



# The Holy See

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***ADDRESS OF POPE PAUL VI  
DURING THE LAST GENERAL MEETING  
OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL***

*7 December 1965*

Today we are concluding the Second Vatican Council. We bring it to a close at the fullness of its efficiency: the presence of so many of you here clearly demonstrates it; the well-ordered pattern of this assembly bears testimony to it; the normal conclusion of the work done by the council confirms it; the harmony of sentiments and decisions proclaims it. And if quite a few questions raised during the course of the council itself still await appropriate answers, this shows that its labors are now coming to a close not out of weariness, but in a state of vitality which this universal synod has awakened. In the post-conciliar period this vitality will apply, God willing, its generous and well-regulated energies to the study of such questions.

This council bequeaths to history an image of the Catholic Church symbolized by this hall, filled, as it is, with shepherds of souls professing the same faith, breathing the same charity, associated in the same communion of prayer, discipline and activity and—what is marvelous—all desiring one thing: namely, to offer themselves like Christ, our Master and Lord, for the life of the Church and for the salvation of the world. This council hands over to posterity not only the image of the Church but also the patrimony of her doctrine and of her commandments, the "deposit" received from Christ and meditated upon through centuries, lived and expressed now and clarified in so many of its parts, settled and arranged in its integrity. The deposit, that is, which lives on by the divine power of truth and of grace which constitutes it, and is, therefore, able to vivify anyone who receives it and nourishes with it his own human existence.

What then was the council? What has it accomplished? The answer to these questions would be the logical theme of our present meditation. But it would require too much of our attention and time: this final and stupendous hour would not perhaps give us enough tranquillity of mind to make such a synthesis. We should like to devote this precious moment to one single thought which

bends down our spirits in humility and at the same time raises them up to the summit of our aspirations. And that thought is this: what is the religious value of this council? We refer to it as religious because of its direct relationship with the living God, that relationship which is the *raison d'être* of the Church, of all that she believes, hopes and loves; of all that she is and does.

Could we speak of having given glory to God, of having sought knowledge and love of Him, of having made progress in our effort of contemplating Him, in our eagerness for honoring Him and in the art of proclaiming Him to men who look up to us as to pastors and masters of the life of God? In all sincerity we think the answer is yes. Also because from this basic purpose there developed the guiding principle which was to give direction to the future council. Still fresh in our memory are the words uttered in this basilica by our venerated predecessor, John XXIII, whom we may in truth call the originator of this great synod. In his opening address to the council he had this to say: "The greatest concern of the ecumenical council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine be guarded and taught more effectively.... The Lord has said: 'Seek first the kingdom of God and His justice.' The word 'first' expresses the direction in which our thoughts and energies must move" (Discorsi, 1962, p. 583).

His great purpose has now been achieved. To appreciate it properly it is necessary to remember the time in which it was realized: a time which everyone admits is orientated toward the conquest of the kingdom of earth rather than of that of heaven; a time in which forgetfulness of God has become habitual, and seems, quite wrongly, to be prompted by the progress of science; a time in which the fundamental act of the human person, more conscious now of himself and of his liberty, tends to pronounce in favor of his own absolute autonomy, in emancipation from every transcendent law; a time in which secularism seems the legitimate consequence of modern thought and the highest wisdom in the temporal ordering of society; a time, moreover, in which the soul of man has plumbed the depths of irrationality and desolation; a time, finally, which is characterized by upheavals and a hitherto unknown decline even in the great world religions.

It was at such a time as this that our council was held to the honor of God, in the name of Christ and under the impulse of the Spirit: who "searcheth all things," "making us understand God's gifts to us" (cf. 1 Cor. 2:10-12), and who is now quickening the Church, giving her a vision at once profound and all-embracing of the life of the world. The theocentric and theological concept of man and the universe, almost in defiance of the charge of anachronism and irrelevance, has been given a new prominence by the council, through claims which the world will at first judge to be foolish, but which, we hope, it will later come to recognize as being truly human, wise and salutary: namely, God is—and more, He is real, He lives, a personal, provident God, infinitely good; and not only good in Himself, but also immeasurably good to us. He will be recognized as Our Creator, our truth, our happiness; so much so that the effort to look on Him, and to center our heart in Him which we call contemplation, is the highest, the most perfect act of the spirit, the act which even today can and must be at the apex of all human activity.

Men will realize that the council devoted its attention not so much to divine truths, but rather, and principally, to the Church—her nature and composition, her ecumenical vocation, her apostolic and missionary activity. This secular religious society, which is the Church, has endeavored to carry out an act of reflection about herself, to know herself better, to define herself better and, in consequence, to set aright what she feels and what she commands. So much is true. But this introspection has not been an end in itself, has not been simply an exercise of human understanding or of a merely worldly culture. The Church has gathered herself together in deep spiritual awareness, not to produce a learned analysis of religious psychology, or an account of her own experiences, not even to devote herself to reaffirming her rights and explaining her laws. Rather, it was to find in herself, active and alive, the Holy Spirit, the word of Christ; and to probe more deeply still the mystery, the plan and the presence of God above and within herself; to revitalize in herself that faith which is the secret of her confidence and of her wisdom, and that love which impels her to sing without ceasing the praises of God. "Cantare amantis est" (Song is the expression of a lover), says St. Augustine (Serm. 336; P. L. 38, 1472).

