CHURCH HISTORY SERIES • LESSON 29 • NOLL TURNING POINT 12

The Second Vatican Council

Rome's aggiornamento — how John XXIII opened a window, and the Catholic Church walked through it • 1962–1965

By Shane Gunn • Primary-source study

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Where this fits: Lesson 29 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — the final entry in Mark Noll's twelve "Turning Points," following **Edinburgh 1910 (Lesson 27)** and **the Chicago Statement (Lesson 28)**. The Second Vatican Council was the largest and most consequential church council in the history of Christianity — 2,625 bishops, four years, sixteen documents, and a reshaping of half the world's Christians. See the full **Series Timeline**.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

On 11 October 1962, Pope John XXIII walked down the nave of St. Peter's Basilica in solemn procession and opened the largest ecumenical council in Christian history. Two thousand, six hundred and twenty-five Catholic bishops had come from every continent. More than a hundred non-Catholic observers — Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Quaker, Pentecostal — were seated in a place of honor, something no previous Catholic council had allowed. For the next four autumns, the world's Catholic bishops debated, voted, and eventually promulgated **sixteen documents** that changed how the Roman Catholic Church worships, teaches, reads the Bible, relates to other Christians, relates to Jews and Muslims, and thinks about religious liberty.

Protestants have sometimes dismissed Vatican II as an internal Catholic affair or exaggerated it as Rome's secret conversion to Protestantism. Neither is true. Vatican II did not alter core Catholic dogma — the authority of the pope, the seven sacraments, Marian doctrine, purgatory, transubstantiation, apostolic succession. What it did alter was the Catholic Church's *posture* toward Scripture, liturgy, other Christians, non-Christian religions, modern culture, and religious liberty. For Protestants watching from outside, the most visible changes were the vernacular Mass, the priest facing the people, the new official openness to ecumenical conversation, and the explicit framing of Orthodox churches as "sister churches" and Protestant bodies as "separated brethren" or "ecclesial communities."

Mark Noll places Vatican II as his twelfth and final "turning point" because no other twentieth-century event so decisively shaped the shape of global Christianity. With 1.3 billion Catholics in the world today, whatever reshapes Rome reshapes half of all professing Christians on earth.

> *LXX (Isa 54:2): πλάτυνον τὸν τόπον τῆς σκηνῆς σου καὶ τῶν αὐλαιῶν σου, πῆξον, μὴ φείσῃ· μάκρυνον τὰ σχοινίσματά σου καὶ τοὺς πασσάλους σου κατίσχυσον.*
>
> Isaiah 54:2 (ESV): "Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes." — a verse John XXIII quoted in his opening address.

PART 1 — BACKGROUND: A CENTURY OF DEFENSIVE CATHOLICISM (1789–1958)

To understand the shock of Vatican II, one has to see how defensive the Catholic Church had been for the preceding century and a half. Four successive blows shaped the 19th- and early-20th-century Catholic posture:

> **The French Revolution and its aftermath (1789–1815).** The Revolution confiscated monasteries, abolished tithes, conscripted priests into a state church (the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, 1790), and ultimately guillotined or exiled thousands of clergy. Napoleon kidnapped two popes (Pius VI died in French captivity in 1799; Pius VII was held 1809–

1814). Catholic leaders emerged from the Napoleonic era convinced that the modern liberal state was an existential threat.

The loss of the Papal States (1870). For over a thousand years, the pope had ruled a large chunk of central Italy as a temporal sovereign. Italian unification under Victor Emmanuel II ended that. In September 1870, Italian troops broke through the walls of Rome at the Porta Pia. Pius IX declared himself a "prisoner of the Vatican" and refused to set foot outside the papal palaces. The Lateran Treaty of 1929 finally resolved the standoff with a tiny 109-acre Vatican City state, but the trauma of 1870 shaped Catholic self-understanding for a century.

The First Vatican Council (1869–1870). Convened by Pius IX and interrupted by the Italian invasion of Rome, Vatican I promulgated the doctrine of *papal infallibility* — that when the pope speaks *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals, he speaks infallibly. Vatican I sharpened Catholic identity around the papal office at the very moment Catholic political power was collapsing. It also left an open question: what is the role of the bishops, collegially, in the government of the Church? Vatican I ran out of time before answering. Vatican II would return to it.

