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The cover illustration shows an impression of the Council in public session in St Peter's.  
(Picture: Bruno Del Priore, Rome; reproduced by courtesy of the *Catholic Herald*)

# The Vatican Council and You

By

MOST REV. JOHN CARMEL HEENAN D.D.  
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## THE VATICAN COUNCIL AND YOU

### INTRODUCTION

Now that the Council has begun it is worth while to contrast the English background to the First and Second Vatican Councils. When the First Vatican Council was held in 1869 Europe was ruled largely by royalty. France still had an emperor — as did Austria. Germany was well stocked with princes but, of course, the real ruler of Prussia was Bismarck. Christian princes had a very real interest in the First Vatican Council. They were especially concerned about the proposed decree of Papal Infallibility. They felt that this was likely to become much more than a question of theology. They felt that what might begin as a purely spiritual measure could end by threatening the power of the State.

There was in fact no intervention by secular powers during the whole course of the Vatican Council. But at one time there was a strong movement among statesmen to break up the Council. The Prime Minister of Great Britain, Mr Gladstone, was generally regarded in Europe as the most suitable statesman to lead the movement against Rome. He tried to persuade his Cabinet to agree that England should join Europe in an onslaught on the Vatican. Gladstone, fortunately, did not have his way. But it is almost startling to see how different the Catholic Church looked to Englishmen in those days. It would be hard to imagine a Cabinet meeting in Downing Street today concerning itself with the Second Vatican Council. No British government in our day would contemplate measures to break up the Council.

Many politicians regard religion as irrelevant. But those who are practising Christians are glad that Catholics from all over the world are meeting together. They know that this meeting is not a conspiracy against men of other religions. The Council will not immediately lead to Christian Unity but it will certainly help to foster it. It may also have its influence in promoting world peace.

The Second Vatican Council opened on October 11th, the Feast of Mary Mother of God. Around Pope John nearly three thousand bishops of all nations were gathered. Church history has never recorded a more impressive Christian assembly. The Pope and the bishops, however, are not the whole Church. The Church means every Catholic — including the baby baptised last week. The clergy are, of course, the pastors, but all of us — bishops, priests and laity — are part of that flock ruled over by Christ the Good Shepherd. The Vatican Council is not, therefore, the concern only of bishops. The hierarchy is not a mere board of directors. The bishops have gone to Rome to witness to the Faith in their own dioceses, just as in their own dioceses at all times they are witnesses to their people of the faith of the whole Catholic Church. The Council has not been called to enable bishops to impose fresh rules upon those they govern. The Pope has called the Council to renew the life of the Church and make it strong to face the perils and unprecedented opportunities of our times.

The last General Council took place almost a hundred years ago. Since that time two world wars and stupendous scientific progress have transformed our whole way of life. Christians have been brought together by common danger. The attack on faith and morality has been bold and sustained. The General Council will speak to a world vastly changed since 1869, when Pope Pius IX opened the First Vatican Council.

Never did a Council have such careful preparation. During the last three years committees of experts have examined

questions submitted to the Holy See by bishops, clergy and faithful from every part of the world. The agenda of the Council has not been made public but the Pope has announced some of the subjects to be discussed.

I wish it were possible to give a precise description of the Vatican Council. You must not think of it as a kind of General Assembly of the United Nations. There you have the various countries drawn up in opposing blocks. It stands to reason that each nation will look first to its own interests. Small countries have to make their decisions and cast their votes with an eye to the Great Powers.

The Vatican Council is not at all like that. There are no Great Powers or Small Powers. All taking part in the Council have only one object in mind — to help the Church to bring men nearer to God. This is really a most exciting event. In the nearly two thousand years of its life the Church has held only twenty General Councils. So we are making history. God alone knows what He has in store for the Church and the world. But we may be quite sure that from this Council, presided over by Pope John XXIII, blessings will come not only to Catholics but to all Christians ; and not only to Christians but to all the children of God who sincerely seek His Will.

