interpretation; it is a spiritual battle.

Saint John Paul II's entire papacy was dedicated to faithfully interpreting and implementing this vision of the Second Vatican Council in the life of the Church for the new evangelization. He said at the end of the Jubilee year 2000 in an apostolic letter called *Novo Millennio Ineunte, At the Dawn of the New Millennium*, talking about the importance of Vatican II, says:

With the passing of the years, the Council documents have lost nothing of their value or brilliance. They need to be read correctly, to be widely known and taken to heart as important and normative texts of the Magisterium, within the Church's tradition. Now that the jubilee has ended, I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council as the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning. (57)

The path forward for the new evangelization, for the new springtime, is this beautiful vision of the Second Vatican Council that is a great grace, a great intervention of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, and a sure compass by which the Church is to take her bearings as she moves forward in the new millennium and in the new evangelization.

The Pastoral Vision of Vatican II

What was this vision of the Second Vatican Council? What did the Council propose, and how should we interpret, look at, and read its documents?

The Second Vatican Council happened between 1962 and 1965, and occurred in two separate sessions. The first session began in October 1962, then there was a break, and it started up again from 1964 to 1965, and it's important to understand the worldwide cultural developments of the time.

One of the reasons **Pope Saint John XXIII** called the Second Vatican Council was that he recognized a new, emerging secular cultural reality and realized that the way the Church engaged with the world had to change to more faithfully engage it. There was a new secular, post-Christian culture that was emerging around the world, and it demanded a new way of teaching, witnessing, and living the gospel because the world had changed.



One of the things that one often hears about Vatican II is that this was a **pastoral Council**. What does this mean? So, the Second Vatican Council was the 21st ecumenical Council in the history of the Church. An ecumenical Council is when the Holy Father calls together all of the bishops of the world, or at least a supermajority of the bishops of the world. Up to this point, all previous Councils were called to discuss and settle matters of doctrinal crisis or doctrinal disputes. The early Councils of Nicaea or Ephesus or Chalcedon, etc., were called together to discuss and to correct doctrinal disputes. Matters like who was Jesus? Is he fully God? Is he fully human, or what is the Holy Trinity? Those big doctrinal disputes that were happening in the early Church, things like the Arian

heresy that claimed Jesus was not God. The Council of Trent in the 16th century was convened to address some of those doctrinal issues that had arisen because of the Protestant Reformation.

In 1962, the Second Vatican Council was not convened not to settle doctrinal disputes. That doesn't mean that Vatican II doesn't have some very important doctrinal things to say, but the primary reason for Vatican II was a pastoral reason. How is the Church going to more effectively teach and live her mission in a way that's going to more effectively engage this emerging modern and secular culture?

One of the first things that Vatican II did was a reading of the signs of the times. There were four primary areas that Vatican II was seeking to address. A non-exhaustive list includes:

1. First was the widespread separation of faith and life. There were many Catholics and Christians who were professing belief in God and faith in the Church, but how they were living their lives was quite different. People were living secular lives that were disjointed from their professed faith.
2. Another was increasing liturgical indifference. There was an increasing indifference toward the liturgy in being effective in communicating God's grace and that all were called to in Christ.
3. Third was the rise of secular humanism. A secular post-Christian culture that was emerging.
4. Finally, there was the perceived irrelevance of the faith in a technological and scientific world.

We are still living in that today in our modern culture, and that's because the Council has yet to be fully implemented in the life of the Church. To understand the Council, you have to understand these issues that the Council was responding to.

Vatican II also intended to create a new **ecclesial reality** that pertains to the life of the Church. Vatican II sought to renew the life of the Church for mission. Pope John XXIII especially recognized that the way that the Church had been responding to the rise of this secular movement and culture, beginning with the Enlightenment and some of the philosophies and theologies that had emerged in the 18th and 19th century, was largely defensive, a circle-the-wagons approach to things over the last 500 years, and the Church had to shift from a defensive posture to a more offensive missionary posture to engage the emerging secular culture.