The council documents—especially the ones on divine revelation, the liturgy, the Church, priests, Religious and the laity—leave wide open to view this primary and focal religious intention, and show how clear and fresh and rich is the spiritual stream which contact with the living God causes to well up in the heart of the Church, and flow out from it over the dry wastes of our world.

But we cannot pass over one important consideration in our analysis of the religious meaning of the council: it has been deeply committed to the study of the modern world. Never before perhaps, so much as on this occasion, has the Church felt the need to know, to draw near to, to understand, to penetrate, serve and evangelize the society in which she lives; and to get to grips with it, almost to run after it, in its rapid and continuous change. This attitude, a response to the distances and divisions we have witnessed over recent centuries, in the last century and in our own especially, between the Church and secular society—this attitude has been strongly and unceasingly at work in the council; so much so that some have been inclined to suspect that an easy-going and excessive responsiveness to the outside world, to passing events, cultural fashions, temporary needs, an alien way of thinking...may have swayed persons and acts of the ecumenical synod, at the expense of the fidelity which is due to tradition, and this to the detriment of the religious orientation of the council itself. We do not believe that this shortcoming should be imputed to it, to its real and deep intentions, to its authentic manifestations.

We prefer to point out how charity has been the principal religious feature of this council. Now, no one can reprove as want of religion or infidelity to the Gospel such a basic orientation, when we recall that it is Christ Himself who taught us that love for our brothers is the distinctive mark of His disciples (cf. John 13:35); when we listen to the words of the apostle: "If he is to offer service pure and unblemished in the sight of God, who is our Father, he must take care of orphans and widows in their need, and keep himself untainted by the world" (James 1:27) and again: "He has seen his brother, and has no love for him; what love can he have for the God he has never seen?" (1 John

4:20).

Yes, the Church of the council has been concerned, not just with herself and with her relationship of union with God, but with man—man as he really is today: living man, man all wrapped up in himself, man who makes himself not only the center of his every interest but dares to claim that he is the principle and explanation of all reality. Every perceptible element in man, every one of the countless guises in which he appears, has, in a sense, been displayed in full view of the council Fathers, who, in their turn, are mere men, and yet all of them are pastors and brothers whose position accordingly fills them with solicitude and love. Among these guises we may cite man as the tragic actor of his own plays; man as the superman of yesterday and today, ever frail, unreal, selfish, and savage; man unhappy with himself as he laughs and cries; man the versatile actor ready to perform any part; man the narrow devotee of nothing but scientific reality; man as he is, a creature who thinks and loves and toils and is always waiting for something, the "growing son" (Gen. 49:22); man sacred because of the innocence of his childhood, because of the mystery of his poverty, because of the dedication of his suffering; man as an individual and man in society; man who lives in the glories of the past and dreams of those of the future; man the sinner and man the saint, and so on.

Secular humanism, revealing itself in its horrible anti-clerical reality has, in a certain sense, defied the council. The religion of the God who became man has met the religion (for such it is) of man who makes himself God. And what happened? Was there a clash, a battle, a condemnation? There could have been, but there was none. The old story of the Samaritan has been the model of the spirituality of the council. A feeling of boundless sympathy has permeated the whole of it. The attention of our council has been absorbed by the discovery of human needs (and these needs grow in proportion to the greatness which the son of the earth claims for himself). But we call upon those who term themselves modern humanists, and who have renounced the transcendent value of the highest realities, to give the council credit at least for one quality and to recognize our own new type of humanism: we, too, in fact, we more than any others, honor mankind.

And what aspect of humanity has this august senate studied? What goal under divine inspiration did it set for itself? It also dwelt upon humanity's ever twofold facet, namely, man's wretchedness and his greatness, his profound weakness—which is undeniable and cannot be cured by himself—and the good that survives in him which is ever marked by a hidden beauty and an invincible serenity. But one must realize that this council, which exposed itself to human judgment, insisted very much more upon this pleasant side of man, rather than on his unpleasant one. Its attitude was very much and deliberately optimistic. A wave of affection and admiration flowed from the council over the modern world of humanity. Errors were condemned, indeed, because charity demanded this no less than did truth, but for the persons themselves there was only warning, respect and love. Instead of depressing diagnoses, encouraging remedies; instead of direful prognostics, messages of trust issued from the council to the present-day world. The modern world's values were not only respected but honored, its efforts approved, its aspirations purified

and blessed.

