

4-6-2022

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David Barry OSB

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Recommended Citation

Barry, David. "Is it 60 years ?." *Pastoral Liturgy* 52, no. 3 (2021): 1-4. <https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/pastoral-liturgy/vol52/iss3/2>

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Is it Sixty Years?

By David Barry OSB

Some weeks ago, the editor asked me if I would write a few pages to commemorate the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962. I wondered to myself if it could really be sixty years ago. How many of my readers would remember the event? How many of them were even born by then? Perhaps a review of the lead-up to the opening of the Council might stir memories and help inform those whose personal memory does not go back that far. I begin with one small example of what was happening in the Church.

The writer was 26 years of age when the Second Vatican Council opened on 11 October 1962. Four weeks before, he had been ordained to the subdiaconate by a very new Perth assistant bishop (two-days consecrated), later Bishop of Bunbury, Most Revd. Myles McKeon. The subdiaconate was a non-sacramental major order instituted by the Church. The subdeacon's main function was to assist both priest and deacon in the celebration of High Mass and other liturgical functions. He was charged with chanting the Epistle, the common name for the first reading at Mass, whether it was in fact from a New Testament Epistle (Letter), the Acts of the Apostles, the Apocalypse (The Revelation to John) or from a book of the Old Testament; he also, for some reason swathed in the mists of liturgical history, wore a humeral veil during the Canon (Eucharistic Prayer) under which he held aloft the paten. In those days the priest's host was placed directly on the corporal before and after the consecration; the paten only came back into service at the end of the Canon. As a major order, the subdiaconate bound the recipient to life-long celibacy and to the daily recitation of the Divine Office. The order was abolished for the Latin Rite by Pope St Paul VI in 1972, when the four minor orders: porter (doorkeeper), lector (reader), exorcist and acolyte were reduced to two ministries exercised by lay people called lector and acolyte, and were no longer referred to as minor orders. At this distance the writer feels entitled to apply to himself Paul's words from his Letter to Philemon, 'Paul, an old man' (v.9), and entertain the pious hope that Paul's self-description there also fits in some measure, 'and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus'. The changes mentioned above are just one small illustration of the changes the Church and the writer have been through in these sixty years.

On 25 January 1959, less than three months after assuming the papal office, (ascending the throne of Peter, in the language of that time), Pope St John XXIII, while celebrating the feast of the Conversion of St Paul and praying for Christian unity at the Roman Basilica of St Paul's Outside the Walls, told the group of cardinals with him that he was seriously considering convoking an ecumenical council. The reaction was a stunned and stony silence. Many Catholics, including ecclesiastics, thought that, with papal primacy and papal infallibility defined by the Vatican Council of 1869-70, there was no need for a general council of the Church's bishops, even though the 1917 Code of Canon Law devoted a section to the Ecumenical Council. The very thought of all the work entailed in planning, organizing and holding such a Council, let alone managing and harmonizing the conflicting views that were sure to be held by its members, as to how the Church was faring internally (e.g., pope-bishops, pope-curia, bishops-curia, clergy-laity, religious-bishops, missions, liturgy, priestly formation, and many more); and how the Church was faring in relation to the world of the post-war and the Cold War (e.g., capitalism-communism, democracy-

totalitarianism, materialism and secularism, etc.,) was a daunting prospect, especially for older men looking forward to their retirement.

There was an awkward historical fact to be faced: that Vatican I (as it would now be called) had been interrupted by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, leaving an important part of its agenda, on the episcopate, not dealt with. Despite two world wars, the demise of empires, and the decolonization that was in full swing in Africa, many bishops and theologians outside Rome, and some in Rome, had continued researching, pondering and discussing the nature and role of the episcopal body, which could assume such importance when it came together for an ecumenical council. Canon 228 § 1. said: 'An Ecumenical Council enjoys supreme authority over the whole Church.' That statement was balanced by the same Canon's § 2. 'There is no appeal to an Ecumenical Council against a decision of the Roman Pontiff.'

The new pope was himself an historian, but being already in his late 70s was thought by many to have been elected as a 'stop-gap' pope while a younger candidate for the position was still emerging. Meantime, it was initially thought in Rome that little would happen to upset the *status quo*.

The new pope wanted to hold not only an ecumenical council but also a diocesan synod for the Diocese of Rome itself, where such a synod had not been held for several centuries. The Diocese of Rome was, after all, his diocese. The Roman Synod's primary purpose was to renew Church life at the Church's centre, tidying up aspects of liturgical practice, pastoral work, devotional life, life style and compliance with canon law of clergy, religious and laity alike. The months of preparation for and the week-long holding of it could and did serve another purpose. It showed that it was possible to go about organizing a much bigger and vastly more complex event in the form of the Council.

The Ante-preparatory Commission, appointed by Pope John in 1959 under Cardinal Tardini, Vatican Secretary of State, and consisting mainly of curial cardinals based in Rome, set to work to fulfil the Pope's wishes in the ways they knew well, with the Curia taking control and expecting to remain essentially unchanged. They were in for a surprise when faced with the responses of the world's bishops, especially during the Council. This, too, was to be held at the Vatican – hence its name as the Second Vatican Council.

