

VATICAN COUNCIL II

Vatican Council II was the twenty-first general, or ecumenical, council of the Church (October 11, 1962–December 8, 1965). The council is regarded by many as the most significant religious event since the sixteenth-century Reformation and certainly as the most important of the twentieth century.

Educationis), the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*), and the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*).

Constitutions touch substantively upon doctrinal and universal pastoral matters that pertain to the very essence, or “constitution,” of the Church. Decrees and declarations are directed at practical questions or specific pastoral concerns. As such, these latter presuppose the doctrine, theology, and pastoral directives of the constitutions.

Among the distinctive teachings of Vatican II, by contrast with some common beliefs of the pre-Vatican II era, are the following:

1. The Church is, first and foremost, a mystery, or sacrament, and not primarily an organization or institution.
2. The Church is the whole People of God, not just the hierarchy, clergy, and religious.
3. The Church's mission includes action on behalf of justice and peace and is not limited to the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments.
4. The Church includes all Christians and is not limited exclusively to the Catholic Church.
5. The Church is a communion, or college, of local churches, which are not simply administrative subdivisions of the Church universal.
6. The Church is an eschatological community; it is not yet the kingdom of God.
7. The lay apostolate is a direct participation in the mission of the Church and not simply a sharing in the mission of the hierarchy.
8. There is a hierarchy of truths; not all official teachings of the Church are equally binding or essential to the integrity of Catholic faith.
9. God uses other Christian churches and non-Christian religions in offering salvation to all humankind; the Catholic Church is not the only means of salvation.
10. The dignity of the human person and the freedom of the act of faith are the foundation of religious liberty for all, over against the view that “error has no rights.”

See also separate entries on each of the council documents and Bea, Augustine; constitution, conciliar; declaration, conciliar; decree, conciliar; ecumenical council; John XXIII [Angelo Roncalli]; Murray, John Courtney; Ottaviani, Alfredo; Paul VI; Spellman, Francis Joseph; Suenens, Leo Josef.

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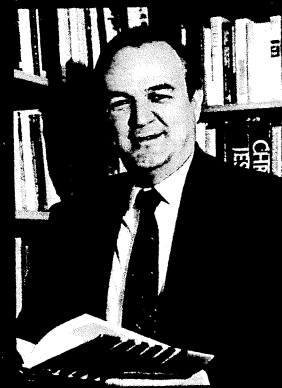
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sacraments, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Peter, Paul, Augustine, and Aquinas to prayer and Christian spirituality, Catholicism in the United States, women in the Church, and Vatican II.

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