George Weigel, in his book, *The Next Pope*, says:

He says the era of what might be called **ecclesiocentricity** - a Church office focused in modernity on institutional survival and institutional maintenance was drawing to a close. A new era of **Christocentricity** - a Church re-focused on the gospel proclamation of Jesus Christ as the answer to the question that is in every human life - was beginning. That was the direction that the Holy Spirit had been leading the Church for almost a century... In taking this path, John XXIII insisted, the Catholic Church was not making a sharp break with the past. Rather, it was returning spiritually, and in its spiritual imagination, to the Galilee of Matthew 28 and the Great Commission. Catholicism was retrieving and renewing its constituting, evangelical purpose.

Vatican II wanted to go back to that early time in the Church to recover and to revive that evangelical mission that was given by Christ Himself to go out to the nations, to evangelize the nations, to take the gospel out to the modern world, not to necessarily recoil or be defensive to the modern world. That's the basis of the vision of Saint John XXIII and the vision for the Council itself. This vision is key for interpreting and understanding Vatican II.

So, how do we understand the Council in this context, and what is the right way and to read and to interpret Vatican II? And it comes down to a “both and” balanced understanding of the Council itself- Catholic is “both and,” just as Jesus is fully God and fully human, “both and.”

The first pillar of this vision of John XXIII for the Council is called **Ressourcement**, a word that John XXIII used in his opening address. It's a French word that means a **return to the sources**. Vatican II had to rediscover and be renewed in the constant teaching and tradition of the Church. That includes:

- Sacred Scripture
- Sacred Tradition
- The witness of the saints
- The writings of the early Church Fathers.

The Church needed to be renewed and refocused on her Christ-centered mission of spreading the gospel.

Pope Saint John XXIII said:

“The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously.”

So that was the first step for the Council. This process of **ressourcement** is the Church rediscovering her mission more deeply in fidelity to Jesus Christ.

Then the task of the Council would be expressed with the now-famous Italian word, **aggiornamento**. It literally means an **opening of the windows**.

Aggiornamento: A bringing up to date in order to better dialogue and witness the truth of Jesus Christ to the modern world.

This word **aggiornamento** was very much misinterpreted and twisted by the hermeneutic of rupture or the paracouncil, taking it to mean an opening of the windows to let the modern world into the Church, or the Church conforming herself to the modern world.

That the Church was outdated or had to change was **not** the vision of Pope Saint John XXIII and the Council. Quite the opposite. It is opening the windows so the Church **can go** out equipped with the truth of Jesus Christ that every person is longing for and wired for in order to transform the culture and the world to Jesus Christ.

Pope St. John XXIII, in his opening speech for the Council said:

But at the same time she must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world... The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing (**ressourcement**), and the way in which it is presented (**aggiornamento**) is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration.

How are we going to take that sacred deposit of faith, the truth of Jesus Christ, and proclaim it in a way that's going to be effective in reaching the hearts and minds of modern men and women?

There is a balance between these two pillars of the Council, **ressourcement** and **aggiornamento**, and the writings and vision of the Council rests solidly on these two pillars, the pillar of **ressourcement**, a rediscovery of our faith, so that we can live it more richly and more vibrantly, so that the other pillar (**aggiornamento**) we can

take that truth and present it to the modern world in a way that's going to be effective. If you remove one of those two pillars, the Council's vision and mission fail.

What happened after the Council? The paracouncil, the progressives, those who support the hermeneutic of rupture, took out that *ressourcement* pillar and said the Council was a break from the past. Some others, the more traditionalist view of the Council took out that *aggiornamento* pillar, the focus on the Church being renewed for mission, and wanted to keep the circle-the-wagons mentality.

If we don't understand these two pillars and hold them in balance, not only are we going to misinterpret and misunderstand the vision of Vatican II, but we're also going to misunderstand and misinterpret the vision of the new evangelization for the Church of the third millennium.

