

## Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

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Volume 42 *After 50 Years: The Living Spirit of Vatican II*

Article 3

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9-1-2012

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### Recommended Citation

O'Malley, John W. (2012) "The Council's Spirit: Vatican II: The Time for Reconciliation," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 42, Article 3.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol42/iss1/3>



# The Council's Spirit

Vatican II:  
The Time for  
Reconciliation

By John W. O'Malley, S.J.

**W**hen the Second Vatican Council ended almost fifty years ago, it was clear something of great importance had happened. Its impact hit every Catholic most immediately in that the liturgy began to be celebrated in the vernacular, with the priest turned to face the congregation. But there was much more. For the first time in history Catholics were encouraged to foster friendly relations with non-Catholic Christians and even to pray with them. The church entered into formal dialogues with other churches and revisited doctrines that had divided the churches for centuries. Catholics in the United States rejoiced that the council had for the first time affirmed the principle of religious liberty and had officially repudiated all forms of anti-Semitism.

We in Jesuit universities have grown so accustomed to changes the council directly or indirectly brought about in our institutions that we take them for granted and forget how groundbreaking they were. Among them perhaps the most palpable was the transformation of the former religion department into a theology or religious studies department. The change was much more than cosmetic, much more than a change of nomenclature. It entailed a radical rethinking of the method and purpose of that department.

Whereas before the council the religion curriculum consisted, for the most part, in Catholic apologetics, it now took on a much wider scope. Until then, moreover, the department was made up entirely of Jesuits. It was inconceivable that a non-Catholic might teach in it. Yet, within less than a decade after the council, the situation had completely changed. Philosophy departments underwent analogous changes, which, among other things, resulted in more attention to modern philosophies. But the whole university was affected by the council, as reflected in its hiring and admission policies, in how it presented itself to the public, and in how it tried to relate more effectively to American culture while retaining a distinctive identity.

Important though these developments were in themselves, they do not singly or collectively capture the sense pervasive at the time of the council that something further happened, something of which these particulars were but manifestations—a further something that explained the particulars and fitted them into a larger pattern. The council's import included but also transcended its specific enactments.

(Left) The Vatican II fathers of the church.

To express this larger import, people began to speak of “the spirit of the council.” They did not mean to imply that the “spirit” was at odds with the “letter” of the council's documents, but, rather, that, while it built on the letter, it rose to a higher level of generalization. It fit the particulars into a coherent and consistent framework.

Although the distinction between spirit and letter is venerable in the Christian tradition and is, indeed, a distinction often made in everyday speech, it is tricky and susceptible to manipulation. *Your* spirit of the council may not be *my* spirit of the council. Yet, if careful attention is paid to the “letter” of the council's documents—that is, to certain basic orientations found in them—it is possible to uncover that “something further” denoted by “spirit.”

In comparison with other councils, a truly special characteristic of Vatican II is not only that such orientations pervaded the council but also that they surfaced so early in it and persisted to the end. They are a set of issues-under-the issues or issues-across-the-issues that imbue the council with a truly remarkable coherence. In other words, the documents of Vatican II are not a grab-bag of discreet units but, taken together, they constitute a single, though complex, testament.

Among the issues was the problem of change in an institution whose identity is based on proclaiming in unadulterated fashion a teaching announced long ago. Another issue was the relationship between the central authority of the papacy and others in the church, especially the bishops but also priests, theologians, and the laity itself. One of the most immediately practical, however, was how to deal with realities that the church had traditionally considered anathema. Could and should the church seek reconciliation with them?

On the day the council opened, October 11, 1962, Pope John XXIII delivered a remarkable address in which he tried to provide the council with its orientation. In it the pope distanced the council from the scolding and suspicious attitude toward “the world” that had pervaded official Catholic thinking for over a century, as if everything modern was bad. The church, according to the pope, should not simply wring its hands and deplore what was wrong but engage with the world so as to work together for a positive outcome. It should “make use of the medicine of mercy rather than of severity” in dealing with everyone. It should eschew as far as possible the language of condemnation.

Although Pope John did not use the word reconciliation that was what he was speaking of. He asked for

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## He wanted to end the siege mentality that had gripped Catholic officialdom in the wake of the French Revolution and the subsequent seizure of the Papal States, a mentality that feared all things modern

reconciliation with “the world” —with the world as it is, not as it was supposed to be according to the fantasy of an idealized “Christian Middle Ages” that still held many Catholics in thrall. He wanted to end the siege mentality that had gripped Catholic officialdom in the wake of the French Revolution and the subsequent seizure of the Papal States, a mentality that feared all things modern.