The Modernist crisis (1893–1914). Beginning in the 1890s, some Catholic scholars (Alfred Loisy in France, George Tyrrell in England) began applying higher-critical methods to the Bible and trying to reconcile Catholic theology with evolutionary science and historical criticism. Pope Pius X responded ferociously. In 1907 his encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* condemned "Modernism" as "the synthesis of all heresies," and he required all Catholic priests and seminary professors to swear an "Anti-Modernist Oath" (1910). For the next fifty years, Catholic biblical scholarship, historical scholarship, and ecumenical engagement were suspect at best.

By 1958, when Pope Pius XII died, the Catholic Church looked remarkably impressive — over 500 million members, enormous institutional networks, a clear theological identity — but was isolated from the Bible movement, the liturgical movement, the ecumenical movement, and the wider intellectual currents of the 20th century. That isolation is what John XXIII set out to end.

John XXIII — Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli (1881–1963)

BORN SOTTO IL MONTE, BERGAMO, ITALY • ORDAINED PRIEST 1904 • PAPAL DIPLOMAT IN BULGARIA, TURKEY, FRANCE 1925–1952 • CARDINAL PATRIARCH OF VENICE 1953 • POPE 28 OCTOBER 1958 – 3 JUNE 1963

Called Vatican II | "Good Pope John" | Canonized 2014

Roncalli was the fourth of fourteen children born to a family of Italian sharecroppers in the Lombard village of Sotto il Monte, near Bergamo. The family was so poor that his parents reportedly had no shoes for him when he was small. Ordained a priest in 1904, he spent most of his career as a diplomat, first as papal nuncio in Bulgaria (1925–1934, an Orthodox country where he cultivated friendships with Orthodox hierarchs), then in Turkey and Greece (1934–1944, where he helped thousands of Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust by issuing false baptismal certificates), then in France (1944–1952, navigating the delicate postwar purges of collaborationist bishops).

When Pius XII died on 9 October 1958, Roncalli was 76 years old and was universally expected to be a "transitional" pope — a caretaker for a few years while the cardinals decided on a younger man. He was elected on the twelfth ballot, 28 October 1958, and took the name John XXIII. He was the first pope to take the name "John" since the disastrous medieval antipope John XXIII (d. 1419), whose number he pointedly reused to stake a claim that the medieval claimant had not been a legitimate pope.

Less than three months into his papacy, on 25 January 1959, Pope John stunned his cardinals by announcing three projects: a synod for the diocese of Rome, a revision of the Code of Canon Law, and — the bombshell — an ecumenical council for the universal Church. His own cardinals were visibly startled. It had been nearly a century since the last council (Vatican I, 1869–1870). Pius XI and Pius XII had both considered reconvening Vatican I and both had decided against it. John's decision was his own, announced before any formal consultation.

He framed the council with a single Italian word: *aggiornamento* — "updating" or "bringing up to date." In a famous image, he spoke of "opening the windows of the Church to let in fresh air." The council, he said, would not define new dogmas or

condemn errors; it would engage the modern world with warmth. On 11 October 1962, at the opening Mass of the Council, John delivered an address (*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, "Mother Church rejoices") that rejected what he called the "prophets of doom" who saw only darkness in the modern age. He was already terminally ill with stomach cancer.

Pope John XXIII died on 3 June 1963, having seen only the first of the council's four sessions. His successor, Paul VI, would see the council through. John was beatified in 2000 by John Paul II and canonized in 2014 by Francis, alongside John Paul II. He is remembered worldwide as "Good Pope John."

PART 3 — THE FOUR SESSIONS (1962–1965)

Vatican II met in four autumn sessions over four years. Between sessions, commissions worked on draft documents at the Vatican.

Session 1 — 11 October to 8 December 1962. The opening session was dominated by a battle over procedure. The Roman Curia had prepared seventy draft documents (*schemata*) for the bishops to vote on. On the first working day, a French bishop moved to discard the curial draft list of candidates for the council's doctrinal commissions; the motion passed overwhelmingly. Over the next weeks, the bishops rejected or returned most of the curial *schemata* and began producing their own drafts. The pattern of the council was set: it would not rubber-stamp curial documents; the world's bishops would write the documents themselves.

Session 2 — 29 September to 4 December 1963. John XXIII had died on 3 June 1963, and the council reconvened under his successor, Paul VI (Giovanni Battista Montini, 1897–1978). Paul VI had been Archbishop of Milan; he was a curial insider but understood and largely supported John's vision. Session 2 promulgated the council's first two documents: *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (the liturgy constitution) and *Inter Mirifica* (on mass media).

