Pope John XXII, born 1881
Proclaiming Peace in the World: 

The Second Vatican Council and World Peace

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Following the Second World War, a great rivalry arose between the powers of the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Europe was impacted the most by this rivalry, divided by an “Iron Curtain” spread across the continent. As the 1950s passed into the ‘60s, war seemed likely in Europe. It was in this context that Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council for the Catholic Church in 1962. This Council had a twofold mission, seen by the official theme proposed by John: *Ecclesia Christi, lumen gentium* (the church of Christ, light to the world).

The former referenced the internal revisions within the Church while the latter dealt with the Church’s position in the world. The Council sought to clarify the official positions of the Catholic Church, unite the various cardinals and bishops across the world, and bring the Church into modernity. As

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John’s 1961 Christmas bull, *Humanae Salutis*, proclaimed: “We have felt at once, right from the time of our election as pope, the urgent duty to call together our sons in order to enable the church to contribute more effectively towards solving the problems of the modern age.” When asked by a Canadian dignitary to explain the reasoning behind the Council, John XXIII went over and threw open the window, saying “What do we intend to do? We intend to let in a little fresh air.”

The Council in particular dealt with how to further peace throughout the world, not an easy goal. When the bishops were called to Rome, the conservative minority was primarily apprehensive about recent developments, such as the menace of Communism, while the progressive majority was more concerned with internal affairs. Nonetheless, the documents of the Council’s leaders, Pope John XXIII and his successor, Pope Paul VI, as well as the documents of the Council itself, marked a new willingness of the Catholic Church to become more vocal about world peace in the midst of the Cold War.

The leading figure of the Catholic peace movement in the early stages of the Council was Pope John XXIII. After his election, John worked hard to combat the general feeling that he was an “interim pope,” a feeling that disappeared when

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4 Tanner, 4.
he suddenly called for an ecumenical council a few months after his election.\textsuperscript{5} On May 15, 1961, John XXIII issued an encyclical named \textit{Mater et Magistra} (Mother and Teacher).\textsuperscript{6} This encyclical established John’s position as a moderate capitalist. Though there are passages that have a distinct socialist impression (“It is worthwhile stressing here how timely and imperative it is that workers be given the opportunity to exert their influence throughout the State, and not just within the limits of their own spheres of employment.”\textsuperscript{7}), he still endorsed the basic premises of capitalism, such as private property (“Private ownership of property, including that of productive goods, is a natural right which the State cannot suppress.”\textsuperscript{8}). This marked a distinct change from the pure capitalistic message that the Vatican had previously endorsed, which caused the Italian Communists to celebrate, even printing parts of encyclical in their pamphlets under a hammer and sickle.\textsuperscript{9} Thus, John was able to place himself firmly in the center, which allowed him to communicate effectively with both the leaders of the United States and the USSR. This was put to the test as the Cold War tensions heightened. In October 14, 1962, a mere three days after the Second Vatican Council was convened, an


\textsuperscript{6} Note: For encyclicals and Council decrees, the name of the document comes from the first phrase at the beginning of the document, the incipit.


\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 255.

American U-2 discovered missiles in Cuba, setting off a crisis that brought the Cold War to the brink of destruction. Just as the First Vatican Council was ended by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, so it seemed war would terminate this Council before it even began. Throughout the following two anxious weeks, John XXIII worked with both sides to resolve the matter, and even helped influence Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev to withdraw the Soviet ships from Cuba. John became known as a great artisan of peace, and was one of the first awarded the prestigious Balzan Prize for Humanity, Peace, and Brotherhood among Peoples in 1962.

John’s full opinion on the idea of world peace is perhaps best seen in his last encyclical before his death, *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth). Issued on April 11, 1963, after the end of the First Session, *Pacem in Terris* received more enthusiasm than any other encyclical to this point, drawing praise from both President John F. Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev and sparking an interest in an international congress of peace. In his encyclical, John (predictably) called for a mutual peace to rid the threat of war: “The stock-piles of armaments which have been built up in various countries must be reduced all round and simultaneously

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12 Pope John XXIII, 316.
by the parties concerned. Nuclear weapons must be banned. A general agreement must be reached on a suitable disarmament program, with an effective system of mutual control.”

John encouraged Christians to follow Jesus’ example as the “Prince of Peace,” as well as to work with non-Christians to achieve their goals of peace.

John viewed his encyclical, the first ever to be addressed to all men, not merely Catholics, to be evolutionary, another step toward unity. This set the theme of the Council’s documents on peace, for even after death, the legacy of John lasted and permeated the entire Council. It is hard to overstate the impact that *Pacem in Terris* had on the world. Before this encyclical, the Vatican had adopted a distinctly pro-war approach against the Communist nations. However, with John’s stance on world peace made known, a period of conciliation materialized, even within Italian politics. The Communists even gained influence in the Italian government, increasing their proportion in the national poll from three percent to twenty-five percent, while the Christian Democrats lost about five percent.

