

## Session 4

# The Gospel Makes Progress

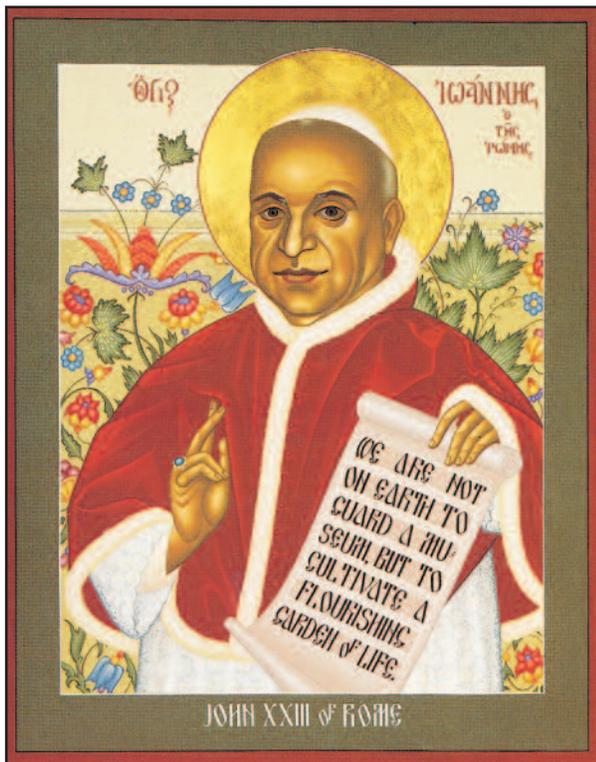
When John XXIII opens the Council October 11, 1962, he seeks to quiet the prophets of doom among Church leaders. He seeks to engage the world and serve its people. He wants a council that updates the Church and seeks unity, not one that repeats dogmas and condemns opponents.

Three words describe what the pope hopes for. The first word, *aggiornamento*, refers to updating the church, bringing it into the present, and addressing the signs of the times. The second word, *ressourcement*, means looking to sources in the past that help reclaim essentials. The third word is *development*, which means the Gospels and Church Traditions are dynamic; they make progress in the world. For example, the New Testament takes slavery for granted in society, but from the beginning many Christians free their slaves and over centuries move to abolish it.

Vatican II was like an earthquake after 400 years of little change. On October 11, 1962, 2,500 cardinals and bishops processed across St. Peter's Square through waving, clapping crowds, into St. Peter's Basilica, the huge church in Rome built over the tomb of the apostle Peter. They met every fall for four years.

A total of 2,860 bishops participated in the council over the four years. They came from 116 countries: 36% from Europe, 34% from the Americas, 20% from Asia and Oceania, 10% from Africa.

Members of the curia, the Vatican administrative bureaucracy, headed each of the ten commissions that Pope John directed to prepare proposals for the council. They consulted the bishops of the world, collated their input, and created pro-



posals and questions to discuss, all in Latin.

As its first order of business, the council planned to elect 16 members to each commission. The curia supplied a list of bishops to elect. At this early point many bishops didn't know one another and hadn't chatted over cappuccinos or dinner. A wise cardinal called for a 48-hour break, so the bishops could caucus in language groups, learn from one another who could contribute to commissions among their own, and select from a wider slate of candidates. Consequently, the commissions drew broader and more diverse membership—a move that enlivened proceedings. The bishops rejected most of the Curia's original proposals and directed the commissions to redevelop them. Fifteen minutes into the council the Holy Spirit began encouraging diversity and change.

Work on new understandings of scripture and tradition continued throughout the Council. In 1943, Pope Pius XII set off a flurry of scholarship when he approved scientific methods of bible study and recognized three layers of tradition—Jesus' own teaching, then a 40-year period of apostolic preaching and oral tradition, and then the collecting of oral traditions and writing of the gospels.

Not until its final session in 1965 did the Council pass its revised

Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), which tells us that God has entered our history and revealed God's very self. We humans are made for communion with God. God has spoken in creation, in the prophets, and in Jesus Christ, in whom we see God as one of us.

The Council affirms revelation is alive in the Church, making progress in history. The two sources of revelation—scripture and tradition—are really one, for the scriptures arise out of the message of the eyewitness disciples and the life of the early Christian communities. We, the People of God, continue to hand on these traditions today through the prayer, study, and experience of each of us as the document describes:





“The **TRADITION** that comes from the apostles **MAKES PROGRESS** in the Church with the help of the **HOLY SPIRIT**.

There is a **GROWTH IN INSIGHT** into the realities and words that are being passed on.

This comes about in various ways. It comes **THROUGH THE CONTEMPLATION AND STUDY OF BELIEVERS** who ponder these things in their hearts.

It comes **FROM THE INTIMATE SENSE OF SPIRITUAL REALITIES WHICH THEY EXPERIENCE**.

And it comes **FROM THE PREACHING OF THOSE WHO HAVE RECEIVED, ALONG WITH THEIR RIGHT OF SUCCESSION IN THE EPISCOPATE, THE SURE CHARISM OF TRUTH**.

Thus, as the centuries go by, the Church is always advancing towards the **PLENTITUDE** of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in her”  
(*Dei Verbum* #8).

### **Reflect**

- How do you continue to study and contemplate our Christian tradition?
- How does your study and contemplation animate the way you live and participate in family and civic community?
- To whom have you handed on your study and insight?
- How have you experienced that God lives and the Spirit breathes in you and all of us?