John XXIII had a wider experience of “the world” than any pope in modern times. As a young priest he had served as an orderly and chaplain in the Italian army during World War I. He had spent decades as a papal diplomat in either predominantly Orthodox or predominantly Muslim populations, and he performed well as nuncio in Paris at a most delicate moment for the church in post-war France. Then, finally, he served with distinction as bishop (technically, patriarch) of Venice.

We should not be surprised, therefore, that at the crucial moment of the council's opening he introduced the theme of reconciliation. It was not a new theme with him. Two and a half years earlier in 1959, when he announced his intention of convoking a council, he gave as one of the council's two principal aims: the extension of a “cordial invitation to the faithful of the separated communities to participate with us in this quest for unity and peace, for which so many long in all parts of the world.” His invitation found response from other Christian bodies that was as positive as it was unanticipated, and it resulted in the extraordinary phenomenon of the presence at the council of sometimes as many as a hundred or more representatives of the Protestant and Orthodox churches. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

### *The decrees*

Thus, even before the council opened, reconciliation had begun to take hold as an issue and goal. During the council its scope broadened. In the first document that the council passed, the decree on the sacred liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, the council asked the church to break out of its Eurocentrism and to admit other cultures as partners. The Catholic church had, of course, consistently presented itself as catholic in the sense of embracing all peoples and cultures. Although there was considerable truth in that claim, the church had been so strongly imprinted with the culture of the West as to

seem identical with it. With the voyages of discovery of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries came the shock of large populations and altogether different cultures that had not heard of Christianity. The discoveries severely challenged the claim of universality.

A vigorous program of evangelization followed, which in virtually every case entailed the simultaneous introduction of Western traditions and values, as if these were inseparable from the gospel message. There were important exceptions, as with the Jesuits in China led by Matteo Ricci, who in respect for their Chinese hosts tried in their life-style and mind-sets to become Chinese. They even won permission to celebrate mass in Chinese and published a Chinese missal.

**T**he Holy See eventually condemned the Jesuit experiment. Through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Catholic missionaries as well as Protestant saw themselves as bearing “the white man's burden” of bringing Western ways to their flocks. It was this approach the council gently but firmly repudiated. The liturgy decree set the council on its course when it affirmed, “The Church cultivates and fosters the qualities and talents of different races and nations” and admits their customs “into the liturgy itself, provided they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit.” In its subsequent documents the council repeatedly took up the theme of reconciliation with cultures other than Western, most notably in the decree on the church's missionary activity.

Of course, the most obvious and direct act of reconciliation was the decree on ecumenism. Its opening line affirms, “The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council.” It bids Catholics to respect the beliefs of those not in communion with the church, and sets in motion a process of respectful dialogue with them. These steps might seem cautious and minimal, but they constituted a dramatic course reversal from condemning all other Christians and counseling Catholics to avoid, as far as possible, all contact with them. After the wars of religion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, religious differences eventually got recognized as inappropriate, name-calling, but deep antagonisms had persisted until the eve of the council.

Remarkable about the decree on ecumenism is how easily the council accepted it. The same was not true for the decree on non-Christian religions, *Nostra aetate*. Few other documents had a rougher course. It originated with John XXIII's deep concern about anti-Semitism and Christian responsibility regarding the Holocaust. During World War II he has used his diplomatic post in Istanbul to help Jewish refugees flee Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary, even prompting Hungarian nuns to issue phony baptismal certificates to save Jews from certain death in the Nazi concentration camps.

**I**n its early drafts, therefore, the decree dealt exclusively with the church's relationship to the Jews. Objections were raised against it on theological grounds—were not the Jews an accursed race?—but also on political grounds. It made the Arab states nervous because it seemed to be a step toward Vatican recognition of the state of Israel, which up to that point the Vatican had not done.

*Nostra aetate* eventually won approval, but only after it was expanded to include other non-Christian believers, most notably the Muslims. In fact, it treats the Muslims at much greater length than any of the others, including the Jews. No longer were they “our eternal and godless enemy,” as Pope Paul III described them in 1542 in his bull convoking the Council of Trent, but people deserving respect, who shared with Christians many of the same religious traditions going back to the common patriarch, Abraham.

