

# The Promise of Vatican II

## *A Discussion Series*



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## Overview

Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council 50 years ago in a spirit of hope. He envisioned the Council as a setting for Divine Providence “leading us to a new order of things.” As part of our effort to renew the Church, Voice of the Faithful offers this series as a way to review some of the documents of Vatican II and explore the ways in which the Council has touched our lives.

The series uses the final chapters of Bernard Prusak’s study, *The Church Unfinished*, and selected passages from the documents of Vatican II. It has been designed for use in affiliate meetings, home gatherings, or parishes—wherever adult Catholics seek to further their faith and understanding. The week-by-week guide will help explore how Vatican II has affected us personally and as a church community.

Each week follows a similar format:

- ❖ Opening prayer and scripture
- ❖ Centering prayer (15 minutes)
- ❖ Discussion (using the questions provided as a guide; 45 minutes)
- ❖ Action consideration (15 minutes)
- ❖ Closing prayer

The process is one of “think, judge, act”—a process developed by the Jocists and introduced in the U.S. by Dorothy Day and the Christian Family Movement.

## Committee

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## Reading Assignments Overview

### Week 1

- ❖ Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*: pages 270 – 283
- ❖ *Sacrosanctum concilium*: Section 42
- ❖ *Lumen gentium*: Chapters 1 and 2

### Week 2

- ❖ Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*: pages 283 – 299
- ❖ *Lumen gentium*: Chapter 3

### Week 3

- ❖ Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*: pages 299 – 312
- ❖ *Nostra aetate*: Section 1

### Week 4

- ❖ Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*: Chapter 7
- ❖ *Gaudium et spes*: Part One, and Part Two sections 54, 55, 56, 58, 59, 72, 76, 78

**Note:** An excellent source for the Vatican documents is *The Documents of Vatican II* edited by Austin Flannery. The documents also can be found online at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/)

## Room Preparation

If at all possible, arrange chairs in a circle when setting up the discussion area. You also could arrange concentric semi-circles with chairs off-set in each row but a circle is best for encouraging discussion.

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## Week 1

### *Preparatory Readings*

- ❖ Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*: pages 270 – 283
- ❖ *Sacrosanctum concilium*: Section 42
- ❖ *Lumen gentium*: Chapters 1 and 2

### *Opening Prayer and Scripture*

***Pray together Pope John XXIII's Prayer for the Vatican Council:***

Almighty God! In Thee we place all our confidence, not trusting in our own strength. Look down benignly upon these members of Thy Church. May the light of Thy supernal<sup>1</sup> grace aid us in taking decisions and in making laws. Graciously hear the prayers which we pour forth to Thee in unanimity of faith, of voice, and of mind.

### *Brief Overview of Series*

**To the Moderator:** After reminding everyone of the purpose and plan for the series, please repeat the “ground rules” for a collegial discussion: Everyone who wishes to speak will be heard. Please speak to your own thoughts and impressions rather than as an “answer” or as a “judgment” on another’s thoughts. Remember that there is no need to be in agreement with everyone else, and there is no “right” answer to any of the questions.

### *Centering Prayer*

***To be read SLOWLY by the discussion leader or a volunteer***

Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God,  
The resolve to run forth to meet your Christ  
With righteous deeds at his coming,  
So that, gathered at his right hand,  
They may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom.  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
One God, for ever and ever.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that this is not a typo. The word in the prayer is indeed “supernal” and not “supernatural.” *Supernal* means (a) of or relating to the sky or heavens, celestial; (b) of exceptional quality or extent.

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**After the prayer has been read spend a few minutes in silence.**

**Moderator:** We will now go around the circle so that each of us can say which word or phrase struck us particularly from the Collect.

**After each participant speaks, go around the circle again and ask each one to explain the feelings invoked by the word or phrase they used. [If a participant does not wish to give an explanation, they may simply say “pass” on the second round.]**

## **Discussion Questions**

1. In what ways can we understand the statement “one particular Church, Rome, and its bishop were recognized as having a primacy of special service for preserving the unity of all Churches in the universal communion?” (Prusak, page 274)
2. The *Constitution on the Liturgy* (section 42) initiates Vatican II’s retrieval of the essential nature of Particular (or local) Church in relation to the Universal Church (Prusak, page 275). How does our current Church structure support or hinder this concept?
3. The first three chapters of *Lumen gentium* indicate that Vatican II was intended to start a discussion of Church as mystery rather than Church as hierarchy. (Prusak, pages 277-278) Do you think it is better to start with mystery or with something else? Why?
4. How does *Lumen gentium* (Chapter 2) portray the “communion of saints”? (Prusak, pages 281-283) What meaning does the “communion of saints” have in your life?

