The **Second Vatican Council**, or **Vatican II**, was an ecumenical council of the [Catholic](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ca/Catholicism) church opened under [Pope John XXIII](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/po/Pope_John_XXIII) in [1962](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/19/1962) and closed under [Pope Paul VI](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/po/Pope_Paul_VI) in [1965](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/19/1965).

The most visible result of the council for most Catholics was the changes in how church sacraments were practiced, and the use of vernacular languages for the Mass. The council also brought less visible, but fundamental changes in how the [Catholic](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ca/Catholicism) Church saw itself and its relationship with other faiths and the world. It has often been cited as the most significant event in Catholicism in the 20th century.

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**Background**

The [First Vatican Council](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/fi/First_Vatican_Council) had been held nearly a century before, but had been cut short by the effects of the Franco-Prussian War. As a result, only discussions on the role of the Papacy were completed, with needed examination of pastoral and dogmatic issues concerning the whole church left undone.

[Pope John XXIII](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/po/Pope_John_XXIII) gave notice of his intention to address these issues less than three months after his election in [1959](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/19/1959). While in many messages over the next three years he expressed his intentions in formal detail, one of the best known images is of Pope John, when asked why the Council was needed, opened a window and reportedly said *"I want to throw open the windows of the Church so that we can see out and the people can see in."*

**Sessions**

2,908 persons (referred to as Council Fathers) were entitled to seats at the council. This included all bishops, as well as many superiors of male religious orders. 2,540 took part in the opening session, making it the largest gathering in any council in church history. Attendance varied in later sessions from 2,100 to over 2,300. In addition, a varying number of *periti* ([Latin](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/la/Latin) for "experts") were available for theological consultation -- a group that turned out to have a major influence as the council went forward. 17 Orthodox and Protestant denominations were represented by observers.

**First Period ([October 11](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/oc/October_11" \o "October 11) to** [**December 8**](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/de/December_8)**,** [**1962**](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/19/1962)**)**

The council formally opened in a public session which included the Council Fathers as well as representatives of 86 governments and international bodies. In the first general session, the bishops voted to *not* proceed as planned by the curial preparatory commissions, but to first consult among themselves, both in national and regional groups, as well as in more informal gatherings. This resulted in a reworking of the structure of the council commissions, as well as changing the priority of issues considered.

Issues considered during the sessions included liturgy, mass communications, the Eastern Rite churches, and the nature of revelation. Most notably, the schema on revelation was rejected by a majority of bishops, and Pope John intervened to require its rewriting.

After adjournment, work began on preparations for the sessions scheduled for [1963](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/19/1963). However these halted after the death of [Pope John XXIII](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/po/Pope_John_XXIII) on [June 3](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ju/June_3), [1963](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/19/1963). [Pope Paul VI](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/po/Pope_Paul_VI) was elected on [June 22](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ju/June_22), [1963](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/19/1963), and immediately announced that the council would continue.

**Second Period ([September 29](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/se/September_29" \o "September 29) to** [**December 4**](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/de/December_4)**,** [**1963**](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/19/1963)**)**

In the months prior to the first general session, Pope Paul worked to correct some of the problems of organisation and procedure that had been discovered during the first period. This included inviting additional lay Catholic and non-Catholic observers, reducing the number of proposed schemas to 17 (which were made more general, in keeping with the pastoral nature of the council), and later eliminating the requirement of secrecy surrounding general sessions.

Pope Paul's opening address stressed the pastoral nature of the council, and set out four purposes for it:

* to more fully define the nature of the church, and the role of the bishop;
* to renew the church;
* to restore unity among all Christians, including seeking pardon for Catholic contributions to separation;
* to start a dialog with the contemporary world.

During this period, the bishops approved the constitution on the liturgy ([*Sacrosanctum Concilium*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/sa/Sacrosanctum_Concilium)) and the decree on the media of social communication ([*Inter Mirifica*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/in/Inter_Mirifica)). Work went forward with the schemas on the church, bishops and dioceses, and ecumenism. On [November 8](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/no/November_8), [1963](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/19/1963), Joseph Cardinal Frings openly criticized the Holy Office (once known as the [Inquisition](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/in/Inquisition)) which drew a vehement defense of it by its Secretary, Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani. This exchange is often considered the most dramatic of the council.

**Third Period ([September 14](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/se/September_14" \o "September 14) to** [**November 21**](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/no/November_21)**,** [**1964**](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/19/1964)**)**

In the period between the second and third periods, the proposed schemas were further revised based on comments from the council fathers. A number of topics were reduced to statements of fundamental propositions that could gain approval during the third period, with post-conciliar commissions handling implementation of these measures.

Eight religious and seven lay women observers were invited to the sessions of the third period, along with additional male lay observers.

During this period, the council fathers worked through a large volume of proposals. Schemas on ecumenism ([*Unitatis Redintegratio*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/un/Unitatis_Redintegratio)), the Eastern Rite churches ([*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/or/Orientalium_Ecclesiarum)), and the constitution of the Church ([*Lumen Gentium*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/lu/Lumen_Gentium)) were approved and promulgated by the Pope.

A *votum* or statement concerning the sacrament of marriage for the guidance of the commission revising the [Code of Canon Law](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ca/Canon_law" \o "Canon law) regarding a wide variety of juridical, ceremonial and pastoral issues. The bishops submitted this schema with a request for speedy approval, but the Pope did not act during the council. Pope Paul also instructed the bishops to defer the topic of artificial contraception (birth control) to a commission of clerical and lay experts that he had appointed.