Try to imagine the scene in St Peter's. All the bishops of the Catholic Church are there with the Vicar of Christ to seek the guidance of God. It reminds us of one of the most dramatic passages in Holy Scripture: the description in the Acts of the Apostles of how they waited in the Upper Room for the coming of the Holy Ghost. 'They returned to Jerusalem . . . and went up into an upper room . . . and were persevering in one mind in prayer.' (Acts 1 : 12-14). The bishops had not decided any issue before the Council met. When they are asked to make a decision they do not vote according to race or nation. They speak, before God, according to the light of His Holy Spirit.

The Church belongs to God but it is composed of men.

Looked at even as a human institution it is the most remarkable organisation in the world. I said that you must not think of the Council as if it were the General Assembly of the United Nations. Just imagine, for example, the difference in the authority of those who speak. In St Peter's during the Council a bishop from the mission field, with only a few thousand Catholics in his territory, speaks for the Church of God with the same authority as the bishop of a venerable diocese with millions of Catholics. Looking round the vast assembly of bishops, abbots and theologians you would understand that the Catholic Church is truly universal. The Church does not belong only to Europe. Of those taking part in the Council only about a third are Europeans. More than half are from the New World, Asia and the Australian continent. Never did the Church more obviously belong to the whole world than she does today.

What will the Vatican Council decide? That we cannot say. We have been told some of the things which the Council will discuss. But nobody knows more than that. We can, of course, say what the Council will not do. It will not alter the Catholic Faith. The words 'One Lord, one Faith, one baptism' (Ephesians 4 : 5) are as true today as when they were written by St Paul. It was also St Paul who spoke so strongly to the Galatians: 'But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach a gospel to you besides that which we have preached to you, let him be anathema' (Galatians 1 : 8). The Council will preach Christ, who is 'the same yesterday and today and the same for ever' (Hebrews 13 : 8).

#### WHY HOLD A COUNCIL ?

If the Faith is going to be the same after the Council, what is the point of holding the Council at all? In the first place, the Council can teach us a great deal more about the Faith. The Church is like any normal person. She learns by experience. The Church is the same today as it was in the time of the

apostles. But the Church has learned much more about the truth of God. Our Lord promised that this would happen — 'The Paraclete, the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring all things to your minds, whatsoever I have said to you.' (John 14 : 26). The Holy Ghost still teaches us and brings to our minds the deeper meaning of the Faith. The Holy Ghost will guide and rule the Vatican Council. That is why we must unite in prayer with Catholics all over the world as we await the discussions of the Council.

There is nothing in the Bible which says the Church must hold Councils. But from the very beginning the bishops have always met together to solve the problems arising in the life of the Church. One of the first problems the early Church had to solve was whether or not Gentile converts had to be circumcised. Remember that all the apostles were Jews and had been brought up under the law of Moses. Because this was a question affecting the whole Church, the Apostles decided to hold a Council in Jerusalem, which was then the centre of the Church's government. At the Council of Jerusalem these first bishops of the Church sought to discover God's Will. They decided that Gentile converts were under no obligation to be circumcised. It is interesting to notice the words with which they made their decision known. This is what they said: 'It hath seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us to lay no further burden upon you.' (Acts 15 : 28).

Throughout history the Church has held General Councils to make the teaching of Christ more clear to the faithful. Let me give you some examples. Over sixteen hundred years ago the Council of Nicea explained exactly what is meant by calling Christ the Son of God. It means that Christ has the same nature as God the Father. A hundred years later two other Councils of the Church, one at Ephesus and the other at Chalcedon, taught that Christ is one Person, the Person of God the Son, yet He is a man like ourselves in all things save sin.

It may seem strange to you that the Church had to teach what is already so plainly written in the Gospel. But people are not always able to understand the Bible. Two people can see quite different meanings in the same words. If the Bible alone were a sufficient guide there would not really be any need to have the Church to teach us. So the Church continues to define and explain simple truths. No doubt the Vatican Council will show what special lessons the words of Christ have for us today.

