

One might wonder what happened at Vatican II that brought about such a change in dealing with the Protestant Reformation. Why was it now so important to dialogue with “heretics?” Simply put the Holy Spirit happened, Pope John XXIII happened, and the horrors of World War II happened. In order to appreciate the call of Vatican II on ecumenism we need to appreciate Church Teaching and Divine Revelation.

I meet some people who tell me the Pope said this or that, only to discover they are quoting a Pope long dead. Such people fail to realize that Church Teaching is a living tradition that is clarified and defined by subsequent magisterial teaching. If this weren't so one would today justify slavery using Church documents from the 19th century. One errors in arresting their understanding of papal authority with just one Pope. The voice of Peter echoes through the unbroken succession of the Vicar of Christ. Our Catholic teaching holds to the continuity of papal teaching and as such is refined by each subsequent Pope.

When Pope John XXIII called Vatican II he exercised one of the sovereign rights of the papacy. In doing so he summoned the Bishops from around the world to this great council and opened the window to the reality of the Church and God's call for today.

Vatican II and the teachings of the Church since Vatican II are authoritative. Those who reject this are in error. The Bishop in his diocese holds proper canonical authority and in union with the Pope stands in apostolic succession as Shepherd of his flock. Those who reject this truth reject the bond of charity and unity; they are schismatic. It is very important that the laity have a proper understanding of this and a genuine respect for the office of Bishop and his brother priests. There are a number of lay organizations that work to undermine the Catholic Church, individuals who presume to be bishops in their own right. This is the same mindset that gave rise to the Protestant reformers. The Church's magisterial teaching is very clear on this and those who undermine the Church do so at great peril. As to ecumenism it is paramount that Catholics respect those who teach with “legitimate ecclesiastical authority” and not set out as mavericks and rouges with their own personal agenda.

The Church's teaching on Revelation (*Dei verbum*) makes it clear that God's “treasure of revelation” continues even to this day in the mystery of the Church. “It is for the bishops” the document declares, “with whom the apostolic doctrine resides’ suitably to instruct the faithful entrusted to them in the correct sense of the divine books, especially the New Testament, and in particular the Gospels” (n. 25). In light of the magisterial role of the bishops it is important to note that the Decree on Ecumenism flowed from the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*). The decree is a powerful testimony to the ongoing revelation of God in the Mystery of the Church. It begins:

The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ, all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but they differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ were divided! Certainly, such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature. (n.1)

Here we find the call to ecumenism of Vatican II. Its reasons ought to challenge all Christians. (1) Our present disunity contradicts the will of Christ. (2) Such disunity is a cause of scandal. (3) Such disunity undermines our preaching of the Gospel.

The call of Vatican II for a restoration of unity involves the whole Church, both the faithful and clergy alike (n.5). We all must do our part and must learn what the Catholic Church teaches and what we are obligated to do in this effort. The call of Vatican II requires a maturity of faith and our responsibly educating ourselves to know the Catholic Faith. The

laity, especially, need to study the Church's teaching on ecumenism and to respect those given legitimate ecclesiastical authority. This is the call of Vatican II and in Part IV we will look at the Church's teaching on ecumenism.