Session 3 — 14 September to 21 November 1964. The session promulgated the two central doctrinal constitutions: *Lumen Gentium* (on the Church) and *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (on the Eastern Catholic Churches), plus *Unitatis Redintegratio* (on ecumenism). Between Session 3 and Session 4, in January 1965, Paul VI flew to the Holy Land — the first pope to leave Italy in over 150 years — and met Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople in Jerusalem. The following December, the two leaders would jointly lift the 1054 excommunications.

Session 4 — 14 September to 8 December 1965. The final session promulgated ten documents, more than half the council's entire output. These included the remaining two constitutions (*Dei Verbum* on divine revelation and *Gaudium et Spes* on the Church in the modern world), the ecumenically explosive declarations *Nostra Aetate* (on non-Christian religions) and *Dignitatis Humanae* (on religious liberty), and eight other decrees on bishops, priests, religious life, mission, and lay apostolate. On 7 December 1965, Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras issued a joint declaration from Rome and Constantinople lifting the mutual excommunications of 1054. Vatican II closed the following day, 8 December 1965.

PART 4 — THE SIXTEEN DOCUMENTS

Vatican II produced four "Constitutions" (the highest level), nine "Decrees," and three "Declarations" — sixteen documents in total. The four Constitutions are the central theological output.

THE FOUR CONSTITUTIONS

1. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* — Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (4 December 1963). Authorized the use of the vernacular (local languages) in the Mass — previously celebrated only in Latin. Called for "full, conscious, and active participation" by the laity. Revised the lectionary so that far more Scripture is read at

Mass (a three-year Sunday cycle covering most of the New Testament and major portions of the Old). Simplified the ritual. The post-conciliar *Novus Ordo* Mass of 1969 implemented these reforms.

2. *Lumen Gentium* — Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (21 November 1964). The council's central ecclesiological document. Defined the Church as "the People of God" (Chapter II, which precedes the chapter on the hierarchy — a deliberate shift of emphasis). Taught the doctrine of *collegiality* — that the college of bishops, with and under the pope, shares in the supreme government of the Church. Reaffirmed papal primacy but balanced it with episcopal collegiality. Described the relationship of the Catholic Church to other Christians with the carefully chosen phrase that the Church of Christ "subsists in" (*subsistit in*) the Catholic Church — not simply "is" the Catholic Church. Treated Mary in Chapter VIII rather than in a separate document.

3. *Dei Verbum* — Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (18 November 1965). The most Protestant-friendly document of the council. Taught that Scripture and Tradition are "one sacred deposit of the Word of God" flowing from a single source, Christ. Encouraged Catholics to read the Bible and approved modern biblical-critical methods (within limits). Explicitly said Scripture "teaches firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" — language that both sides have debated ever since.

4. *Gaudium et Spes* — Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (7 December 1965). The council's engagement with the modern world — marriage and family, economic justice, war and peace, culture, science, atheism. Opened with one of the most-quoted lines of Vatican II: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." Condemned "total war" against civilian populations and called for the outlawing of weapons of mass destruction.

Selected other documents of unusual importance:

> • ***Unitatis Redintegratio*** **(Decree on Ecumenism, 1964)** recognized that the Spirit of Christ is at work in non-Catholic churches, called Orthodox churches "sister churches,"

designated Protestant bodies as “ecclesial communities” (a term that signaled Rome’s continuing judgment that Protestantism lacks full ecclesial reality while still affirming real Christian life within it), and committed the Catholic Church to the ecumenical movement. It is the Catholic counterpart to the Edinburgh 1910 inheritance.

• ***Nostra Aetate*** **(Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, 1965)**, a brief, five-section document that explicitly repudiated the charge of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Christ, condemned antisemitism, and spoke respectfully of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. *Nostra Aetate* is widely credited with fundamentally reshaping Catholic-Jewish relations in the decades since and was a major factor in the beatification of Pope John XXIII.

• ***Dignitatis Humanae*** **(Declaration on Religious Liberty, 1965)**, drafted primarily by the American Jesuit **John Courtney Murray**, affirmed that every human person has a civil right to religious liberty, based in human dignity; no civil authority may coerce religious belief. This represented a dramatic development from the 19th-century papal condemnations of religious liberty as indifferentism (Gregory XVI, Pius IX). *Dignitatis Humanae* made it possible, after 1965, for the Catholic Church to embrace the First Amendment posture already embedded in American law since 1791.