The first pillar, **ressourcement**, came to be known as *pastoral renewal ad intra*. Vatican II was all about the renewal of the life and mission of the Church, a true, authentic renewal. The Church is always in need of reform and renewal. In the history of the Church, you see this ebb and flow of high moments in the life of the Church, and then moments of crisis that call for renewal.

Examples include the Protestant Reformation and the renewal of the Council of Trent and the renewal of the Counter-Reformation, or the renewal that saints like Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Dominic brought to the Church of the Middle Ages. Similarly, the Holy Spirit gave the Second Vatican Council to renew the life of the Church, but that renewal occurs in two areas.

First and foremost was renewal within the life of the Church, or *ad intra*, Latin for within or inside. Pastoral renewal *ad intra* is the Church first rediscovering her own mission and fidelity to Christ to become a more effective sacrament of salvation for the world. As George Weigel pointed out, it's the Church going back and rediscovering and being renewed in that initial commission of Christ to go out and to evangelize the nations, **ressourcement**, a return to the sources.

Something very beneficial for Vatican II was that, over the 100-150 years prior to the Council, there were some amazing discoveries in theology and archeology. In the area of theology, there were already happening within the life of the Church through the Holy Spirit renewal movements having to do with the life of the laity, renewal movements having to do with the liturgy, renewal movements having to do with ecclesiology, or the theology of the Church, or the study of Sacred Scriptures. All of that was already happening and brewing.

Another thing that happened was the archeological discovery of things like the Dead Sea Scrolls and other archeological finds in the Middle East, as well as the discovery of a lot of early Church writing. That all gave great movement in **ressourcement**, and what came out of this in the Council was a rediscovery of the identity of the Church as sharing in the mission of Christ that affected every aspect of every member of the Church, including the laity.

Mission flows from being. Mission flows from identity. We're only good in our mission if we first know our true identity. That is this pastoral renewal *ad intra*. A synonym for this is **Fidelity to God**. The Church, as the sacrament of salvation, is duty-bound to authentically teach and hand on the truth of Jesus Christ to the modern world. So, the Church, in pastoral renewal *ad intra*, is being faithful to herself to the extent that she's being faithful to Christ.

Mission, *ad extra*, relies on and is based on fidelity: fidelity to God, fidelity to herself as a Church, and fidelity to the mission that has been entrusted to us by Christ. That's the first pillar, pastoral renewal *ad intra*.

Next is pastoral renewal *ad extra*, and this is the Church's mission of going out. Being renewed in her mission within herself, she also needs to be renewed in her mission of how to go out and engage and evangelize the modern world. This is pastoral renewal *ad extra*, or going out. Pastoral renewal *ad intra* cannot be separated from pastoral renewal *ad extra*. The more that the Church understands her mission and identity in Christ, the more she's going to be effective in preaching the gospel to the modern world, aggiornamento, that opening of the windows and going out and engaging the modern world.

For Pope Saint John XXIII and the Council, **ressourcement** was primary. How can we hand on what we first don't possess ourselves? So, fidelity to God, **ressourcement**, is first. Then, how can we go out and hand this on more efficaciously to our modern culture?

Another synonym for this **pastoral renewal ad extra** is **fidelity to the human person**. **Ressourcement** is fidelity to God, fidelity to all of divine revelation, to God's mission that He's entrusted to the Church. The more faithful we are to Christ, the more faithful we are going to be in our mission. But why fidelity to the human person when it comes to pastoral renewal *ad extra*? Because if we're going to hand on the gospel effectively, we must understand our audience, and this was precisely part of the problem with the Church of the last 500 years. The Church had to be renewed not only in her mission herself, but also by reading the signs of the times, understanding our current modern culture and all of its realities, all of the good and not so good things in our modern culture so that the Church can proclaim the gospel in a way that is effective.

