



# The Holy See

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## **ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II TO THE CONFERENCE STUDYING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL**

*Sunday, 27 February 2000*

*Your Eminences,*

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*1. I am very pleased to meet you at the end of the conference that has been held these days in the Vatican on the truly demanding and stimulating theme of the implementation of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. I greet Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, whom I thank for his address on behalf of you all. My greeting also goes to the Prefects of the dicasteries and the other Cardinals, as well as to the Archbishops and Bishops whose presence highlights the importance of this meeting. Lastly, I greet the experts who have come here from various parts of the world to contribute their own experience and reflections. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council has been a gift of the Spirit to his Church. For this reason it remains a fundamental event not only for understanding the Church's history at this end of the century, but first and foremost for exploring the abiding presence of the risen Christ beside his Bride in the course of world events. Through the Council Assembly, which saw Bishops come to the See of Peter from all over the world, it was possible to note how the patrimony of 2,000 years of faith has been preserved in its original authenticity.

2. With the Council, *the Church first had an experience of faith*, as she abandoned herself to God without reserve, as one who trusts and is certain of being loved. It is precisely this act of abandonment to God which stands out from an objective examination of the Acts. Anyone who wished to approach the Council without considering this interpretive key *would be unable to penetrate its depths*. Only from a faith perspective can we see the Council event as a gift whose still hidden wealth we must know how to mine. At this juncture the significant words of St Vincent of Lérins come to mind: "The Church of Christ, the concerned and careful guardian of the dogmas entrusted to her, never changes anything in them; she removes nothing and adds nothing; she does not cut what is necessary and does not add what is unnecessary; she never loses what is hers and never appropriates what belongs to others; but with all zeal, she attends faithfully and wisely to the ancient dogmas and desires only to perfect and hone those which had in ancient times been given an initial form and first outline, to strengthen and reinforce those which are already prominent and developed, and to preserve those which have already been confirmed and defined" (*Commonitorium*, XXIII).3. The Council Fathers were faced with a *real*

*challenge*. It involved the effort to understand more deeply, at a time of rapid changes, the nature of the Church and her relationship to the world, in order to provide a suitable "aggiornamento". We accepted this challenge - I too was a Council Father - and responded to it by seeking a more coherent understanding of the faith. What we achieved at the Council was to show that if *contemporary man* wants to understand himself completely, he too *needs Jesus Christ and his Church*, which continues in the world as a sign of unity and communion. The Church, the People of God journeying on the paths of history, is truly *the perennial witness to a prophetic message*. While she attests to the newness of the promise, she makes its fulfilment evident. The God who has promised is the faithful God who fulfils the word he has given. Is this not what the Tradition going back to the Apostles enables us to affirm every day? Are we not a continual process of transmitting the saving Word that offers man, wherever he may be, the meaning of his life? The mission of the Church, as the trustee of the revealed Word, is to proclaim it to everyone. This prophetic mission means taking responsibility for making visible what the Word proclaims. We must therefore put into effect the visible signs of salvation, so that the message we bring may be understood in its integrity. Christians cannot delegate to others the task of taking the Gospel to the world. It is a mission that involves their own responsibility as believers and followers of Christ! The Council wished to restore this fundamental truth to all believers.

4. In order to mark the first 20 years of the Second Vatican Council, I convoked an Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985. Its goal was to celebrate, examine and further the Council's teaching. In their analysis the Bishops spoke of the "lights and shadows" that had marked the post-conciliar period. For this reason, I wrote in the Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* that "an examination of conscience must also consider the reception given to the Council" (n. 36). Today I thank all of you who have come here from many parts of the world to answer that request. The work you have undertaken in these days has shown how present and effective the Council's teaching is in the life of the Church. Certainly, it requires ever deeper understanding. However, within this dynamic the genuine intention of the Council Fathers must not be lost: indeed, it must be recovered by *overcoming biased and partial interpretations* which have prevented the newness of the Council's Magisterium from being expressed as well as possible. The Church has always known *the rules* for a correct hermeneutic of the contents of dogma. These rules are set *within the fabric of faith* and not outside it. To interpret the Council on the supposition that it marks a break with the past, when in reality *it stands in continuity with the faith of all times*, is a definite mistake. What has been believed by "everyone, always and everywhere" is the authentic newness that enables every era to perceive the light that comes from the word of God's Revelation in Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> The Council was an act of love: "A great, threefold act of love" - as Pope Paul VI said in his opening address at the Council's fourth session - an act of love "for God, for the Church, for humanity" (*Insegnamenti*, vol. III [1965], p. 475). The effectiveness of that act has not been exhausted at all: it continues to work through the rich dynamic of its teachings. The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* put *the Word of God at the heart of the Church's life* with renewed awareness. This centrality stems from a more vivid perception of the unity of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. The Word of God, which is kept alive by the faith of the holy people of believers under the guidance of the Magisterium, also asks each of us to accept our own responsibility for preserving intact the process of transmission. So that the primacy of the Father's Revelation to humanity may endure with all the force of its radical newness, theology must first become a coherent tool for understanding it. In the Encyclical *Fides et ratio* I wrote: "As an understanding of Revelation, theology has always had to respond in different historical moments to the demands of different cultures, in order then to mediate the content of faith to those cultures in a coherent and conceptually clear way. Today, too, theology faces a dual task. On the one hand, it must be increasingly committed to the task entrusted to it by the Second Vatican Council, the task of renewing its specific methods in order to serve evangelization more effectively.... On the other hand, theology must look

to the ultimate truth which Revelation entrusts to it, never content to stop short of that goal" (n. 92).