With John’s death, and the subsequent election of Cardinal Montini as Pope Paul VI, many cardinals wondered if the spirit of *Pacem in Terris* would continue with the new pope. However, Paul VI quickly established himself as John’s natural successor and the harbinger of peace. He ensured his support of

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 368-9.
16 Blanshard, 30.
John’s message in *Pacem in Terris*, for he had been influential in the encyclical’s publication, even leading some to blame him for the “soft on Communism” stance it adopted.¹⁷ Paul decided that he would continue both John’s Council and his peace movement.

The new pope had endorsed *Pacem in Terris*, but his own views would be publicly known a few years later. On October 4, 1965, Paul visited the United Nations in New York City, just one of the many papal trips he took after his election, where he addressed the UN General Assembly frankly. In a spirit very similar to *Pacem in Terris*, Paul expressed his views on peace and the purpose of the United Nations: “We come to the high point in Our message…No more war, war never again. It is peace, peace which must guide the destinies of peoples and of all mankind…Gentlemen, you have performed and you continue to perform a great work: the education of mankind in the ways of peace.”¹⁸ Like John, Paul condemned the arms race and preached simultaneous disarmament for all nations: “If you wish to be brothers, let the weapons fall from your hands. One cannot love with an offensive weapon in his hands…The real danger comes from man himself, who has at his disposal ever more powerful instruments, which can be

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used as well for destruction as for the loftiest conquests.’”¹⁹ Paul’s proclamation reflected the same idealism that John’s did and furthered cemented the Church’s new position of anti-war and pro-peace. When he returned to Rome, Paul himself spoke about the ramifications of this address: “The consequences are grave from Our proclamation of peace. Because through Our mouth We have proclaimed the cause of peace, the Catholic Church is now committed to assuming greater responsibility for promoting the cause of peace.”²⁰ Paul’s report meant that no longer would the Catholic Church take a pro-war stance or even a neutral stance. The Catholic Church was suddenly and officially on the side of peace. John XXIII was not an accident; there would be a definite and lasting change.

The first two sessions (the first under John XXIII and the second under Paul VI) dealt little with the concept of peace, focusing instead on the internal matters of the Church. As the Third Session began in 1964, the bishops and cardinals of Vatican II prepared to deal with the external affairs of Catholicism. The Third Session focused mainly on religious peace and ecumenism. On November 21, 1964, the bishops passed their decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio* (Restoration of Unity).²¹ In this decree, they adopted a more tolerant

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¹⁹ Ibid.


²¹ Note: The Second Vatican Council passed many documents that were ranked according to their importance. At the top were constitutions, of which there were four, then declarations (three), then last came decrees (nine).
view of other Christian bodies, and expressed their desire for unity throughout Christianity. “The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council…Certainly, such division [among the Christian churches] openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature.” The bishops even showed how to accomplish this: “There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion. For it is from newness of attitudes of mind, from self-denial and unstinted love, that desires of unity take their rise and develop in a mature way. The Apostle of the Gentiles says: ‘I, therefore…beg you to lead a life…eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.’” While the bishops did preach this message of unity, they continued to refer to the non-Catholic Christians as the “separated brethren” and showed their hesitation to endorse common worship. On the whole, however, Unitatis redintegratio, passed by an overwhelming majority of 2,137 to 11, showed openness toward groups previously rejected by the Church. In fact, twice in the decree, the Catholic Church accepted a share of the blame for disunion, albeit generically, which marked a definite change from their position in

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23 Ibid., 460.
24 Ibid., 461.
the past. The decree showed that religious liberty was prominent in the minds of the cardinals. The influential Belgian bishop Joseph De Smedt, in a speech to the Council endorsing the decree, proclaimed that John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris* preached “the right of human persons to the free exercise of their religion according to the dictates of their consciences.” This unprecedented step proved that the Council was willing to become more accepting of other denominations. *Unitatis redintegratio* was the first official step in making peace in the world, for it expressed a desire to make peace within Christianity first.

The Council’s willingness to be more open did not extend exclusively to other Christian faiths. On October 28, 1965, within the Fourth Session and following Paul VI’s address to the United Nations, the bishops of the Council passed *Nostra aetate* (In our time) or the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, by a vote of 2,221 to 88. Like *Unitatis redintegratio*, *Nostra aetate* was far more open to those the Church had previously rejected, specifically Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Jews. *Nostra aetate* acknowledged that truth can be found in some of the teachings of these religions, while still proclaiming the supremacy of Christ. Most telling in this short document is the Council’s comments on the Islamic and Jewish religions. For the Muslims, *Nostra aetate* proclaimed: “The Church has also a high regard

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for the Muslims…Over the centuries, many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace.”  

