

# Vatican II: Sixty Years On

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This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. I was five at the time, and I have no direct recollection of it except for a vague memory of seeing some clip of on TV. But I do recall, in the following years, the new English Mass books, learning new types of hymns, a priest playing a guitar and leading a music group at a Mass and my newly built local church being dedicated to the Holy Spirit, something we were told was very unusual in the Catholic world. For me, the council had something to do with change, being modern, being closer to people.

It would be some years later, when I was studying theology, that I came to appreciate how significant it was. With over 3,000 bishops gathering for the first time from all over the world and just some twenty years after the Second World War, the council that lasted from 1962 to 1965 was dedicated, unlike previous councils, not so much to this or that heresy or problem but to the bigger question ‘Church, what do you say of yourself at this time of history?’ It was a time when a new world was emerging, full of political, social, technological and cultural developments. The Church needed to know



how to navigate its way in new times.

The council changed the way Catholics and others saw the Catholic Church. Not that the Church of Christ in itself changes, but the bishops emphasised in a new way the Church’s mission as a call to be ‘an instrument of close-knit unity with God and among humankind’. For that the Church needed to rediscover itself as the People of God journeying within history along with all of humanity, living in communion of faith, hope and love, radiating Christ in the world. The bishops recognised in a new way the role of the Holy Spirit, prompting them to go out and engage with the world within which the Church lives. They re-read how, in Christ who is the Light of the Nations, the Catholic Church is built up by the Word of God and



Paul VI, Francis Spellman, Enrico Dante, Alfredo Ottaviani and Aspremo II Colonna

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the sacraments, as well as endowed with ministries and charisms, but then called to reach out in dialogue to all. The dialogue would be to other Christians, to members of other religions and to people of good will who might have no religious conviction.

Sixty years later, the it still needs to be unpacked in its deep meaning and relevance. The synodal pathway is an opportunity to do that. Sr Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary for the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, likes to quote the Australian scholar Ormond Rush's comment that 'synodality is the Second Vatican Council in a nutshell'.

Since 2021 the Church in Ireland has been pursuing its own specific national synodal pathway. It is an opportunity for us to re-visit and go

deeper in our understanding of the council. In the *Final Document* issued at the conclusion of the synod in Rome held last year, which I was privileged to attend, we read how the synodal journey is 'a further act of reception of the Council, thus deepening its inspiration and reinvigorating its prophetic force for today's world'.

In his address to cardinals just two days after his election, Pope Leo referred to the importance of the path of renewal launched by the council. He expressed his desire that the cardinals, and indeed each of us, would renew together their 'complete commitment to the path that the universal Church has now followed for decades in the wake of the Second Vatican Council'. It's a desire he has for each of us.