The Code of Canon Law then in force (to be revised after Vatican II and, after long delays, promulgated in 1983) had a section devoted to an Ecumenical Council which comprised canons 222 to 229. Canon 223 laid down: §. 1. The following are called to a Council and have the right to a deliberative vote: 1st. Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church, even those not bishops; 2nd. Patriarchs, Primate, Archbishops, residential [diocesan] Bishops, even if not yet consecrated; 3rd. Abbots and Prelates *nullius* [i.e., not belonging to a diocese but having pastoral care of a territory equivalent to a diocese]; 4th. The Abbot Primate, Abbot Superior of monastic congregations [called Generals or Presidents], the highest Major Superior of exempt clerical religious orders and congregations, but not those of other orders unless the decree convoking the Council states otherwise. §. 2. Also titular Bishops called to a Council have a deliberative vote, unless this is expressly ruled out in the convocation. §. 3. Theologians and experts in canon law, who happen to be invited to the Council, have only a consultative vote.

All those who had a deliberative vote had to be consulted by the Ante-preparatory Commission as to questions and matters they regarded as requiring consideration by the Council. When this was done, from the mass of material sent in a synthesis was made and

the coordinating Central Commission adopted a process of selection so as to draw up the agenda of the Council, which had to receive the Pope's approval.

One of John XXIII's most earnest hopes was that the Council would promote the reunion of Christendom – divided between the Catholic Churches in union with Rome and the Orthodox Churches (Greek, Coptic, Russian, Serbian, Ukrainian, etc.) and non-Catholic Oriental Churches and the churches and ecclesial communities stemming from the Reformation – by endorsing the ecumenical movement within the Catholic Church and encouraging its active participation in the broader movement launched by the World Council of Churches. To this end a special body was created, known as the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, under the respected scripture scholar and former Rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, the German Cardinal, Augustin Bea. The Secretariat invited representatives from the churches and ecclesial communities mentioned above to attend the Council as Observer-delegates. Present for, but not taking part in, the Council's debates or voting, the Observers were provided with the texts issued to the Council Fathers, and could make observations and comments on these and the proceedings which could then be fed back through the Secretariat and the Council Presidents to the assembled Fathers.

Pope John and the world's bishops had other concerns, many of which survived the selection process to find a place on the agenda. In mid-1959 the Pope issued an Encyclical setting out the purpose of the Council. In mid-1960 there was a *Motu Proprio* announcing the appointment of the Preparatory Commission to carry the work forward. On Christmas Day 1961, Pope John signed the bull formally convoking the Council. On 2 February 1962 came the *Motu Proprio* announcing that the Council would convene on 11 October that year. All this time there were many people employed in attending to the requirements of getting over 2,000 bishops and their greatly varying body of aides (secretaries, theological advisers, etc.) to Rome, from places adjoining Rome to isolated places at the ends of the earth. Many bishops could manage this with no difficulty, but many others needed as much assistance as possible to follow very long and complex itineraries to reach Rome. The same differences existed with regard to accommodation. Those who could manage did; for those without such resources arrangements had to be made for accommodation in church buildings (seminaries, colleges, guesthouses conducted by religious sisters, etc.) or hotels. Organizing or facilitating transport from different places in Rome for the Council sessions in St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican; plans made for and building of the seating for the bishops in the naves and transepts of St Peter's, seminarians rostered to act as 'runners' for the monsignori keeping an eye out for the smooth proceedings of each Council session, and to count the ballots for the Council Fathers' votes. It was a busy and exciting time for many people in Rome.

After the solemn ceremonies marking the opening of the Council on 11 October 1962, and various addresses from Pope John to the Council, the Diplomatic Corps and Special Missions to the Council, to journalists and to Observer-delegates, ten Conciliar Commissions took over from the Preparatory Commissions; they were composed of sixteen members elected by the Council and eight appointed by the Pope. The President of each was a Cardinal appointed by the Pope. These Commissions were tasked with presenting draft proposals (technically called *schemata* – the singular is *schema*) for what would become the Council's decrees and constitutions; they then considered amendments proposed by Council members in the debates on the drafts. All of these Commissions were assisted by *periti*: expert theologians, scripture scholars, canon lawyers and others appointed or available for consultation when needed. They would make an important contribution to the *schemata*, to analysing the suggested amendments and to the final outcome of the whole process. Less than two weeks into the actual Council, after the Conciliar Commissions had been formed,

the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity was granted status equivalent to that of the Conciliar Commissions.

Pope John proposed to the Council for consideration and amendment a Message to the World to be issued in its name. This was duly done on 20 October. For the rest, the Pope followed the Council's proceedings at a distance, only rarely intervening, going about his usual tasks: appointing bishops, apostolic delegates and nuncios, receiving the credentials of newly appointed ambassadors to the Holy See, holding his weekly general audience for visitors to the Vatican. He issued a new constitution on the procedures to be followed on the death of a pope. He was to die on 3 June 1963. Fortunately, his successor, Paul VI, who as Cardinal-Archbishop Montini of Milan had followed the Council's preparation and the first Session with keen and intelligent interest, determined that the Council should resume for the Second Session in October as originally planned. A great deal of work was still needed to carry forward Pope John's vision for the *aggiornamento* and renewal of his beloved Church in the service of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even sixty years later, that remains a work in process.

To refresh my memory, I have consulted

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