

“THE COUNCIL, THE CHURCH AND THE VOCATION OF BISHOPS”

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Every Sunday, Catholics across Colorado – in fact, Catholics all over the world – say the following words when we worship:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God; begotten, not made; of one Being with the Father, Through Him all things were made.

We’ve said those words thousands of times at Sunday Mass. We know them so well that sometimes we don’t think about them. But they’re vital to understanding what it means to be Catholic. And here’s why.

A man born of a Jewish mother is Jewish by virtue of his birth. He may be very religious, or lukewarm, or an atheist. But he’s still, in a real sense, a Jew. Being Catholic is a very different kind of experience. Baptism is *necessary* to being a Catholic. But it’s *not enough* as we grow in age. As Catholics, we become defined by what we believe, how we worship, and how actively we live our faith in public and in private.

It’s not possible to be what some people call a “cultural” Catholic. Catholic culture comes from an active Catholic faith. Unless we truly believe and practice our faith, “Catholic culture” is just a dead skin of nostalgia and comfortable habits.

When Catholics say that Jesus is *eternally begotten of the Father* and *of one being with the Father*, we’re joining ourselves to 17 centuries of Christian faith. Those words come to us from the very first ecumenical council of the Church, the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. The Nicene Creed settled a very long and important dispute over the identity of Jesus Christ. And the results of that council have shaped the course of Western history ever since.

Catholics have always struggled to understand the mystery of what it means for Jesus to be both fully human and fully divine. That mystery is the creative tension at the heart of the Christian faith. In the Fourth Century, a very gifted priest named Arius tried to make the tension go away. He argued that “God begat [the Son], and before [the Son] was begotten, He did not exist.” In other words, Jesus might have a uniquely intimate relationship with God, but finally He was a creature just like you and me.

Arius had a brilliant mind. A lot of bishops and scholars supported him. But in the end, the Council Fathers saw that if Jesus was *created* by the Father, He can’t be eternally *co-equal* with the Father. And that means Christian revelation begins to fall apart. If God isn’t a Trinity of eternally equal persons, then the Incarnation is false, because God didn’t become man. And if the Incarnation is false, then so is the Redemption, because God

didn't die on the cross to deliver us from our sins. What Arius proposed would have actually undermined the entire Gospel message of salvation.

That's why the Council of Nicaea described Jesus as *one in being* or *one in substance* with the Father. And that's why we say those same words in the Creed every Sunday. The Nicene Creed has helped shape Western civilization's understanding of who God is and who man is. And over the centuries, that's had an impact on Western art, music, morality, ideas of justice and human dignity, our political institutions – everything. Faith drives culture. What we believe shapes how we think and what we do. That's why *what* we believe -- or don't believe -- matters.

I began with the Council of Nicaea tonight because it shows how important an ecumenical council can be – not just for the Church, but also for the world. That's what the word “ecumenical” means. It comes from the Greek, *oikoumene*, meaning “the whole world.” The Church has had 21 ecumenical councils from Nicaea to Vatican II. Many have been hugely important for the course of history, like Nicaea, Chalcedon and Trent, and they've dealt with many different issues.

All true ecumenical councils have a few common marks. All are either called or confirmed by the Pope. All involve bishops and other persons entitled to vote from around the world. And all become part of the content of our faith once the Holy Father approves the results. In the words of Blessed Pope John XXIII, all “ecumenical councils, whenever they are assembled, are a solemn celebration of the union of Christ and His Church, and hence lead to the universal radiation of truth.”

We do well to remember Pope John tonight because the council he called – the Second Vatican Council – ended 40 years ago this fall. Some of you in this room were born after Vatican II. But all of us have been shaped by it. And the council will probably continue to shape Catholics for decades to come. So it makes sense to understand how and why it happened, and what it accomplished.

Vatican II didn't correct any new heresy. It didn't define any new doctrine. It also wasn't just the idea of John XXIII. Several cardinals had privately encouraged Pope John to call a council -- including Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, who later became the council's leading conservative, and a man that liberals loved to criticize.

John XXIII set the goal of Vatican II in his opening remarks to the council. He said that, “the greatest concern of the ecumenical council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously.” To do that he wanted the council not to “reinvent” or “re-imagine” the Church, but to renew the methods, forms and structures of the Church according to the needs of the modern world, always “recognizing that the substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way it is presented is another.”

In other words, the Church in 1945 and the Church in 2005 has exactly the same goal: the proclamation of the Lord Jesus Christ for the conversion and salvation of the world, through the truth of the Catholic faith. The methods and structures may differ. The mission hasn't changed.

The genius of Vatican II is its scope. Over a three-year period, in 16 documents, it examined, purified, renewed and reaffirmed nearly every aspect of Catholic life. In a very logical way, the council's four major constitutions give us a catechesis on the whole Christian faith.

For example, Catholics have always believed "*lex orandi, lex credendi*" -- in other words, we worship as we believe and believe as we worship. So in 1963, the council issued the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy as its very first document, because the Eucharist is the "source and summit" of Catholic life. Our worship at the Eucharistic meal and sacrifice of the Mass is the cornerstone of our belief and everything else.