## **Action Consideration**

Each person decides what action they might pursue in light of the discussion.

## **Closing Prayer**

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## Week 2

### *Preparatory Readings*

- ❖ Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*: pages 283 – 299
- ❖ *Lumen gentium*: Chapter 3

### *Opening Prayer and Scripture*

***Pray together Pope John XXIII's Prayer for the Vatican Council:***

Almighty God! In Thee we place all our confidence, not trusting in our own strength. Look down benignly upon these members of Thy Church. May the light of Thy supernal grace aid us in taking decisions and in making laws. Graciously hear the prayers which we pour forth to Thee in unanimity of faith, of voice, and of mind.

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### *Centering Prayer*

***To be read SLOWLY by the discussion leader or a volunteer***

Almighty and merciful God,  
May no earthly undertaking hinder those  
Who set out in haste to meet your Son,  
But may our learning of heavenly wisdom  
Gain us admittance to his company.  
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
One God, for ever and ever.

***After the prayer has been read spend a few minutes in silence.***

**Moderator:** We will now go around the circle so that each of us can say which word or phrase struck us particularly from the Collect.

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**After each participant speaks, go around the circle again and ask each one to explain the feelings invoked by the word or phrase they used. [If a participant does not wish to give an explanation, they may simply say “pass” on the second round.]**

## **Discussion Questions**

1. (*Lumen gentium*, sections 18, 20) In the early years of the Church until about 500 A.D., bishops were the pastors of their churches with deacons to help them. In larger dioceses, priests (the “presbyteroi”) were appointed to assist bishops in their sacramental duties. Do you regard your “ordinary” (the label the Church uses for the sitting Bishop/Archbishop of a diocese) as a pastor? Do you feel more loyalty to your parish or to your diocese? Why? (Prusak, pages 284-285)
2. (*Lumen gentium*, sections 19-23; especially 21) How do you understand the bishops as acting collegially? Do you see the two parts of receiving their office “sacramental consecration” and “hierarchical communion” as bifurcating or unifying? Why? (Prusak, pages 285-286). Do you think this might affect their decision making? In what way do you experience the two parts of a bishop’s office? Would you change anything?
3. Regarding the note appended to the official text of *Lumen gentium* (Prusak, pages 286- 288), how do you understand “communion”? Do you see this as “an organic reality which requires a juridical form and is simultaneously animated by charity”? (translated by Prusak) Does this communion exist in your parish? Does any form of communion exist in your parish? How can you make the communion stronger?
4. (*Lumen gentium* section 23; Prusak, pages 288-289) “The council declares Episcopal conferences to be contemporary manifestations of collegial cooperation among bishops.” (Prusak, page 289.) Is the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) a prominent figure in the life of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States? Why or why not? Should it be? In what ways can you make the USCCB effective in your life and the life of your parish?

## **Action Consideration**

Each person decides what action they might pursue in light of the discussion.

## **Closing Prayer**

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## Week 3

### *Preparatory Readings*

- ❖ Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*: pages 299 – 312
- ❖ *Nostra aetate*: Section 1
- ❖ Optional: Look up Roman Catholic definitions of the terms local church, universal church, papal primacy, episcopacy, and communion of churches. (Sources: papal documents at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), documents on the web sites [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org), [www.ewtn.com](http://www.ewtn.com), and [www.ncronline.org](http://www.ncronline.org).)

### Opening Prayer and Scripture

***Pray together Pope John XXIII's Prayer for the Vatican Council:***

Almighty God! In Thee we place all our confidence, not trusting in our own strength. Look down benignly upon these members of Thy Church. May the light of Thy supernal grace aid us in taking decisions and in making laws. Graciously hear the prayers which we pour forth to Thee in unanimity of faith, of voice, and of mind.