So, the Council demanded a pastoral and **kerygmatic** (proclamation) style that is effective in reaching the hearts and minds of modern men and women. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. The Church must understand how to meet modern culture in a way that's effective.

Another great insight into this pastoral vision of Vatican II is from the Council itself, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (This Sacred Council), the first document issued by the Council itself. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. Before the Council spoke about the liturgy, it wanted to state its goals and purposes, which is why the document starts, *This Sacred Council*. It makes clear the goals and aims of the Council. It says:

This sacred Council has several aims in view: (1) It desires to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; (2) to adapt more suitably to the needs of our times those institutions which are subject to change (not everything was up for grabs); (3) to foster whatever can promote union among those who believe in Christ (ecumenism); (4) to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church.

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Those are the four goals of the Second Vatican Council. When reading the Council documents, one must not only keep pastoral renewal *ad intra* and *ad extra* in balance, but also these four goals. These are what the Council was striving for from the beginning and are called **hermeneutical keys** (hermeneutics simply means interpretation).

Another hermeneutical key was from Pope Saint Paul VI in an encyclical written between the two sessions of Vatican II.

Some history. Pope Saint John XXIII called the Council in 1959, and the Council opened in 1962. In between the two sessions of the Council, John XXIII passed away, and Paul VI was elected pope. Immediately, Paul VI, who was already involved in the Council as one of the cardinals, wrote an important encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, which means *His Church*. Whose Church? Christ's Church, not our Church. It's also come to be known as *Paths of the Church* or *Paths of Renewal*, because in *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul VI offered three paths that the Church needed to follow in order to bring about authentic renewal in this mission of the Church, and these three paths became very influential in the writings of Vatican II, and even in the writings of Saint John Paul II. Three paths:

1. The first Paul VI talks about is **awareness**, and corresponds directly with **ressourcement**. The Church must first deeply meditate on her identity and mission in Jesus Christ. The more that we're faithful to Christ, the more that we're faithful in our mission.
2. Secondly, Paul VI says **renewal** is the second path. The Church must then be renewed through conversion to become more holy and conformed to God's word and truth. The more that we come to know Christ, awareness, the more that then we are called to conversion to become holy.
3. Paul VI call the third path **dialog** or **mission**. The Church can then fully participate in Christ's mission to evangelize and serve modern men and women by preaching the truth with love.

This provides a beautiful pedagogy or way of acting and teaching that Paul VI gives in *Ecclesiam Suam* that deeply affected the pastoral vision of the Council.

All of this leads to a new **missionary ecclesiology**. Ecclesiology is the study and the mission of the Church. The Second Vatican Council squarely renewed the life of the Church for mission. This is why Pope Francis calls us to be missionary disciples, because we're all part of this new missionary ecclesiology.

Pope John Paul II said:

In Ecclesiam Suam, this great Pontiff (Paul VI) indicated the paths of an inspired ecclesial journey toward the third millennium.

This is key. Vatican II was all about renewing the Church for mission for the third millennium, and for John Paul II, the third millennium is a code word for new evangelization.

The first is a spiritual path and refers to the awareness that the Church must have of herself to conform to the vocation entrusted to her by the Redeemer. The second is the moral path and concerns the authentic, esthetic, practical, and canonical renewal she needs to carry out her mission in the world. The third is the way of the apostolate. For the ecclesial community, the method of dialogue is becoming the way in which to work to bring the Lord's comforting message of salvation everywhere. Angelus Address, August 8, 1999

The Documents and Themes of Vatican II

What were the 16 documents of the Second Vatican Council, and what are some of the key themes that flowed out of these documents and out of the Council?

Not all Vatican II documents carry the same weight in terms of teaching, as is the case with any magisterial teaching documents. Of the 16 documents of Vatican II, four are called constitutions, telling us that those are the most important documents of the Council, and those are the four documents we will examine. These four

constitutions contain within themselves the bulk of what the Council wanted to teach and the vision that the Council wanted to put forth.