Since it is nearly a hundred years since the last General Council there must be many things needing fresh examination. It is true that the Holy See is always in touch with every part of the Church. But that is a very different matter from gathering together the bishops of the whole world to discuss the needs of the Church in our time. Nobody can foretell what new strength and knowledge will come to us through the Vatican Council. Although, as we have said, the doctrine of the Church does not alter there may be many changes to make in the day-to-day life of the Church.

See how different the Church looks today compared with the beginning of the century. Look, for example, at Africa. The scene has changed almost beyond recognition. Where a few years ago only pagans lived there are now millions of Catholics. Not so very long ago the priests, brothers and nuns all came from Europe. Today there are thousands of African priests and religious. There are African bishops and an African Cardinal. So you see how, at least outwardly, the life of the Church does change.

From our own experience you and I know that the customs of the Church are altering all the time. Take the changes we have all seen in Mass and Holy Communion. A few years ago there was no evening Mass. Now there is an evening Mass nearly every day in many churches. We used to have to fast from midnight if we wanted to receive Holy Communion and we could not even have a glass of water. The new rules have

brought immense benefits to the faithful. Thousands are now frequent communicants who before were rarely able to receive. So we are right to look for new benefits from the Council. The Pope has told us that he called the Council to renew the whole life of the Church.

#### CHRISTIAN UNITY

You have probably heard or read in the papers that Pope John has invited as observers to the Vatican Council theologians belonging to other Christian bodies. Almost all of them accepted the Pope's invitation. One of the first to accept and to nominate theologians was Dr. Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury. We have grown so used to the friendly and courteous actions of our fellow Christians that we have begun to take them for granted. It is well for us to thank God for this welcome change in relations between ourselves and members of other Christian bodies in this country.

This friendship has been growing fast since the reign of Pope John began. Years ago Protestants would scarcely have known the name of a pope. Today everyone seems to know and love good Pope John. In this country his attitude to those outside the Church has been received with the utmost gratitude. It has altered the outlook of many who hitherto had taken it for granted that Catholics want to remain apart. Thus the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Fisher, determined to go personally to the Vatican to greet the Holy Father. He had already arranged a round of farewell visits to the Patriarchs of the Greek Church and, at first, had no intention of including Rome in his journey. But captured by Pope John's large-heartedness he made his way to the Vatican. Even ten years ago nobody would have prophesied that an Archbishop of Canterbury would visit the Vatican. This growth of friendly relations between Christians has been repeated all over the world. That is why Pope John hopes that the Vatican Council will help the cause of Christian Unity. Great advances have

been made. People who used to look upon each other as opponents now regard each other as fellow Christians.

We must not imagine, however, that Pope John has altered the nature of the Catholic Church. This striving for Christian Unity is no new thing. Already in the time of Pope Pius XII, of happy memory, the Holy See had instructed the bishops of the whole Church to promote this work. The late Pope encouraged Catholics and Protestants to study together means of fostering closer relations.

What Pope John has done is to quicken the pulse of the movement for Christian Unity. Under his guidance, by God's grace, progress has been more rapid than anyone had dared to hope. Who would have believed, for example, that within a few months the Queen, the Prime Minister, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Moderator of the Church of Scotland would all have paid visits to the Vatican?

There is a feeling, shared by all Christians, that this Council will be unlike any other. Most Councils of the Church were summoned in the heat of religious controversy. The Church had to denounce heresy in order to protect her children from corruption. In ancient days people felt so strongly about religion that they fought wars to defend it. Christians today are more concerned to stress what unites rather than what divides them. They respect those who conscientiously hold other doctrines.

So we may be sure that, with Pope John to guide them, the Fathers of the Council will not hurl anathemas at those who reject the Catholic religion. The intemperate language of more robust days will certainly not be used in the Vatican Council. It will avoid expressions which are known to give pain to sincere non-Catholics. Only a few years ago the ceremony on Good Friday was altered so as not to give offence to the Jews. This does not mean that the Council will be afraid to proclaim the truth. It means only that in proclaiming the truth the Council will avoid hurting those not of the household of the Faith.