PART 5 — THE PERITI — YOUNG THEOLOGIANS WHO SHAPED THE COUNCIL

Each bishop was permitted to bring a *peritus* (expert theological adviser). The council’s real drafting work happened in commissions, and the commissions relied heavily on the periti. A short list of the most influential:

Karl Rahner, S.J. (1904–1984)

GERMAN JESUIT • UNIVERSITY OF INNSBRUCK • MOST-CITED CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Peritus | Transcendental Thomism

Rahner was peritus to Cardinal Franz König of Vienna and the most influential theologian at the council. His pre-council work on the nature of revelation and the universality of grace (including the controversial idea of the "anonymous Christian") shaped multiple documents, especially *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. His 23-volume *Theological Investigations* remains the most-cited body of 20th-century Catholic theology.

Joseph Ratzinger (1927–2022) — later Pope Benedict XVI

GERMAN PRIEST • UNIVERSITY OF BONN, THEN TÜBINGEN, REGENSBURG • PERITUS 1962–1965 • POPE 2005–2013

Peritus | Later Pope

At the opening of Vatican II, Ratzinger was a 35-year-old German priest and dogmatic theology professor at the University of Bonn, not yet internationally known. Cardinal Joseph Frings of Cologne brought him as peritus; Frings's opening-session speeches against curial control of the council (ghost-written by Ratzinger) helped re-shape the council's working methods. Ratzinger's Theological Highlights of Vatican II (1966) became one of the most influential early commentaries. Later he became more cautious about what he saw as an overly broad "spirit of Vatican II" that departed from the actual texts. As Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under John Paul II (1981–2005) and then as Pope Benedict XVI (2005–2013), Ratzinger articulated a "hermeneutic of continuity" over against a "hermeneutic of rupture" in interpreting the council.

Henri de Lubac, S.J. (1896–1991)

FRENCH JESUIT • UNIVERSITY OF LYON • PERITUS • CARDINAL 1983

Peritus | *Nouvelle théologie*

De Lubac's pre-war work *Catholicisme* (1938) and his 1946 *Surnaturel* (on grace and nature) had gotten him silenced by Rome for nearly a decade under Pius XII. When John XXIII named him peritus for Vatican II, it signaled that the *nouvelle théologie* (the "new theology" movement that returned Catholic thought to the Church Fathers and scripture

rather than manualist Thomism) was being rehabilitated. De Lubac, Yves Congar, and Jean Daniélou shaped *Dei Verbum* decisively.

Yves Congar, O.P. (1904–1995)

FRENCH DOMINICAN • ECUMENICAL THEOLOGIAN • PERITUS • CARDINAL 1994

Peritus | Ecumenism

Congar's 1937 *Chrétiens désunis* (*Divided Christendom*) had been a pioneering Catholic ecumenical work. Like de Lubac, he had been silenced under Pius XII and rehabilitated by John XXIII. At Vatican II he was the principal theological architect of *Unitatis Redintegratio* (on ecumenism) and contributed heavily to *Lumen Gentium*. Paul VI made him a cardinal near the end of his life.

Hans Küng (1928–2021)

SWISS PRIEST • TÜBINGEN • PERITUS (YOUNGEST) • LATER STRIPPED OF AUTHORITY TO TEACH CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

Peritus | Later censured

Küng was the youngest peritus at the council (34 when it opened) and taught at Tübingen alongside Ratzinger (the two later became theological opposites). His 1960 *The Council, Reform, and Reunion* had helped prepare the ecumenical climate. Post-council, his 1970 book *Infallible? An Inquiry* challenged the doctrine of papal infallibility. In 1979 Rome revoked his permission to teach as a Catholic theologian, though he retained his priesthood and his tenured chair at Tübingen in ecumenical (not Catholic) theology.

John Courtney Murray, S.J. (1904–1967)

AMERICAN JESUIT • WOODSTOCK COLLEGE, MARYLAND • PERITUS FROM SESSION 2 ONWARD

Religious Liberty | American Constitution

Murray's writings in *America* magazine and his 1960 book *We Hold These Truths* had argued that the American constitutional separation of church and state was theologically

compatible with traditional Catholic teaching. He had been silenced by Roman authority in 1954. Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York brought him as a peritus, and Murray became the primary drafter of *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Declaration on Religious Liberty. He is one of the few Americans whose theological work shaped a council document in a decisive way.

Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani (1890–1979) — the curial resistance

SECRETARY OF THE HOLY OFFICE (LATER CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH) 1959–1968

Curial conservative

Every council has its traditionalist voice, and at Vatican II that voice was Cardinal Ottaviani, Prefect of the Holy Office. His episcopal motto, *Semper Idem* ("always the same"), summarized his view that the council should restate traditional teaching without substantial development. When the original curial schemata were rejected in Session 1, Ottaviani's influence collapsed; he nonetheless fought through all four sessions for more cautious texts. After the council, he co-authored the "Ottaviani Intervention" (1969), a letter to Paul VI criticizing the new Mass. He is important as the reminder that Vatican II was genuinely contested — not a scripted performance.

PART 6 — THE CLOSING AND THE LIFTING OF THE 1054 EXCOMMUNICATIONS

On 7 December 1965, the next-to-last day of the council, an extraordinary event took place simultaneously in Rome and in Constantinople. In the **Basilica of St. Peter**, during the final public session of Vatican II, a joint declaration of Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I was read aloud. At the same hour, in the **Patriarchal Cathedral of St. George in the Phanar** (Constantinople, modern Istanbul), a Greek-language version of the same declaration was read by the Ecumenical Patriarch.

The declaration was carefully framed. It did not "repeal" or "annul" the excommunications of 1054; it said that Paul VI and Athenagoras "*consign to oblivion*" (Latin *oblivione tradere*) the personal excommunications that Cardinal Humbert of Silva Candida and Patriarch Michael Cerularius had exchanged in July 1054. The underlying schism was not healed — Rome and the Orthodox churches remain out of communion to this day — but the personal anathemas were set aside as a gesture of mutual repentance and Christian charity. See **Lesson 2: The Great Schism** for the 1054 story.

Vatican II closed the next day, 8 December 1965, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Paul VI addressed six final messages to specific constituencies — rulers, scholars, artists, women, the poor and suffering, and the young — and declared the council finished. Four years, two popes, sixteen documents, 2,625 bishops, 3,058 speeches.

PART 7 — RECEPTION AND CONTINUING DEBATE

The documents were promulgated in 1965. Their *reception* was another matter entirely, and it has produced sixty years of continuing debate within Catholicism.

> **Liturgical reform and Archbishop Lefebvre.** The *Novus Ordo* Mass (1969) implemented the Council's liturgical reforms. A minority of Catholics found the new rite a substantive rupture with the Latin Mass of the prior 400 years (the Tridentine Mass codified in 1570). **Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre** (1905–1991), a French former missionary bishop, founded the **Society of St. Pius X (SSPX)** in 1970 and in 1988 ordained four bishops in defiance of John Paul II. This brought automatic excommunication (lifted in 2009 by Benedict XVI, though the SSPX remains canonically irregular). Benedict XVI's 2007 motu proprio *Summorum Pontificum* liberalized celebration of the pre-1969 Latin Mass; Pope Francis's 2021 *Traditionis Custodes* partly reversed that liberalization.

> **Liberation theology.** The 1968 meeting of the Latin American bishops' conference (CELAM) at Medellín, Colombia, applied Vatican II's commitments in *Gaudium et Spes* to Latin America's poverty and structural injustice. Out of it emerged *liberation theology*,

associated with Gustavo Gutiérrez (Peru), Leonardo Boff (Brazil), Jon Sobrino (El Salvador), and óscar Romero (San Salvador, assassinated 1980 while celebrating Mass, canonized 2018). The movement was contested by John Paul II and by the Ratzinger CDF (two instructions in the 1980s) but left a lasting imprint on Catholic social teaching in the Global South.

Catholic-Protestant dialogue. Vatican II's ecumenical commitments opened fifty years of formal theological dialogue. The **Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification** (Lutheran World Federation and Vatican, 31 October 1999 — the 482nd anniversary of the 95 Theses) declared a "differentiated consensus" on the central issue of the Reformation. The Methodist World Council joined in 2006, the World Communion of Reformed Churches in 2017, the Anglican Communion in 2016. This does not mean the Reformation is over — major disagreements on authority, sacraments, and Marian doctrine remain — but it means that Luther's central concern is no longer church-dividing in the way it was for 450 years.

The "hermeneutic" debate. Benedict XVI's 2005 Christmas address distinguished a "hermeneutic of rupture" (Vatican II as a new beginning that overrode previous tradition) from a "hermeneutic of reform in continuity" (Vatican II as a development, not a contradiction, of the prior tradition). Every subsequent Catholic debate on Vatican II — liturgical, ecumenical, moral, pastoral — has played out within this hermeneutical frame.

PART 8 — VATICAN II AND PROTESTANTS — AN ASSESSMENT

How should Protestants, and specifically evangelical Protestants in the Noll/Chicago Statement tradition, evaluate Vatican II? A fair assessment has four parts.