Few decrees of the council seem timelier in our post 9/11 era. *Nostra aetate* sounds a note of reason and compassion. It is the diametrical opposite of hate-inspired polemics, and it invests Catholics with a special role as agents of reconciliation in the present tense international situation. By extension it invests all those associated with Jesuit universities with that same agency.

The council's final document was entitled *Gaudium et Spes* or in English “The Church in the Modern World.” Although the church-world relationship was not at all on the official agenda when the council opened, it had clearly emerged by the end of the council's first year. No wonder, for it, in fact, took up the theme of reconciliation with the modern world that John XXIII had proposed in his address opening the council. The title is significant: not the church *for* the modern world; not the church *against* the modern world; not the church either *above* or *below* the modern world, but simply *in* the modern world.

What the document recognizes and promotes is what in fact has always taken place but never before so straightforwardly professed—the reciprocal dependency of church and world. “The church, which is both a visible organization and a spiritual community, travels the same

journey as does all humanity and shares the same earthly lot with it.” The church is to act as a leaven, but it also receives from the world as well as gives to it. Obvious though such an affirmation might seem, it was virtually unprecedented in official church documents, most especially since rampant suspicion of all things modern began to dominate Catholic officialdom in the nineteenth century. By being addressed to all men and women of good will, whether believers or not, the document extended the reconciliation theme to its ultimate limits.

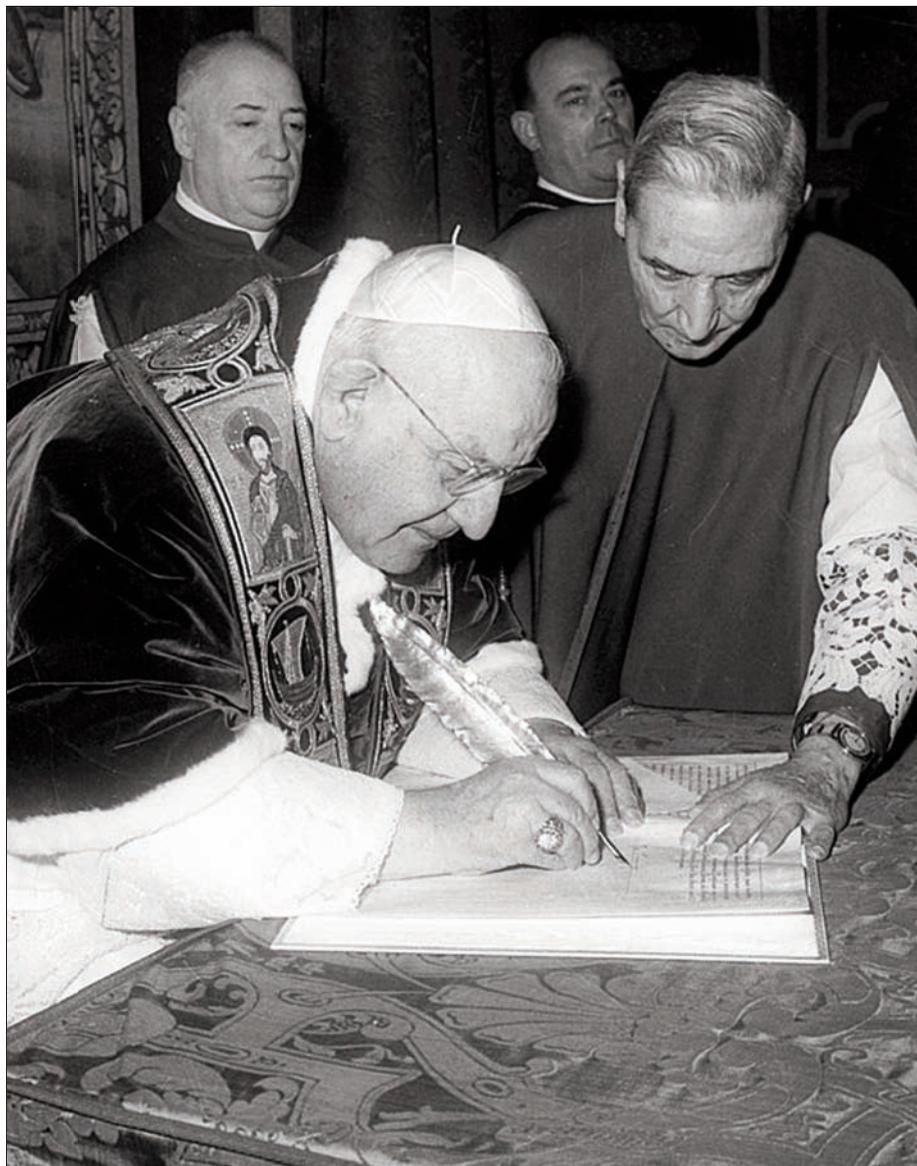
John XXIII's speech opening the council sounded the theme of reconciliation but in an understated and altogether generic way. The council took it up as a fundamental orientation and imbued it with a remarkable scope. It extended reconciliation to the church's relationship to non-Western cultures, to non-Catholic Christians, to non-Christian believers, and, in its final document, to “all humanity.”