### *Brief Overview of Series*

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### *Centering Prayer*

***To be read SLOWLY by the discussion leader or a volunteer***

O God, who see how your people  
Faithfully await the feast of the Lord’s Nativity,  
Enable us we pray,  
To attain the joys of so great a salvation  
And to celebrate them always  
With solemn worship and glad rejoicing.  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,



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Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
One God, for ever and ever.

***After the prayer has been read spend a few minutes in silence.***

**Moderator:** We will now go around the circle so that each of us can say which word or phrase struck us particularly from the Collect.

***After each participant speaks, go around the circle again and ask each one to explain the feelings invoked by the word or phrase they used. [If a participant does not wish to give an explanation, they may simply say “pass” on the second round.]***

## ***Discussion Questions***

1. The *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra aetate*, Section 1) shows a change in the Church’s attitude toward non-Christian religions. How do you see this being carried out today in the Church universal, in your diocese, in your parish? How can you improve things? (Prusak, pages 298-299)
2. Prusak points out that *Lumen gentium* is an ambiguous text trying to balance renewal of the Church with preservation of continuity. (Prusak, page 301) He asserts that the communion paradigm has not been put into practice (page 302). Do you think this is so? Why or why not? Are you aware of any worshipping communities where the communion paradigm exists? Explain.
3. Prusak reminds us that any reforming of the Church with regard to a communion of churches must realize that the context for communities is different than in the first six centuries of the Church and “cannot discard developments in leadership patterns during the second millennium of the Church, [although] it can seek to reshape them” (page 303). In what ways would you reshape both the earliest communities of the Church and the present leadership patterns? How would you synthesize them?
4. How would you rearticulate the relationship of the pope and the bishops and of the baptized and the ordained? (Prusak, page 312) Could this relationship be sustained in your parish? Why or why not?

## ***Action Consideration***

Each person decides what action they might pursue in light of the discussion.

## ***Closing Prayer***

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## Week 4

### *Preparatory Readings*

- ❖ Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*: Chapter 7
- ❖ *Gaudium et spes*: Part One, and Part Two sections 54, 55, 56, 58, 59, 72, 76, 78

### *Opening Prayer and Scripture*

***Pray together Pope John XXIII's Prayer for the Vatican Council:***

Almighty God! In Thee we place all our confidence, not trusting in our own strength. Look down benignly upon these members of Thy Church. May the light of Thy supernal grace aid us in taking decisions and in making laws. Graciously hear the prayers which we pour forth to Thee in unanimity of faith, of voice, and of mind.

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### *Centering Prayer*

***To be read SLOWLY by the discussion leader or a volunteer***

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord,  
Your grace into our hearts,  
That we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son  
Was made known by the message of an Angel,  
May by his Passion and Cross  
Be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.  
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
One God, for ever and ever

***After the prayer has been read spend a few minutes in silence.***

**Moderator:** We will now go around the circle so that each of us can say which word or phrase struck us particularly from the Collect.

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**After each participant speaks, go around the circle again and ask each one to explain the feelings invoked by the word or phrase they used. [If a participant does not wish to give an explanation, they may simply say “pass” on the second round.]**

## **Discussion Questions**

1. Do you think *Gaudium et spes* was too optimistic in thinking the Church could make significant changes in itself? In answering this question, also indicate which definition of Church you are using: for example, communal, hierarchical, communal combined with hierarchical. (Prusak, pages 316-317)
2. According to Prusak, “The constitution (*Gaudium et spes*) considers the worldwide, growing sense of human autonomy and responsibility crucially significant for the spiritual and moral maturity of humanity, and deeply related to the need to unify the world and to construct a world of truth and justice” (page 320). How, if at all, do you see this happening in the worldwide Church, your diocese, your parish? How can you help to promote this growing sense of human autonomy and responsibility?
3. To what extent has the autonomy with which God endowed humanity for shaping the world also been given for shaping the Church? (Prusak, page 121) What would you be willing to contribute to this endeavor?
4. “To believe in the risen Jesus is to trust that the risk of self-giving love will prevail in history and beyond” (Prusak, page 333). Given the turmoil in both the world and the Church today, how are you prepared to risk self-giving love?

## **Action Consideration**

Each person decides what action they might pursue in light of the discussion.

## **Closing Prayer**