

John XXIII calls the council

Richard McBrien | Jan. 20, 2009 Essays in Theology

Fifty years ago, on January 25, 1959, in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convoke an ecumenical council. It was at the closing ceremony for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

More than three-and-a-half years later, on October 11, 1962, Vatican II opened.

Essays in Theology by Fr. Richard McBrien

John himself would not live to see it to fruition. He died on June 3, 1963, after only one of the four sessions had been completed.

The pope noted famously in his diary that the small group of assembled cardinals on that day in January, 1959 had greeted his announcement with "impressive, devout silence," perhaps reflecting not only their surprise but their disapproval as well.

John, after all, had just been elected on October 28, 1958, as a so-called transitional pope. He was just a month shy of his 77th birthday at the time of the conclave. After Pope Pius XII's lengthy pontificate of more than 19 years, the cardinal-electors were looking for some breathing-space before his "real" successor could be named.

But John XXIII had a different idea. He informed the cardinals that the decision to call a council was his alone, and that it was final. He explained that he was motivated "solely by concern for the "good of souls" and in order that the new pontificate may come to grips, in a clear and well-defined way, with the spiritual needs of the present time."

The idea for a council had come to him, the pope said later in his opening speech to the council, "like a flash of heavenly light." A few months earlier, while addressing a group of pilgrims from his former patriarchal see of Venice, he had referred to the idea as "an unexpected illumination."

Each of the cardinals, both those present in the basilica on that day and others around the world, were invited to submit "a confidential and sincere statement that would let [the pope] know how each one feels and would give friendly...suggestions for carrying out" the plan. But few accepted the invitation to do so, and almost all who submitted anything did so in cold and formal language.

A personal anecdote: My own seminary professor of Ecclesiology urged us, soon after John XXIII's announcement, to pray that the council never be held. For him, and for many other Catholics, the Vatican Council of 1869-70 had rendered all future councils unnecessary, given that council's reaffirmation of the dogma of papal primacy and its formulation of the new dogma of papal infallibility.

But the pope was determined. His speech to the cardinals on January 25, 1959, mentioned two specific goals of

the council: ?the enlightenment, edification, and joy of the entire Christian people,? and ?a renewed cordial invitation to the faithful of the separated Churches to participate with us in this feast of grace and brotherhood [sic], for which so many souls long in all parts of the world.?

Significantly, the pope?s actual words on that occasion were watered down in the official edition of the address. The non-Catholic Churches were reduced to ?communities,? and they were not to ?participate with us in this feast of grace and brotherhood? but to ?follow us in the search for unity and grace.?

It has ever been thus that Vatican officials sometimes take it upon themselves to ?correct? the words of a reigning pope, without his knowledge or approval. It may be why John XXIII once complained that he was ?in a bag,? not always free to act on his own, according to his own best pastoral and theological insights.

To be sure, the pope was not yet clear in his own mind what he expected the council to accomplish, and so he did not want to say too much in this first announcement.

But as the saying goes, ?nature abhors a vacuum.? Commentators quickly tried their own hand at speculation.

Even seminary professors were so much in the dark about the council?s purpose that, when invited to give suggestions of their own, one of my professors (of Moral Theology) proposed that the council clarify the Church?s teaching on servile work.

I doubt if there is more than a relative handful of Catholics today who even know the meaning of the term. (Servile work refers to unnecessary and, therefore, sinful physical activities that a Catholic might engage in on a Sunday, in violation of the Third Commandment to ?Keep holy the Lord?s day.?)

Clarification of the council?s aims would only gradually come about through discussion and debate in the months and years that followed the pope?s historic announcement of January 25, 1959.

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