The first constitution is the **Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium***. *Lumen Gentium* means *Light to the Nations*. Christ is the light to the nation, and the Church reflects the light of Christ, so that's why this Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* is named as such. Notice this is called a **dogmatic constitution**. That tells us that of the four constitutions, this is one of the most important, because though this was a pastoral Council convened for pastoral reasons, there were some very important dogmatic things that Vatican II had to say, and the most important was what the Council had to say about the Church.

So, of all of the constitutions, we need to look at *Lumen Gentium* as the umbrella document over which all of the rest of the documents of Vatican II must be read and understood in light of the ecclesiology or the teaching on the Church of *Lumen Gentium*.

Then we have **The Dogmatic Constitution on the Word of God, *Dei Verbum***. *Dei Verbum* means *Word of God*. Again, this is a **dogmatic constitution**, so it needs to be weighted up there with *Lumen Gentium*. This Constitution gets into divine revelation. What is Divine Revelation, and how is it handed on? It gets into sacred scripture, sacred tradition, scripture in the life of the Church, etc.

Next, we have **The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium***. This just says Constitution on the Liturgy, not Dogmatic Constitution, so ***Sacrosanctum Concilium***, although it has to do with the sacred liturgy, the source and summit of the Christian life, very important, but it's not a dogmatic constitution, so it can't be seen as a "teaching document." Now, there's a lot of teaching in ***Sacrosanctum Concilium***, but [the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was seen primarily as providing guidelines to reform the liturgy](#).

Finally, we have the **Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes***. *Gaudium et Spes* means *Joy and Hope*, because that's what the Church offers the modern world. This is called The Pastoral Constitution on the Church, different from The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. This isn't a teaching document, but rather how the Church pastorally goes out and dialogs, evangelizes, and interacts with the modern world. So this document, of all the Constitutions, is the pastoral renewal *ad extra*, or going out, constitution of the four constitutions of Vatican II.

The 16 Documents of Vatican II

The Four Constitutions:

1. *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.
2. *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation.
3. *Sacrosanctum concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.
4. *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

Decrees:

5. *Inter Mirifica*, Decree on the Means of Social Communication.
6. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Decree on Ecumenism.
7. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite.
8. *Perfectae Caritatis*, Decree on Renewal of Religious Life.

9. *Optatam Totius*, Decree on Priestly Training.
10. *Christus Dominus*, Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church.
11. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity.
12. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests.
13. *Ad Gentes*, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church.

Declarations:

14. *Gravissimum Educationis*, Declaration on Christian Education.
 15. *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.
 16. *Dignitatis Humanae*, Declaration on Religious Freedom.
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If you think of the constitutions as planets, the decrees and the declarations (discussed momentarily) are moons. They orbit the constitutions. They are a more explicit and practical implementation in the life of the Church given to us in the four constitutions.

So, several of the decrees have to do with what *Lumen Gentium* taught. How are we going to implement that teaching and renewal in the life of the Church? Those are the decrees and the declarations, and they round out the rest of the documents of Vatican II. There are nine decrees that take the teachings of the constitutions and provide more detail and practical ways to implement them in the life of the Church.

Let's take a look at a few of them. First and foremost, we have The Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication, *Inter Mirifica*, a very prophetic document. *Inter Mirifica* reads as if it were written more for 2022 than 1962-1963. It is a beautiful teaching on what our responsibility is to the Church when it comes to instruments of social communication. That definitely has to do with communicating with the modern world, so it orbits *Gaudium et Spes*.

The decree on ecumenism, how the Church interacts and has dialogue with other Christian Churches and other Christian religions, would be a moon in the orbiting *Lumen Gentium*. The same Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches.

