What did the Council Say?
A brief look at the four Constitutions of Vatican II
the most authoritative and important documents on the Council
1. Sacrosanctum Concilium: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (SC)

This was the first and, at the time, least controversial document debated by the Council. Yet it was the one that had the most immediate impact on Catholics and parish life at the local level. It was in the liturgy that Catholics became aware that significant changes were happening in the Church.

By beginning with the theme of the liturgy, the Council was indicating the primacy of God and worship in the life of the Christian. As Pope Paul VI said, “the liturgy was the first subject to be examined and the first too, in a sense, in intrinsic worth and in importance for the life of the Church.”

SC explains the purpose of the liturgy:

“While the liturgy daily builds up those who are within into a holy temple of the Lord, into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit, ... at the same time it marvellously strengthens their power to preach Christ, and thus shows forth the Church to those who are outside ... until there is one sheepfold and one shepherd.” (2)

SC then outlines the principles guiding the promotion and reform of the liturgy and the practical directives for their implementation. Reforms were based on an understanding of the liturgy’s historical development and on practical pastoral concerns. A few points of interest include an affirmation of Sacred Scripture which “is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy.” (24) Also, whilst encouraging the use of the vernacular language in the liturgy, it also said that “the use of the Latin language is to be preserved” (36) Interestingly, it did not demand a turning around of the altars.

Regarding the participation of the faithful at Mass, SC says: “In order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain.” (11) And, “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 ... their right and duty by reason of their baptism.” (14) Finally, regarding the reform of the liturgy, “There must be

Vatican II was the twenty first Ecumenical Council in the history of the Church. Over a four year period from 1962-1965 around 2,400 bishops from around the world gathered at the Vatican on four separate occasions, for roughly two months at a time. The results of the bishops’ deliberations were published in sixteen different documents. Like all Church documents, there is a definite hierarchy or order of importance and level of authority to the documents. There were three Declarations, nine Decrees, and four Constitutions. These four Constitutions are the most important documents of the Council. A brief look at them will help us to better understand Vatican II.
no innovations unless the good of the Church genuinely and
certainly requires them; and care must be taken that any
new forms adopted should in some way grow organically
from forms already existing” (23)

2. Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on
the Church (LG)

The Latin title, from its opening sentence, draws on the
Gospels’ reference to Jesus as the Light of the Nations and
thus already suggests that the Church is not something
separate from Christ. It goes on: “The Church is in Christ like
a sacrament or a sign and instrument both of a very closely
knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human
race ... (The Council) desires now to unfold more fully to
the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own
inner nature and universal mission ... so that all men ... might
attain fuller unity in Christ.” (1)

Rather than speak of the Church in terms of a ‘perfect society’
or a ‘hierarchical society’, as had been common before the
Council, LG considers the Church in eight chapters placed in
a very specific order:

1. The Church as Mystery
2. The Church as the People of God
3. The Church is hierarchical
4. The Laity
5. The Call to Holiness
6. The Religious life
7. The Pilgrim Church
8. Mary’s place in the Church.

LG very much presents an ‘Ecclesiology of Communion’
that gives value to all in the Church: Pope, Bishops, Priests,
Religious, and Lay People, and to their respective and
complimentary gifts and roles in the Church. ‘According to
their proper roles’ each member of the Church, shares in
the mission of carrying the light of Christ to the nations:

“It is not only through the sacraments and the ministries
of the Church that the Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the
people of God and enriches it with virtues, but, “allotting his
gifts to everyone according as He wills, He distributes special
graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts He
makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and
offices which contribute toward the renewal and building up
of the Church. ... These charisms, whether they be the more
outstanding or the more simple and widely diffused, are to
be received with thanksgiving and consolation for they are
perfectly suited to and useful for the needs of the Church.”
(12)

LG also addressed the question of the relationship between
the Catholic Church and our ‘Separated Brethren’: “The
one Church of Christ ... one, holy, catholic and apostolic ...
subsists in the 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. These elements, as
gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling
toward catholic unity”. (8)

3. Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on
Divine Revelation (DV)

DV examines one of the most fundamental elements of the
Christian faith: Revelation. DV reminds us that ‘revelation’ is
not simply a series of doctrines and teachings, but the action
and process by which God reveals himself to us, and invites
a response from us. Revelation is fulfilled in Jesus Christ who
reveals God's saving love: “In His goodness and wisdom God
chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden
purpose of His will. His will is that, through Christ, the Word
made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the
Father and come to share in the divine nature.” (2)

How are we to respond? DV answers, “The obedience of
faith” must be given to God as he reveals himself. By faith
man freely commits his whole self to God, offering the full
submission of intellect and will to God who reveals.” (5)

God’s revelation continues to be transmitted from generation
to generation:

“God graciously arranged that the things he had revealed for
the salvation of all peoples should remain in their entirety,
Therefore Christ the Lord ... commissioned the Apostles to preach the Gospel to all men.” (7)

In transmitting revelation to all generations, there is an unbreakable relationship between the Sacred Scriptures, Tradition, and the Magisterium:

“Sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium ... so linked ... that one cannot stand without the others.”

And further, “The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This Magisterium is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on. ...Sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church ... are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others. All together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.” (9)

The document goes on to speak of man as ‘the image of God’, fallen and redeemed, possessing the dignity of intellect, truth, wisdom, conscience, and freedom. Then, in Part II attention is turned to how the Church, aided by the light of the Gospel and by human experience, can dialogue with the world to seek solutions to some urgent needs: “Of the many subjects arousing universal concern today, it may be helpful to concentrate on these: marriage and the family, human progress, life in its economic, social and political dimensions, the bonds between the family of nations, and peace.” (46)

GS concludes by inviting all Christians to serve others, “recognizing Christ our brother in all men, and loving them in word and in deed” and by “holding loyally to the Gospel and joining forces with all who love and practice justice.” (93)

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Whilst Lumen Gentium examines the nature and life of the Church as such, Gaudium et Spes examines the relationship that the Church has with the modern world. It stresses that the Church does not close herself off from the world, but rather has an important contribution to make and mission to carry out in the world.

GS begins with these beautiful words, bringing the Church and the world into the same boat, so to speak: “The joys and the hopes, the grief and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” (1)

“To carry out her task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.” (4)

In Part I Gaudium et Spes identifies that at the heart of the world’s many problems a key question is lurking: “Who are we?” To a troubled world, Gaudium et Spes says that the Church can help answer this question: “What is man? About himself he has expressed, and continues to express, many divergent and even contradictory opinions. In these he often exalts himself as the absolute measure of all things or debases himself to the point of despair. ... The Church certainly understands these problems. Endowed with light from God, she can offer solutions to them, so that man’s true situation can be portrayed and his defects explained, while at the same time his dignity and destiny are justly acknowledged.” (12)

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Prayer for the Council

O Divine Spirit, sent by the Father in the name of Jesus, who dost infallibly assist and guide the Church, pour forth the fullness of thy gifts upon the Ecumenical Council.

Grant that from this Council there may come forth abundant fruits: that the light and strength of the Gospel may ever more widely influence human society: that new vigour may infuse the Catholic religion and its missionary task: that the Church’s teaching may be better known and Christian morality more widely practised.

Sweet Guest of our souls, confirm our minds in truth, and dispose our hearts to obedience, so that the decisions of the council may find in us generous acceptance and prompt fulfilment.

We beseech Thee, too, on behalf of those sheep, who no longer belong to the one fold of Jesus Christ, that they also, glorifying as they do in the name of Christian, may finally regain unity under one Shepherd.

Renew in our time Thy wondrous works, as in a new Pentecost, and grant that Holy Church, gathered together in unanimous, more intense prayer, around Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and guided by Peter, may spread the kingdom of the Divine Saviour, which is the kingdom of truth, of justice, of love, and of peace.

Amen

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