Then in 1964, the council defined who and what the community of faith is in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Remember that Christ founded the Church before anyone wrote the first word of the first Gospel. The Church came first. The Holy Spirit inspired the Evangelists to fully and truthfully write down God's Word. But it was the community of believers that reflected on it, organized it and interpreted it. The Church *precedes* the Bible, not the other way around.

In the last weeks of Vatican II, the council issued the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. The council's work was then complete.

That's why Vatican II is important. That's why rereading the work of the council in this anniversary year is so fruitful.

I want to focus in a special way tonight on what the council said about the Church, because it's the Church that celebrates the council's memory. And too many times over the past four decades, people have claimed to be the Church or the voice of the faithful, and then acted or taught in ways that seem to oppose what the Church actually believes.

When people say, "we are the Church," of course that's true. We're all the Church, because the Church is the community of the faithful.

But a "community of faith" or a "community of the faithful" implies that there's someone and something we have the duty to be *faithful to*. We don't invent the Catholic faith. Nor do we own it. We receive it; we live it in community; we witness it to others; and we pass it on fully -- as good stewards -- to our children. That's what life in the Church means. That's why it's worth reflecting for a few minutes on the content of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

Blessed John XXIII described the Catholic Church as the “mother and teacher of all nations.” In opening the Second Vatican Council, he said that, “the Church, surrounded by divine light, spreads her rays over the entire earth.” That’s what the Latin words *Lumen Gentium* mean: “light to the nations.” That’s what our lives mean. That’s our purpose. That’s the reality of the Church that you and I belong to -- not some religious corporation or the Elks Club at prayer; but the glory of Jesus Christ alive and risen, and God’s light to the world.

I hope that each of us tonight will go home and reread *Lumen Gentium* in the coming weeks. Not all of it is easy reading. But it’s worth the effort, because this document does a wonderful job of teaching us who and what the Catholic Church is. In fact, many of the other council documents, like the Decree on the Apostolate of Laypeople, flow directly out of *Lumen Gentium*.

Lumen Gentium presents the Church in a range of very beautiful imagery from Scripture and Catholic tradition. Each of the images is important and true. But none can stand alone outside the context of the others.

The Church is a sheepfold of safety, with Jesus as the only sheep-gate. The Church is also God’s flock, and also His tillage – the land He cultivates to bring new life to the world. The Church is God’s building, with Jesus as the foundation and each of us its living stones. The Church is also the spotless spouse of Christ and the family of God. The Church is also an exile and pilgrim in the world. The Church is also a sacrament -- a sign and instrument of communion with God, and unity among men and women.

Above all, the Church is the mystical Body of Christ and the new Israel; the new, messianic People of God with Jesus as our head. The Church is also the new royal priesthood, with all Christians living in fundamental equality through Baptism, but like a family, having a diversity of duties and organized in a hierarchy of roles.

Religious and consecrated persons bear witness to the Beatitudes by living poverty, chastity and obedience in a radical way. Laypeople, because they live in the daily secular world, have the missionary task of humanizing society and converting it to Jesus Christ. And the ordained have the vocation of service to the Church, feeding the faithful through the Eucharist and other sacraments, and teaching, sanctifying, encouraging and governing for the sake of God’s people. But all members of the Church have exactly the same call to holiness according to the circumstances of their lives.

Lumen Gentium reminds us that no one is saved except through Jesus Christ, and that the Catholic Church is the true Church of Christ and necessary for salvation. As a result, no one can be saved “who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it, or to remain in it” (LG 14).

But God is also a merciful Father. He seeks the salvation of all men and women. Therefore, *Lumen Gentium* also teaches that those, “who no fault of their own, do not

know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do His will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation” (15).

Maybe the most moving quality to *Lumen Gentium* is the way it begins and ends with a person. It begins with the person of Jesus Christ as the savior and light of humanity, and the meaning of history. And it ends with the person of Mary, His mother and our mother, and an icon of what we all can be -- and what the Church *will* be -- in her perfection. When we claim that, “we are the Church,” Mary’s humility, obedience, fidelity and love are what we should mean.

I want to end tonight with some thoughts about the vocation of bishops. Next month is the 40th anniversary of one of the final documents of the council, *Christus Dominus*, or the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church. *Christus Dominus* is Latin for “Christ the Lord.” The first line of the conciliar text reads, “Christ the Lord, the Son of the Living God, came to redeem His people from their sins, that all mankind might be sanctified.” It’s a reminder to bishops that their first duty is to proclaim the Lordship of Jesus Christ; to give up their own lives and live as Jesus Christ for the service of the persons in their care.

Vatican II described the vocation of bishops as a call to serve rather than a call to power. When a bishop struggles to put on Jesus Christ over his own sins and weaknesses, he begins to understand why the council talks about the pastoral office of bishops *in* the Church, and not outside or above it. Bishops have the same need for redemption as the people to whom they belong. The only difference is that God will hold bishops even more accountable because of the leadership to which He ordained them, and because of the graces of office that they’ve received.