All of these decrees relate to one of the constitutions. Vatican II wanted to renew the life of the Church for mission, so things like Catholic education, religious life, priestly formation, the bishop's pastoral office, the apostolate of the laity, the ministry and life of priests, the Church's missionary activity, look at all the way that these decrees touch the life and mission of the Church, but to understand these decrees, we need to understand the Constitution.

So, there's an order to reading the documents of the Second Vatican Council, as well as understanding them and interpreting them.

There are also three documents of Vatican II that are called **Declarations**. This is more of the Church communicating her vision to the modern world, so it speaks to a broader audience. The constitutions and decrees are speaking to the Church, whereas the declarations are speaking more to the modern world, to all men and women of goodwill. For example, the Declaration on Christian Education is important for everyone.

The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church with Non-Christian Religions communicates outside of even the Church herself, and the Declaration on Religious Freedom has to do with every single human person, saying every single human person has the right to religious freedom. Those declarations are more outward-speaking to the wider world than just within the life of the Church.

And Messages, while not strictly speaking documents of Vatican II, the Council offered them to the wider world. The Message to Humanity had a closing message addressed to various groups: rulers, scientists, artists, women, poor, sick, and suffering workers, youth, showing this desire of the Council to have this ongoing dialog with all sections and all areas of modern society.

Next, what are some of the themes that stand out from the Documents of Vatican II with a bit more granularity?

Extremely important is that the documents of Vatican II are deeply **Christocentric**. This flies in the face of the paracouncil or the Hermeneutic of Rupture and discontinuity, which very much desired to bring the Church down to being a pure social institution where the Church begins to look a lot more like a governmental organization than the **sacrament of salvation**. The paracouncil lost sight of the deeply Christocentric nature of the teachings of Vatican II. The more that the Church is centered on Christ, the more she deeply understands her mission in Christ, and the more effective she is going to be, not as a governmental organization or a pure social institution, but as we'll see in *Lumen Gentium*, the sacrament of salvation. The sacrament of salvation means that Jesus Christ is literally present and working through the Church and through the individual members of the Church to bring the gospel to our modern culture.

In this deeply Christocentric teaching of Vatican II, we see first and foremost that Jesus Christ fully reveals the loving plan of the Father accomplished in the Holy Spirit, and that is the core and the center of the Church's mission. The Church participates in the saving mission of the Holy Trinity; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We see that Jesus reveals and brings about the mystery, identity, and mission of the Church. Christ is intimately working in and through the Church, so the more that the Church is conformed to Christ, the more that the Church is going to be effective in her mission.

We also see in the teaching of the Council that **Jesus Christ fully reveals man to himself**. Where do we see the truth of the human person? In Jesus Christ, who was the perfect man. So, Jesus fully reveals to us as human persons our mission and our identity, and that is the theological crisis of our time. The human person finds his or her identity precisely in God, precisely in Christ. In *Ecclesiam Suam* Pope Saint Paul VI in says:

We must accustom ourselves to see Christ in the Church. It is Christ who lives in the Church, who teaches, governs, and sanctifies through it. It is Christ, too, who manifests Himself differently in different members of his society.

Vatican II is not just about the Church as a conglomeration of people. Yes, the essence of the Church has its mission in Christ, but each and every baptized member of the Church shares in that mission. We'll see that more when we look into *Lumen Gentium*.

The next theme that we see in Vatican II is this emphasis on the **universal call to holiness**. Vatican II was all about making saints, because saints renew the Church, and saints renew the world, and the fathers of the Council understood this deeply, and that's why at the very center of the vision and the mission of Vatican II is this universal call to holiness. In some ways, **you could reduce the entire teaching of the Council to one word:**

holiness. Why? Because Vatican II calls the members of the Church to be holy, so that these holy saints of the Church can go out to help modern men and women become holy. That's the essence of the vision of Vatican II. Pope Saint John Paul II, in his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte, At the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, in 2000, reflected back on Vatican II and reaffirmed its teachings for the Church of the Third Millennium, emphasizing the importance of this universal call to holiness. He said:

It is necessary, therefore, to rediscover the full practical significance of Chapter 5 of the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church *Lumen Gentium*, dedicated to the “universal call to holiness.” **The Council Fathers laid such stress on this point, not just to embellish ecclesiology or the life and mission of the Church with a kind of spiritual veneer, but to make the call to holiness an intrinsic and essential aspect of their teaching on the Church.** The rediscovery of the Church as “mystery,” or as a people “gathered together by the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” was bound to bring with it a rediscovery of the Church’s “holiness,” as understood in the basic sense of belonging to him who is in essence the Holy One, the “thrice Holy” (cf. Is 6:3). To profess the Church as holy means to point to her as the Bride of Christ, for whom he gave himself precisely in order to make her holy (cf. Eph 5:25-26). This as it were objective gift of holiness is offered to all the baptized. (NMI, 30)

So, holiness isn't this nice little polish that we put over ourselves. Oh, look at me! I'm a saint outwardly. No, holiness must penetrate and impregnate the entire life and mission of the Church, and every single life of every single member of the Church. Vatican II is saying to us, “It's sainthood or bust.” It's all about holiness. Holiness must be the center of everything that we do, because it's only through holiness, through sanctity, through a convincing authentic Christian witness that the Church is going to be effective in the work of the new evangelization.

Holiness is the soul of the apostolate. It's the soul of the heart and the mission of the life of the Church. The universal call to holiness is key, and this is a theme that goes throughout and beyond the Second Vatican Council.

Another key theme is the unity of faith and life. This was one of the crises from the reading of the signs of the times that the Council was trying to address. That we have many Catholics and Christians who profess to be Christian, who profess the faith, who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ, but yet they don't live that way at all. This is one of the greatest crises, and *Gaudium et Spes* addresses this in paragraph 43, and it hits to the heart of this pastoral vision of the Council. It says:

This Council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously in response to the Gospel spirit. They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but to seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation... GS 43

One extreme the Council is warning against is that you can't be Christians who are hiding, who just go away and go out from the world. No, Christians are called to go into the world to change the world for Christ. It then talks about the other extreme.

Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone, and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life...

Too often these days we see Catholics and Christians who say, "Oh, I'm Catholic," and then, whether it's politics or entertainment or whatever, live lives completely contrary to their professed Catholic faith. That is a serious error that the Council goes to correct, and so this paragraph in *Gaudium et Spes* concludes:

This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age. (GS, 42)

Be it the hierarchy, the clergy, or the laity, the Council seeks desperately and effectively to bridge this gap between faith and life and to bring those into a unity.

Another theme that emerged from the Council that has wide-ranging and serious effects on the mission of the Church, on evangelization and catechesis, is what is called **an apologetics of meaning**. When we use the word apologetics, we normally think of Catholics talking with Protestants, or vice versa, and where is this in the Bible, and where is that in the Bible, and why does the Church teach and believe what she does? While that is apologetics, but when it comes to the Church's dialogue and mission to the modern world, is that what most modern men and women are worried about? Biblical proof-texting? No. Where are most modern men and women at in our secular post-Christian culture? Devoid of any reference to God and to Christianity, modern men and women are desperately searching for the meaning of life. Modern men and women are looking for love, happiness, and faith in all the wrong places. So, our job as the Church is to go out and to help modern men and women see that Jesus Christ and his truth are the answer to all the pressing questions they are asking. Jesus Christ is the answer to the meaning of life. Apologetics of meaning means that yes, we teach what the Church teaches and believes, but we teach it in a way that answers those fundamental questions. *Gaudium et Spes* says:

To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics. GS, 43

Yes, we need to be faithful to all that the Church teaches and believes; those unchanging teachings, even the ones that are unpopular, but how do we explain them? We need to explain them in a way that's going to be effective. And for modern men and women, it's answering these fundamental questions of the meanings of life, even the controversial teachings of the Church on things like marriage and family and human sexuality. Those are things we should not be afraid to teach. Quite the contrary. Why? Because the Church's truth in those teachings actually corresponds to the deepest longings of the human heart of modern men and women, they just don't know it. That's why this apologetics of meaning that flowed out of the Second Vatican Council is so important in the way that we do evangelization and the way that we do catechesis.