In effect, the bishops sought to negate rivalries that had existed between Christians and Muslims for centuries. Likewise, the Council was more open to the Jewish people, even acknowledging that it was merely the Jewish leaders (and not the Jews themselves) who crucified Christ, a position the Church had not held before this time. Like they did for the Muslims, the Council expressed an eagerness to show respect to the Jewish faith: “Since Christians and Jews have such a common spiritual heritage, this sacred Council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation. This can be obtained, especially, by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussion.” The Church had made its peace with those within the Christian faith, through Unitatis redintegratio, and those outside of Christianity, through Nostra aestate. The Council was finally ready to turn to the broader sense of peace in the world.

Just as the Council had preached religious tolerance before, now it called for religious liberty. In Dignitatis humanae (Of the Dignity of the Human Person), or the Declaration on Religious Liberty, the Council hoped to influence nations to

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27 Flannery, 739-740.
28 Ibid., 741.
29 Ibid.
accept religious liberty. In their introduction to the declaration, the bishops stated their idea of what religious liberty should be: “The demand is increasingly made that men should act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty. The demand is also made that constitutional limits should be set to the powers of government, in order that there may be no encroachment on the rightful freedom of the person.” In passing Dignitatis humanae on December 7, 1965, the Council began to move from the Church’s relationship with the world to advisement about the world’s problems. Fierce supporters of this schema arose, primarily from the American and Canadian bishops, as well as fierce detractors, mostly from the Spanish bishops. Cardinal Benjamin de Arriba y Castro, archbishop of Tarragona, led the assault on this schema, warning: “Let the council take care not to declare the ruin of the Catholic Church where Catholicism is the only religion practiced.” The pope began to worry that a significant number of dissenting bishops would harm the credibility of the Council when he visited New York. However, the schema managed to pass by a large majority of 1,997 to 224. Despite the setbacks, the declaration received such a large majority that the Catholic Church could proclaim its unwavering support for religious freedom.

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32 Ibid., 255.
The declaration insisted that this freedom become a part of the world society: “All nations are coming into even closer unity…in order that relationships of peace and harmony may be established and maintained within the whole of mankind, it is necessary that religious freedom be everywhere provided with an effective constitutional guarantee, and that respect be shown for the high duty and right of man freely to lead his religious life in society.” The passage of Dignitatis Humanae showed that the Church was hoping to shift policy within nations in order to achieve peace, particularly in Communist or Muslim controlled countries, where religious freedom was nonexistent.

The pinnacle of the Second Vatican Council’s attempts at world peace came in the form of Gaudium et Spes (Joy and Hope), or the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Passed on December 7, 1965, the same day as Dignitatis Humanae, Gaudium et Spes was long awaited. It had been in the works and had been slowly gaining momentum from the papacy of John XXIII. Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens, the architect of Gaudium et Spes, was asked by John to put together the schema after Suenens wrote a Lenten letter that stressed the Council’s need to emphasize what unites Catholics with the outside world, not what separates them. There was much debate over the schema before the vote began. The main issue at hand was the lack of condemnation of Communism. Yü

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33 Regan, 199.
Pin, the exiled archbishop of Nanking, spoke in the name of seventy Asiatic bishops when he asked for a chapter condemning Marxism to aid those who “groan under the yoke of Communism and endure unspeakable sufferings.” Likewise the American bishops felt that the schema was too neutral, or even treasonably soft, on Communism. Cardinal Suenens, on the other hand, fought against the chapter, encouraging debate with atheistic Communists, hoping that “they may seek and recognize the true image of God, which may be hidden under the caricatures they reject.” Communism was not the only divisive issue. One section of the schema was devoted to the arms race: “People are convinced that the arms race, which quite a few countries have entered, is no infallible way for maintaining real peace…rather than eliminate the causes of war, the arms race serves only to aggravate the position…Therefore, we declare again that the arms race is one of the greatest curses on the human race.” This was not well received by the American bishops. A mere week before the crucial vote, Philip M. Hannan, archbishop of New Orleans, passed around a circular letter arguing the benefits of amassing nuclear weapons. Hannan’s efforts proved futile in the end, however. Some also saw the constitution as too accepting of other beliefs. Bishop de