Christus Dominus is a curious mix of housekeeping and theology. A lot of the document deals with very practical matters, like redrawing diocesan boundaries, or how long pastors should serve in parishes, or when to ask for an auxiliary bishop, or the role of the diocesan staff.

Earlier this month I met with my Presbyteral Council. That’s a group of priests who advise me on priestly issues and the overall life and health of the archdiocese. This weekend I’ll meet with my Archdiocesan Pastoral Council. That’s another advisory group of mostly laypeople. They do a similar thing. They have a special focus on pastoral issues facing the diocese, like how to strengthen our Catholic schools, or how to maintain the safety of our children, or how to better prepare couples for a Catholic marriage.

Both of these councils are very important in helping me to be a better bishop. Both exist because of *Christus Dominus*.

But all of the practical issues in *Christus Dominus* rest on the document's spiritual foundation, which comes from *Lumen Gentium* and the ancient traditions of the Church.

The Early Church Father, St. Ignatius of Antioch, reminded Christians that, "Those [who] belong to God and to Jesus Christ -- they are with the bishop." Every bishop is a successor to the apostles and a pastor of souls. Every bishop has the duty to safeguard the liturgical life of the local Church. Every bishop must proclaim the Gospel and teach the true Catholic faith in his diocese. Every bishop should give an example of personal sanctity in charity, humility and simplicity of life. Every bishop should help the poor and suffering. Every bishop has the obligation to sanctify, encourage, correct and govern the local People of God. And above all, every bishop needs to do these things with fatherly love and fraternal charity, because the Church is a family of faith. It's not a political party or an impersonal institution. It's a *family* – a family of faith.

That's why bishops are so reluctant to excommunicate anybody, even a grave public criminal or a Catholic public official who directly opposes Church teaching on a serious matter. A good father will do almost anything, and bear almost anything, to keep his daughter or son in the family.

And he owes that same fidelity to his priests. Vatican II *commands* bishops to support their priests, and to treat them as sons and brothers. In Catholic teaching, a priest shares intimately in the mission of his bishop through the Sacrament of Orders. A priest is never simply an "employee" of the Church, and the bishop is forbidden to treat him that way.

I began my remarks tonight with a story about the Council of Nicaea. While all true ecumenical councils are important, some failed in achieving their goals. The Council of Florence failed in the 15th Century because the Western Church was badly divided and the Greek Church rejected a union. The Fifth Lateran Council failed in the 16th Century because it focused on the wrong issues. It did too little too late to change the conditions that led to the Protestant Reformation.

We need to ask ourselves this fall, considering the goals that Vatican II set for itself: Will history judge the council a success or a failure? In opening Vatican II, Blessed John XXIII said that, "the council now beginning rises in the Church like daybreak, a forerunner of most splendid light." Pope John Paul II, who attended the council as a bishop, spoke many times about "crossing the threshold of hope" and a rebirth of Christian faith in the new millennium.

So far the evidence is mixed. One in every three new children born in "Christian Europe" today is Muslim. Except for Islam, religious belief and practice are declining across the continent. So are fertility rates. Pope Benedict XVI told a gathering of Italian priests recently that the "so-called traditional Churches look like they're dying." In fact, in Europe's wealth and selfishness and refusal to have children, an entire civilization seems to be *choosing* to die.

Earlier this month, Pope Benedict told a group of new bishops to pray for “a humble trust in God and for the apostolic courage born of faith.” In 2002, the then-Cardinal Ratzinger said that “a bishop must do as Christ did: precede his flock, being the first to do what he calls others to do and, first of all, being the one who stands against the wolves who come to steal the sheep.”

Whether history judges Vatican II as a success or a failure finally depends on us -- bishops, clergy, religious and laypeople alike – and how zealously we live our faith; how deeply we believe; and how much apostolic courage we show to an unbelieving world that urgently needs Jesus Christ.

We’ve been here before. The Council of Nicaea could have failed. That council, and all the long history that followed it, could have turned out very differently. It didn’t because of one man – a young deacon and scholar at Nicaea named Athanasius of Alexandria, who was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Athanasius fought for the true Catholic faith at Nicaea and throughout his entire career. Arian bishops excommunicated him. Emperors resented him. His enemies falsely accused him of cruelty, sorcery and even murder. He was exiled *five times*. And in the face of it all, he became the single most articulate voice defending the orthodox Catholic faith, which is why even today we remember him as *Athanasius contra mundum*: “Athanasius against the world.”

But he never gave up. He had courage. He had the truth. And the truth won. He became one of the best-loved bishops and greatest Doctors of the Church -- and the faith we take for granted today, we owe largely to him.

Now, that’s my idea of a bishop. That’s my idea of a Catholic believer fully alive in Jesus Christ. And if bishops and their people choose to live that same apostolic courage once again -- beginning here, now, tonight -- then John XXIII’s hopes for the council as a new dawn for Christian life really *will* rise in the Church as a light to the nations.