Pope Saint John Paul II was a master at this apologetics of meaning. This is why the youth loved him and came to him in droves for World Youth Days, because he would speak to them in this way and show them how Jesus Christ is answering those deepest longings of their human hearts.

Another key theme in *Gaudium et Spes* is **Christian anthropology** and the crisis of **secular humanism**. As our culture continues to become more secular, and our society as a whole pulls away from God and denies God, a serious consequence of is that when we lose sight of God, we lose sight of ourselves as human persons created in the image and likeness of God, and then the human person becomes a threat to himself. This is why Vatican II was so concerned about Christian anthropology, teaching the human person in light of Christ, as created in the image and likeness of God. This is such a theological crisis of our time because literally we've forgotten what it means to be a human person.

Gaudium et Spes 22:

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, **fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear.**

Jesus Christ fully reveals man to himself. If we want to know what it means to be human, we look at Christ.



Gaudium et Spes 24:

Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when he prayed to the Father, “that all may be one ... as we are one” (John 17:21-22) opened up the vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that **man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.**

Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses it will save it.

Luke 17:33

We only come to know ourselves as human persons when we give a sincere gift of ourselves.

A couple of other significant themes of the Council are **communion** and **co-responsibility** for the mission of the Church. The Church doesn't just belong to the clergy and the religious. Every single baptized member of the Church has a co-responsibility and shares in the mission of the Church. This is where teaching on the laity emerges, from *Lumen Gentium*. A couple of things flow from this. One is that **communion is the basis of mission**. The more that we're in communion with Christ and in communion with one another, the more effective we're going to be in our mission. Recall that mission flows from being. Our mission flows from our identity. We need to know who we are in Christ. Why is this so important? Because we need to evangelize and to bring the gospel to the world through the power of witness, and we need the laity, and we need all baptized members of the Church witnessing the gospel to our modern culture. Pope Saint Paul VI (famously) said:

Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if one is a teacher, it's because he's first a witness.

This is why the theme of communion and co-responsibility for the mission of the Church is so important for our time.

Finally, the final theme that really flows out of the Council is the Church's **solidarity with modern man**. Just like Jesus Christ, who was the second person of the Trinity, came down and entered into our humanity and entered into space and time to be in intimacy, in communion with us, to redeem us, so too the Church must go out and have that same solidarity, that same communion, that same accompaniment with modern men and women.

We hear a lot these days about **pastoral accompaniment**. We need to pastorally accompany people. We need to get into their shoes. We need to smell like the sheep. We need to walk with them. All comes from the Second Vatican Council, and so the Church draws close to modern man.

John Paul II, in his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, or the *Redeemer of Man*, says:

Since this man is the way for the Church, the way for her daily life and experience, for her mission and toil, the Church of today must be aware in an always new manner of man's "situation." That means she must be aware of his possibilities, which keep returning to their proper bearings and thus revealing themselves. She must likewise be aware of the threats to man and all that seems to oppose the endeavor "to make human life ever more human" and to make every element of this life correspond to man's true dignity - in a word, she must be aware of all that is opposed to that process. RH, 14

This is reading the signs of the time, being faithful to the human person. We need to understand modern men's and women's situation, their threats, their realities, the world and the culture that modern men and women are swimming in, so that the Church can accompany them, bring the truth and light of the Gospel, and bring them to Jesus Christ. This is the incarnational principle, that pastoral accompaniment, that every single member of the Church is called to practice in our daily lives as part of evangelization, and catechesis as we live our lives of faith.

Next, we will examine more closely the four Constitutions, starting with *Lumen Gentium*.