1. Welcome the Bible in Catholic hands. *Dei Verbum* mandated the translation of Scripture into all languages and urged all Catholics to read the Bible. The Catholic lectionary revision after 1965 expanded the Scripture read at Mass by roughly 400%.

Catholic biblical scholarship since the council — figures like Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, Luke Timothy Johnson, Scott Hahn — has been a significant service to the whole church. This is a direct answer to the Reformation's charge that Rome kept Scripture from the people.

2. Welcome ecumenical charity. *Unitatis Redintegratio*'s framing of Protestants as genuine Christians, joined to Christ though not in full communion with Rome, is the most generous posture Rome has ever taken toward the Reformation heritage. Protestants should return the charity: Vatican II Catholics are not "just Catholics" in the 16th-century polemical sense — the council meaningfully reshaped the Catholic posture.

3. Maintain honest disagreement. Vatican II did not change the *filioque*, papal infallibility, Mariology, the seven sacraments, transubstantiation, apostolic succession, or the authority of Catholic Tradition alongside Scripture. On the central Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*, Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* did not concede the Protestant position. Honest ecumenism requires honest disagreement.

4. Learn from the witness. John XXIII's courage in opening the windows, the deep biblical engagement of Rahner, de Lubac, and Ratzinger, the theological seriousness of *Dei Verbum*, the moral clarity of *Nostra Aetate* and *Dignitatis Humanae* — these are a witness from which Protestants can learn without compromising our own confessions. Noll's judgment is apt: Vatican II was a turning point for the whole of global Christianity, and Protestants ignore it at the cost of understanding the world we actually live in.

Greek NT (Eph 4:13): μέχρι καταντήσωμεν οἱ πάντες εἰς τὴν ἑνότητα τῆς πίστεως καὶ τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ.

Ephesians 4:13 (ESV): "Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

PRAYER

Father of all truth, you have called your Church to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic — and you have allowed that Church to be fractured by human sin through the centuries. We thank you for the courage of Pope John XXIII, who threw open the windows of a long-isolated house; for the faithful scholarship of the Council's teachers, and for every step that drew closer to the unity Jesus prayed for in the upper room. Teach us to value truth over convenience and charity over suspicion. Where we still disagree, keep us honest. Where the Council gave your whole Church reason to be grateful — the open Bible, the recovery of collegiality, the call to religious liberty, the repudiation of antisemitism — teach us to receive these gifts and give thanks. Bring all your people, in your own time and your own way, to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. In the name of Jesus Christ, our one Lord, Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. John XXIII called Vatican II after three months as pope, without lengthy curial consultation. Was this bold leadership or rash action? When is sudden, decisive action in church life justified?

2. The vernacular Mass (1969) is the single most visible change of Vatican II. Read the ESV of 1 Corinthians 14:6–19 on unintelligible speech in worship. How does Paul's argument bear on the Latin-vs.-vernacular question?

3. *Nostra Aetate* repudiated the charge of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Christ. Read Matthew 27:25 ("His blood be on us and on our children") and Acts 4:27–28 in the context of Romans 11. Who is responsible for the crucifixion, and on what basis should Christians reject Christian antisemitism?

4. *Dignitatis Humanae* affirmed that no civil authority may coerce religious belief. How does this relate to the Westminster Confession's earlier teaching (ch. XX) on liberty of

conscience, and to the First Amendment of 1791?

5. Benedict XVI distinguished "hermeneutic of rupture" from "hermeneutic of reform in continuity" in interpreting Vatican II. How would a similar distinction apply to our reading of the Reformation? Was the Reformation a rupture or a reform in continuity? Both?

FURTHER READING

- Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 3rd ed., Baker Academic, 2012 — Chapter 12: "The Second Vatican Council"
- Norman P. Tanner, *The Councils of the Church: A Short History*, Crossroad, 2001
- John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Harvard/Belknap, 2008 — the standard scholarly narrative
- Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, Liturgical Press, 2012 — a peritus's day-by-day diary
- Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, Paulist, 1966
- George Weigel, *The Irony of Modern Catholic History*, Basic Books, 2019 — conservative Catholic reading
- Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (eds.), *The Catholicity of the Reformation*, Eerdmans, 1996 — Lutheran engagement with Vatican II
- The sixteen Vatican II documents in English: *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, Liturgical Press, revised edition
- *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (LWF/Vatican, 1999) — full text and commentary

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