It would be unwise to attempt to prophesy what the Council will say and do. But we know that the Church will keep in mind not only the needs of its own children but those of the Orthodox, the Anglicans and Protestants of every kind. We know, for example, that intolerance is one of the subjects to be discussed at the Vatican Council. We may be quite sure that intolerance will not be allowed to masquerade under the banner of the Catholic Church. The Council, in other words, while bringing strength to Catholics will seek to comfort the separated brethren.

It would be wrong, however, to give false comfort to our friends. It would be wrong to suggest — as the secular press has sometimes done — that the Council has been called mainly to discuss reunion. It has even been suggested that the Church would be prepared to alter certain doctrines for the sake of unity.

The Church is not responsible for what the papers say but Catholics should be on their guard against accepting and spreading ill-informed rumours. We must be prudent in all we say about the Council. Our new-found friendship with non-Catholics is precious. We should not put it in peril by building up hopes that cannot be realised. We know that the whole Church shares the Pope's desire for closer unity among Christians. We also know that by the Pope's command Christian Unity will be discussed in detail by the Fathers of the Council. More than that we do not know and more than that we should not say.

Catholics do less than credit to non-Catholics by thinking that they expect us to be silent about the claims of the Church. Those of us on terms of the closest friendship with other Christians know that they never want us to disguise the Church's claims. They know where we take our stand. They respect an honest statement of the Catholic position and despise those who paint a false picture. We ought to thank God for the growing understanding that is drawing Christians

together. The ultimate aim of all sincere Christians is to be united in one Faith. But that day is still far distant. Cardinal Bea, who is in charge of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, has warned us not to be too optimistic about the return of all Christians to the one fold. But, he adds, pessimism is just as dangerous.

There is no reason for being pessimistic about the prospects for Christian Unity. We know that in this country without a miracle it will not come for generations and, perhaps, for centuries. But Christian Unity depends not upon us, but upon God. What is impossible to us is not impossible to Almighty God. We do not know how He will use the Vatican Council. But we must not talk as if the goal of Christian Unity were already reached.

We must never speak to other Christians in a way that humiliates them. We should not talk, for example, of their 'submission' to the Catholic Church. If a person receives the gift of Faith there is no question of submitting but of eagerly accepting. Discussions between Catholics and non-Catholics should never be a battle of words or wits. Truth belongs to God.

It is scarcely necessary to say that we should never attack the good faith of members of other denominations. This, fortunately, is not a fault to which Catholics are especially prone. Nor are we bound always to defend the actions of Catholics either in our own social circle or in countries where large numbers of citizens are members of the Church. If we must criticise let us criticise ourselves. We have to find means of correcting our faults as individual Catholics and of showing to the whole world the example of truly Catholic life. That, rather than argument, is the way to lead separated Christians back to the fold.

I hope I have made it clear that the Vatican Council is not likely to solve all the problems of Christian Unity. What we can hope for is a tremendous renewal of life in the Church

which will bring us all closer to God and enable us to help our non-Catholic friends.

We must not picture our country as it was two or three hundred years ago. We must look at England as it is today. Comparatively few of our fellow citizens actively belong to any religious body. I wonder how many among your non-Catholic neighbours go regularly to church or chapel. When we talk about England as a Protestant country we have to know exactly what we mean.

In our work for Christian Unity we shall find that most of our fellow countrymen are simply not interested. Active Christians form a very small proportion of the whole population. That should make us realise how foolish it is for us to waste time fighting fellow Christians when all our energy should be devoted to fighting disbelief. Sometimes fervent Catholics express dismay lest all this talk of Christian Unity may destroy the work of conversion. But what do we mean when we talk about the conversion of England? If we mean only the conversion of Protestants England will never be converted. What we should mean is the conversion of the whole country. It is not a question of enticing men and women from their Protestant allegiance but of reclaiming people from unbelief and of showing other Christians what the Church has to offer them.

The work of Christian Unity, indeed, should go hand in hand with the work of conversion. We do not meet non-Catholics to fight them. We meet to help them. One of the best ways of promoting Christian Unity is to give information about the Church to as many people as will accept it.