You see, for example, how the countless different languages of peoples existing today were admitted for the liturgical expression of men's communication with God and God's communication with men: to man as such was recognized his fundamental claim to enjoy full possession of his rights and to his transcendental destiny. His supreme aspirations to life, to personal dignity, to his just liberty, to culture, to the renewal of the social order, to justice and peace were purified and promoted; and to all men was addressed the pastoral and missionary invitation to the light of the Gospel.

We can now speak only too briefly on the very many and vast questions, relative to human welfare, with which the council dealt. It did not attempt to resolve all the urgent problems of modern life; some of these have been reserved for a further study which the Church intends to make of them, many of them were presented in very restricted and general terms, and for that reason are open to further investigation and various applications.

But one thing must be noted here, namely, that the teaching authority of the Church, even though not wishing to issue extraordinary dogmatic pronouncements, has made thoroughly known its authoritative teaching on a number of questions which today weigh upon man's conscience and activity, descending, so to speak, into a dialogue with him, but ever preserving its own authority and force; it has spoken with the accommodating friendly voice of pastoral charity; its desire has been to be heard and understood by everyone; it has not merely concentrated on intellectual understanding but has also sought to express itself in simple, up-to-date, conversational style, derived from actual experience and a cordial approach which make it more vital, attractive and persuasive; it has spoken to modern man as he is.

Another point we must stress is this: all this rich teaching is channeled in one direction, the service of mankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need. The Church has, so to say, declared herself the servant of humanity, at the very time when her teaching role and her pastoral government have, by reason of the council's solemnity, assumed greater splendor and vigor: the idea of service has been central.

It might be said that all this and everything else we might say about the human values of the council have diverted the attention of the Church in council to the trend of modern culture, centered on humanity. We would say not diverted but rather directed. Any careful observer of the council's prevailing interest for human and temporal values cannot deny that it is from the pastoral character that the council has virtually made its program, and must recognize that the same interest is never divorced from the most genuine religious interest, whether by reason of charity, its sole inspiration (where charity is, God is!), or the council's constant, explicit attempts to link human and temporal values with those that are specifically spiritual, religious and everlasting; its concern is with man and with earth, but it rises to the kingdom of God.

The modern mind, accustomed to assess everything in terms of usefulness, will readily admit that the council's value is great if only because everything has been referred to human usefulness. Hence no one should ever say that a religion like the Catholic religion is without use, seeing that when it has its greatest self-awareness and effectiveness, as it has in council, it declares itself entirely on the side of man and in his service. In this way the Catholic religion and human life reaffirm their alliance with one another, the fact that they converge on one single human reality: the Catholic religion is for mankind. In a certain sense it is the life of mankind. It is so by the extremely precise and sublime interpretation that our religion gives of humanity (surely man by himself is a mystery to himself) and gives this interpretation in virtue of its knowledge of God: a knowledge of God is a prerequisite for a knowledge of man as he really is, in all his fullness; for proof of this let it suffice for now to recall the ardent expression of St. Catherine of Siena, "In your nature, Eternal God, I shall know my own." The Catholic religion is man's life because it determines life's nature and destiny; it gives life its real meaning, it establishes the supreme law of life and infuses it with that mysterious activity which we may say divinizes it.

Consequently, if we remember, venerable brothers and all of you, our children, gathered here, how in everyone we can and must recognize the countenance of Christ (cf. Matt. 25:40), the Son of Man, especially when tears and sorrows make it plain to see, and if we can and must recognize in Christ's countenance the countenance of our heavenly Father "He who sees me," Our Lord said, "sees also the Father" (John 14:9), our humanism becomes Christianity, our Christianity becomes centered on God; in such sort that we may say, to put it differently: a knowledge of man is a prerequisite for a knowledge of God.

Would not this council, then, which has concentrated principally on man, be destined to propose again to the world of today the ladder leading to freedom and consolation? Would it not be, in short, a simple, new and solemn teaching to love man in order to love God? To love man, we say, not as a means but as the first step toward the final and transcendent goal which is the basis and cause of every love. And so this council can be summed up in its ultimate religious meaning, which is none other than a pressing and friendly invitation to mankind of today to rediscover in fraternal love the God "to turn away from whom is to fall, to turn to whom is to rise again, to remain in whom is to be secure...to return to whom is to be born again, in whom to dwell is to live" (St. Augustine, *Solil.* I, 1, 3; PL 32, 870).

This is our hope at the conclusion of this Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and at the beginning of the human and religious renewal which the council proposed to study and promote; this is our hope for you, brothers and Fathers of the council; this is our hope for the whole of mankind which here we have learned to love more and to serve better.

To this end we again invoke the intercession of St. John the Baptist and of St. Joseph, who are the patrons of the ecumenical council; of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, the foundations and columns of the Holy Church; and with them of St. Ambrose, the bishop whose feast we celebrate

today, as it were uniting in him the Church of the East and of the West. We also earnestly implore the protection of the most Blessed Mary, the Mother of Christ and therefore called by us also Mother of the Church. With one voice and with one heart we give thanks and glory to the living and true God, to the one and sovereign God, to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.