Schemas on the life and ministry of priests and the missionary activity of the Church were rejected and sent back to commissions for complete rewriting. Work continued on the remaining schemas, in particular those on the Church in the modern world, and religious freedom. There was controversy over revisions of the decree on religious freedom, and the failure to vote on it during the third period, but Pope Paul promised that this schema would be the first to be reviewed in the next session.

Pope Paul closed the third period by announcing a change in the Eucharistic fast, and a declaration of Mary as "Mother of the Church".

**Fourth Period ([September 14](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/se/September_14" \o "September 14) to** [**December 8**](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/de/December_8)**,** [**1965**](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/19/1965)**)**

Eleven schemas remained unfinished at the end of the third period, and commissions worked to give them their final form. Schema 13, on the Church in the modern world, was revised by a commission that worked with the assistance of laymen.

Pope Paul opened the last period of council sessions with the establishment of a Synod of Bishops. This more permanent structure was intended to preserve close cooperation of the bishops with the Pope after the council.

The first business of the fourth period was the consideration of the decree on religious freedom, which may be the most controversial of the conciliar documents. The vote was 1,997 for to 224 against (a margin that widened even farther by the time the bishop's final signing of the decree ([*Dignitatis Humanae*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/di/Dignitatis_Humanae)). The principal work of the rest of the period was work on three documents, all of which were approved by the council fathers. The lengthened and revised pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world ([*Gaudium et Spes*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ga/Gaudium_et_Spes)), was followed by decrees on missionary activity ([*Ad Gentes*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ad/Ad_Gentes)) and the ministry and life of priests ([*Presbyterorum Ordinis*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/pr/Presbyterorum_Ordinis)).

The council also gave final approval to other documents that had been considered in earlier sessions. This included decrees on the pastoral office of bishops ([*Christus Dominus*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ch/Christus_Dominus)), the life of persons in religious orders (expanded and modified from earlier sessions)([*Perfectae Caritatis*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/pe/Perfectae_Caritatis)), education for the priesthood ([*Optatam Totius*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/op/Optatam_Totius)), Christian education ([*Gravissimum Educationis*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/gr/Gravissimum_Educationis)), relations with non-Christian religions ([*Nostra Aetate*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/no/Nostra_Aetate)), and the role of the laity ([*Apostolicam Actuositatem*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ap/Apostolicam_Actuositatem)).

A major event of the final days of the council was the act of Pope Paul and Orthodox [Patriarch Athenagoras](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/pa/Patriarch_Athenagoras) joint expression of regret for many of the past actions that had lead up to the [Great Schism](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/gr/Great_Schism) between the western and eastern churches. On [December 8](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/de/December_8), [1965](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/19/1965), the Second Vatican Council was formally closed, with the bishops professing their obedience to the council's decrees. To help carry forward the work of the council, Pope Paul:

* had earlier formed a Papal Commission for the Media of Social Communication to assist bishops with the pastoral use of these media;
* declared a jubilee from [January 1](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ja/January_1) to [May 26](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ma/May_26), [1966](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/19/1966) to urge all Catholics to study and accept the decisions of the council, and apply them in spiritual renewal;
* changed the name and procedures of the Holy Office -- now to be known as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith;
* established post-conciliar commissions for bishops and the government of dioceses, religious orders, missions, Christian education, and the role of lay persons;
* made permanent the secretariats for the Promotion of Christian Unity, for Non-Christian Religions, and for Non-Believers.

**Issues**

**The Church**

Perhaps the most famous, and most influential product of the council is the second chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [*Lumen Gentium*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/lu/Lumen_Gentium). This chapter, titled *On the People of God*, sought to clearly define that the Church is all those who believe in Christ:

At all times and in every race God has given welcome to whosoever fears Him and does what is right. God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness.

The council declared that this single, unified Church "subsists in" the Roman Catholic Church "which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure". The hierarchical teaching structure of Church was reconfirmed, while stressing the unique roles that religious orders and lay persons had, and that there was a "universal call to holiness", for all Christians.

**Liturgy**

One of the first issues considered by the council, and the matter that has had the most immediate effect on the lives of individual Catholics has been revision of the liturgy. The central idea was (from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy):

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people, is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.([*Sacrosanctum Concilium*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/sa/Sacrosanctum_Concilium) )

The council fathers established guidelines to govern the revision of the liturgy, which included allowing the use of local languages instead of Latin. As bishops (individually or in groups) determined, local or national customs could be carefully incorporated into the liturgy.

Most of the concrete work of liturgical revision was actually carried out by commissions after the councils, and by national and regional conferences of bishops.

**Scripture and Divine Revelation**

The council sought to revive the central role of scripture in the theological and devotional life of the Church, while continuing the work of 20th century popes in carefully crafting a more modern approach to scriptural analysis and interpretation. This would involve revelation both by scripture and tradition. An approach to interpretation that is open to research into the sources and forms of scripture was approved by the bishops, under the governance and guidance of the church's teaching authority. The Church was to continue to provide versions of the Bible in the "[*mother tongue?*](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/se/?title=Mother_tongue)" of the faithful, and both clergy and laity were to make Bible study a central part of their lives.

**The Bishops**

Prior to the council, the Catholic Church was often described as a rigidly hierarchical organization, with priests answering to bishops, bishops answering to archbishops or primates and on upward to the Pope at the apex. At Vatican II, the council fathers sought to return the role of a bishop to its origins as a direct successor of the original group of apostles. In addition, the role of the bishops grouped together, as the whole College of Bishops (as in the council), or in particular groups for specific places, was enhanced. These bishops’ conferences have taken over much of the role that archbishops and provinces played in the past.

**Other Clergy and Religious**

**The Laity**

**Religious Education and Missions**

**Ecumenism and Religious Freedom**

**The Church and the Modern World**