35 Tanner, 15-16.
36 Blanshard, 321.
37 Tanner, 15-16.
39 O’Malley, What Happened at Vatican II, 266.
Proença Sigaud of Diamantina, Brazil, proclaimed that the constitution was the “Magna Carta of modern paganism.” In response, Bishop Maxim Hermaniuk of Ukraine proclaimed it the “Magna Carta of humanity today.” Two German cardinals proved to be the strongest dissenters: Cardinals Joseph Ratzinger (the future Benedict XVI) and Karl Rahner. To Rahner, who published an article in the summer of 1965, the schema was both too lightweight and too optimistic. Ratzinger later wrote about the schema’s hopeless optimism: “Something of the Kennedy era pervade the Council, something of the naïve optimism of the concept of the great society. It…produced the concept of a zero hour in which everything would begin again and all those things which had formerly been done badly would now be done well.” However, both Rahner and Ratzinger joined the conciliar subcommittees in order to amend their problems with the text. Despite the dissent, Gaudium et Spes passed by a vote of 2,307 to 75, a great victory for Paul and showing that the support was widespread for the schema.

Gaudium et Spes was divided into two distinct parts. The first was dedicated to the Church and Man’s Vocation, or rather, to the individual man. The second, Some Problems of Special Urgency, dealt with the maintenance of peace.

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40 Tanner, 34.
41 Ibid., 34.
43 O’Malley, What Happened at Vatican II, 265.
within mankind as a whole and became more of a catchall for issues the bishops wished to address. Like John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris*, the constitution came out in support of moderate capitalism. Sections seemed to validate the quest for economic equality, something which the Communists stressed: “To fulfill the requirements of justice and equality, every effort must be made to put an end to economic inequalities which exist in the world.” Thus, the bishops officially placed the Church firmly in the moderate camp, hoping that this would allow them to stay out of the Cold War economic fight. In the controversial chapter on the Maintenance of Peace and the Establishment of a Community of Nations, the bishops sought to define just what peace is: “Peace is more than the absence of war; it cannot be reduced to the maintenance of a balance of power between opposing forces, nor does it arise out of despotic dominion, but it is appropriately called ‘the work of justice’ (Is. 32:17)...Peace cannot be obtained unless the welfare of man is safeguarded and people freely and trustingly share with one another.”

Just like John’s *Pacem in Terris* and Paul’s Address to the United Nations General Assembly, *Gaudium et Spes* argued true peace could be achieved only through simultaneous disarmament throughout the world, abhorring nuclear weapons in particular: “The development of armaments by modern science has immeasurably magnified the horrors and wickedness of war...if the kind of

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44 Baum and Campion, 187.
weapons now stocked in the arsenals of the great powers were to be employed to the fullest, the result would be the almost complete reciprocal slaughter of one side...All these factors force us to undertake a fresh reappraisal of war.”

The bishops went on to condemn all war, and indeed, to outlaw it completely. To do this, they believed, a community of nations, such as the United Nations, needed to be vested with the power to enforce the peace. Also, the bishops expressed a desire that the more affluent countries needed to help the nations still developing and general humanitarian efforts. To accomplish these goals, the bishops realized, international cooperation needed to be the standard rather than the exception.

The Second Vatican Council changed how the Catholic Church conducted itself as well as its relationship with the world. Though there were many reforms of the Catholic Church from 1962 to 1965, the idea of peace permeated the entire Council. This was a Council that completely and unexpectedly reversed its position on war. Paul Blanshard, an observer of the Council, wrote: “On the whole the incursions of the Council into this difficult territory of war and peace seemed goodhearted but rather amateurish...If the Church had been a pro-war Church in the 1940s, it now suddenly emerged from the Council in 1965 as one of the most important and influential pro-peace forces in the world.”

This dramatic change built gradually through the Council, starting first with Pope John XXIII,

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46 Ibid., 213-214.
47 Blanshard, 321.
who demonstrated his eagerness for peace in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. His successor, Pope Paul VI, likewise shared his enthusiasm, shown by his address to the United Nations General Assembly in 1965. Through the decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, the Church sought to achieve peace within the ranks of Christianity. *Nostra aestate* also showed that the Church was more open to peace and dialogue outside of Christianity as well. *Dignitatis humanae* marked a change in policy, for the Church left internal affairs and began to concern itself with national internal matters. Finally, *Gaudium et Spes* tied all the documents together through a message of a broad peace and a condemnation of war, and showed a willingness to be a intermediary between the Cold War factions. This tradition of peace promotion even continues on forty-five years later, as Pope Francis reconciles with the Church’s former enemies.  

Thus, the Second Vatican Council furthered the idea of world peace, and in turn, brought the Catholic Church in line with the peace movement.

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