You and I cannot give anyone the Faith. But we can tell them about the Faith and pray for them. During the Vatican Council the Church will be constantly in the news. Millions for the first time will become curious to know something about our religion. It is for us to be ready to help them. The spread of the Faith depends, under God, upon our prayers and example.



## PRAYER FOR THE COUNCIL

The Pope has asked that during the Council prayer will be offered to the Holy Ghost in every church in the world. This request for prayers is no mere formality. The Pope is making a really urgent plea. A General Council is a vital event for the Church of God. This is only the twenty-first Council in nearly two thousand years. The decisions of an ecumenical council affect the lives of Christians until the end of time. Although we cannot foresee what will come from this Council we know that it has not been called just to publish a list of platitudes.

Some laws and customs with which we and our fathers before us have been familiar may be changed. The language of the liturgy, the rule of life for Clergy and Religious, the function of the laity in the Church, may all be revised. We do not know. But, undoubtedly, Catholics both clerical and lay will be given new spiritual help. The Council will confirm and extend the spirit of unity between Catholics and our separated brethren. Other matters may be considered by the Council which nobody — perhaps not even the Pope himself — may yet have considered. For the presiding spirit at an Ecumenical Council is the Holy Spirit. It is to the Holy Spirit, therefore, that the Pope directs us to turn as we implore God's guidance.

The last Vatican Council was disbanded in haste. In 1870 Europe was startled by the roar of guns which signalled the outbreak of war between France and Germany. French troops were withdrawn from Rome and Italian soldiers invaded the Papal States and occupied Rome, the Eternal City. Pope Pius IX suspended the Vatican Council until what he called 'more propitious times.'

So these are the 'more propitious times' for which the Church has waited. Some may think that times were never less propitious. The wide world is divided by suspicion and mutual hatred into two armed camps. These arms are more terrible than any hitherto devised by the genius of man. Powerful States boast of their nuclear power and at the same time pro-

claim their disbelief in God and their determination to uproot religion and the old morality which went with it. No Christian statesman can accept their word or their promises. There can be no brotherhood between those who recognise no common father.

It is against this background that you must picture the sittings of the Second Vatican Council. There are a few vacant seats. The bishops to whom they belong are held prisoners by the Communists. We must follow the example of the first Christians. 'Peter,' we read in the Acts of the Apostles, 'was kept in prison but prayer was made without ceasing by the Church unto God for him.' (Acts 12 : 5).

As we pray we must ask Christ, the Prince of Peace, to use the Vatican Council in the cause of peace. Great blessings will surely come to the Church and the whole world. Under God the result of the Council depends upon our prayers. Pope John is beloved by Catholic and Protestant alike. As his dear children we must support his effort to bring together the brethren of Christ and, indeed, all the children of God.

PRAYER TO THE HOLY GHOST FOR THE SUCCESS OF  
THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

Holy Spirit, who art sent by the Father in the name of Jesus to be with the Church by Thy presence and sure guidance, we pray Thee graciously to pour out the fullness of Thy gifts upon the Ecumenical Council.

Sweet Comforter and Teacher, enlighten the minds of our Prelates who gladly assemble at the invitation of the Supreme Pontiff at Rome to celebrate the Sacred Council.

May the Council be most fruitful, so that the light and strength of the Gospel may spread more and more among men and the Catholic religion and its missionary work happily prosper, making the teaching of the Church and her wholesome moral guidance fully understood.

Sweet Guide of the spirit, strengthen our minds in truth, that we may be humble and obedient in heart, and that, receiving gratefully the decisions of the Council, we may hasten to put them into practice.

We pray also for those still separated from the one fold of Jesus Christ, that, glorying as they do in the Christian name, they may come at last to unity under the one Shepherd.

Show once more Thy wonders in our day as on the day of Pentecost. Grant to Thy Church, that, constant and united in prayer with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and following the lead of Blessed Peter, the reign of our divine Saviour may be advanced, a reign of truth, of justice, love and peace. Amen.

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(S.P.Ap. 23 September, 1959)

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