6. What the Church believes is what she makes the object of her prayer. The Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* explained the premises of a liturgical life that would give God the true worship owed him by the people called to exercise the priesthood of the New Covenant. The liturgy must allow every member of the faithful to *enter deeply into the mystery* to grasp the beauty of praising the Triune God. The liturgy, in fact, is an anticipation on earth of the praise that the hosts of the blessed give God in heaven. At every liturgical celebration, therefore, the participants should be given the possibility of a foretaste, albeit under the veil of faith, of some of the sweetness that will flow from contemplating God in paradise. For this reason, every minister, conscious of the responsibility he has to all the people entrusted to him, must faithfully maintain respect for the sacredness of the rite and grow in his understanding of what he celebrates.<sup>7</sup> "The time has come when the truth about the Church of Christ must be explored, set in order and expressed", Pope Paul VI said in his message at the opening of the Council's second session (*Insegnamenti*, vol. I [1963], pp. 173-174). With these words the unforgettable Pontiff identified the Council's principal task. The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* was a true hymn of praise to the beauty of Christ's Bride. In those pages we brought to completion the doctrine expressed by the First Vatican Council and *we sealed it for a renewed study of the Church's mystery*. *Communio* is the foundation on which the Church's reality is based. It is a *koinonia* that has its source in the very mystery of the Triune God and extends to all the baptized, who are therefore called to full unity in Christ. This communion becomes evident in the various institutional forms in which the ecclesial ministry is carried out and in the role of the Successor of Peter as the visible sign of the unity of all believers. Everyone knows that the Second Vatican Council enthusiastically made *the "ecumenical" yearning* its own. The movement of encounter and clarification, which has been carried out with all the baptized brethren, *is irreversible*. It is the power of the Spirit who calls all believers to obedience, so that unity may be an effective source of evangelization. The communion that the Church lives with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is a sign of how brothers and sisters are called to live together.

8. "The Council, which has given us a rich ecclesiological doctrine, has organically linked its teaching about the Church with its teaching about man's vocation in Christ": I said this in my homily for the opening of the Synod of Bishops on 24 November 1985 (*Insegnamenti*, vol. VIII, 2, p. 1371). The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, which dealt with the fundamental questions which every person is called to answer, repeats to us today words which have lost none of their timeliness: *"It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear"* (n. 22). These words are especially dear to me and I wanted to propose them again in the fundamental passages of my Magisterium. Here we find the true synthesis to which the Church must always look in her dialogue with the people of today as with those of every other age: she knows that her message is a fruitful synthesis of the human being's expectation and of God's response to him. In the Incarnation of the Son of God, which this Jubilee is meant to celebrate on the 2,000th anniversary of the event, man's call becomes obvious. He never loses his dignity when he abandons himself in faith to Christ, because his humanity is then raised to participation in the divine life.

*Christ is the truth that never fades*: in him God reaches out to every human being, and every human being can see God in him (cf. *Jn* 14: 9-10). No encounter with the world will be fruitful, if the believer ceases to fix his gaze on the mystery of the Incarnation of God's Son. The emptiness that many people feel as they face the question about the reason for life and death, about human destiny and the meaning of suffering can only be filled by the message of the truth that is Jesus Christ. The human heart will always be "restless" until it can rest in him, the true refreshment for all who "labour and are heavy laden" (*Mt* 11: 28).<sup>9</sup> The "little seed" which John XXIII planted "with anxious mind and hand" (Apostolic

Constitution *Humanae salutis*, 25 December 1961) in the Basilica of St Paul-Outside-the-Walls on 25 January 1959, when he announced his intention to convoke the 21st Ecumenical Council in the Church's history, has grown and become a tree which now spreads its majestic and mighty branches in the Vineyard of the Lord. It has already produced many fruits in its 35 years of life, and it will produce many more in the years to come. *A new season is dawning before our eyes: it is time for deep reflection on the Council's teaching, time to harvest all that the Council Fathers sowed and the generation of recent years has tended and awaited.* The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council was *truly a prophetic message for the Church's life; it will continue to be so for many years in the third millennium which has just begun.* The Church, rich in the eternal truths entrusted to her, will still speak to the world, proclaiming that Jesus Christ is the one true Saviour of the world: yesterday, today and for ever!

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