But there is an even more pervasive level at which the theme operated so as to substantiate the intrinsic relationship between spirit and letter. We must return to John's opening address. When he asked the council to refrain from condemnations, he introduced the question of the style of discourse the council was to adopt. On the very first working day of the council, Cardinal Joseph Frings of Cologne explicitly brought that question to the floor of the council. A number of other prelates subsequently took it up. By the end of the council's first year, the question had become a major issue, but it was already on the way to a remarkable resolution.

When early in the second year the council found its voice, its style of discourse, it spoke through a literary form and a vocabulary that was new for councils. Instead of issuing laws, which almost invariably had penalties attached for non-observance, the council decided to hold up ideals to inspire inner appropriation. This shift in form required adopting a vocabulary that was new to councils, in which the theme of reconciliation, though expressed in a variety of terms, emerged with dominant force.

Instead of words consisting primarily in anathemas and verdicts of guilty-as-charged, the council spoke most characteristically in words of friendship, partnership, kinship, reciprocity, dialogue, and collegiality. Such words occur too frequently and too consistently in the documents of the council to be dismissed as mere window-dressing or casual asides. They imbue Vatican II with a literary and, hence, thematic unity unique among

## ***Nostra aetate* sounds a note of reason and compassion**



Pope John XXIII signs the papal bull convoking the Second Vatican Council on December 25, 1961. CNS Photo.

church councils. They express an overall orientation and coherence in values and outlook. They are central to understanding the council.

The values the words express are anything but new to the Christian tradition. They are as common in Christian discourse, or more common, than their opposite numbers. But they are not common in councils, nor did they, up to that time, play such a determinative role in official church pronouncements. Vatican II did not invent the words or imply they were not already fundamental in a Christian way of life. Yet, taken as a whole, they convey the sweep of a newly formulated and forcefully specified way of proceeding that Vatican II held up for contemplation, admiration, and actualization. That way of proceeding was the most pervasive of the issues-under-the-issues or the issues-across-the-issues at Vatican II. It was the essence of the “spirit of Vatican II.”

### *How it changed us*

A simple pairing of the model implied by this vocabulary with the model it wanted to replace or balance conveys the vocabulary's import: from commands to invitations, from laws to ideals, from threats to promises, from coercion to conscience, from monologue to dialogue, from ruling to serving, from exclusion to inclusion, from hostility to friendship, from rivalry to partnership, from fault-finding to appreciation, and from behavior-modification to inner appropriation of values.

In promoting the values implicit in this model, the council did not deny the validity of the contrasting values. No institution can, for instance, be simply open-ended. Sooner or later decision is required. No institution can be all-inclusive and not in the process lose its identity. Certainly, no institution whose very reason for existence is proclaiming the gospel message can be so committed to reconciliation as to compromise that message. Yet, what is more constitutive of the message than love of neighbor?

The council was a rich and complex event, in which it is easy to get lost in the trees and lose sight of the forest. If it is important to reflect on how the council changed us, it is even more important to grasp the new orientation the council envisaged for the church and, in so doing, for every Catholic. As I have been trying to show, however, that orientation extends far beyond Catholics, and it thus affects

everybody associated with Jesuit universities, no matter what the individual's religious beliefs or non-beliefs might be. It affects the institution itself, in its policies and in its way of proceeding.

The council issued a message that was bold yet soft-spoken. It was meant to find resonance in the hearts of all persons sensitive to the call of conscience that bids us avoid evil and do good. In a world increasingly wracked with discord, hate-spewing blogs, pre-emptive strikes, war and the threat of war, the result was a message that could not be more timely. It was a message counter-cultural while at the same time responsive to the deepest human yearnings. Peace on earth. Good will to all. ■