



Quick Reference Guide

The Documents of Vatican II

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1. The Dogmatic Constitution on THE CHURCH (In Latin: *Lumen gentium*) A strong document argued by the Council from the first day to its passage; widely supported; set major new focus for the church. Approved on Nov 21, 1964. Vote: 2151 to 5.

Here are the key points:

- The church is in Christ; it is a sacrament of Christ, a mystery of depth. (1)
- It is the Body of Christ. (3, 7)
- It is the People of God, among whom the baptized are called as ministers. (Ch 2)
- It is led by the bishops, bound as a college, in unity with the pope, in a bond of charity and peace. (Ch 3)
- The primary role of the bishop is to shepherd God's people. (21) The ministry of the bishop is that of a servant to the people of God. (24)
- The permanent diaconate is restored. (29)
- There is a distinction between the "priesthood of the baptized" and that of the "ordained." (10)
- For those called to be Catholic, the Church is necessary for salvation. (14) But merely following the law of the Church is not enough; we must also live in love. (14)
- Those in other Christian churches are also related to us. (15) Likewise Jews, Moslems, and all who seek God are connected to us. (16)
- The role of the faithful is to be church in the world. (34)
We are to seek the Reign of God in our everyday work. (33)
- The call to holiness is universal, and the way to holiness is love. (Ch 5)
- Religious live as dedicated members. (Ch 6)
- We are part of the great "communion of saints" bound together in God's love. (47-51)
- The blessed Virgin Mary takes her place, too, among God's people, and all devotion to her must ultimately lead to Christ, the Lord (Ch 8).



2. Dogmatic Constitution on DIVINE REVELATION (in Latin: *Dei Verbum*). A strong document stating that the Church moves forward in time, developing a deeper understanding of what is handed down about the Reign of God. Approved on Nov 18, 1965. Vote: 2344 to 6.

Here are the key points:

- This document restored the understanding that all revelation is complete in Jesus Christ. He alone is the source of revelation. The Scriptures, therefore, are the foundation of divine revelation. Tradition elaborates the meaning of the Scriptures for each generation. (4)
- Doctrine and dogma are expressed in different words for different generations. But the eternal truths do not change. (5-6)
- Dated routine changes but authentic tradition remains always with us. (5)
- Our response to God's revelation is faith. Through faith we entrust our whole selves to God. This faith is handed on to all generations through living traditions. (8)
- There is a close link between Scripture, Tradition, and the teaching authority of the Church. (10)
- Revelation is handed on to us by the Church. (7-9)
- God wants us to know God fully! (2)
- God reveals the inner life of the Trinity to us, communicating God's own self to us. This is known to us as grace. (2)
- This revelation is complete in Christ, but what the Gospel demands of us is still being revealed. God is still speaking.
- Over time, there is growth in our understanding of what God desires (8).
- This growth in understanding is expressed in our sacred Tradition. So Tradition and Scripture have a very close connection and flow from the same divine well.

3. Constitution on SACRED LITURGY (in Latin: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*) Major document reforming the Liturgy. Approved on Dec 4, 1963. Vote: 2147 to 4.

Here are the key points:

- The bishops wanted [1] to give vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; [2] to adapt what is changeable to the needs of today, [3] to promote union among all who believe in Christ, and [4] to strengthen the church's mission to all humankind. (1)
- This document established that the Mass (liturgy) is the source and summit of the Christian life. (10)
- It said that, for the liturgy to be effective, the faithful must be [1] well disposed, [2] know what they are doing, and [3] participate. (11 & 14))
- It established that some elements are changeable (language, books, prayers, music,



persons, and places) and some aren't (Scripture, bread, wine, offertory, consecration, communion). (21)

- It allowed for use of the vernacular in worship. Latin was retained in an official way but for full participation to become a reality, the language of the people would be needed. (36, 54)
- It restored the Eucharist as an act rather than a static devotional object. This meant a down playing of devotions outside of Mass (rosary, benediction, and so forth) in order to focus on the liturgical year and rites. (48)
- It established Baptism and Eucharist with primacy among the sacraments. (6)
- It called for the full, active, conscious participation of all the faithful as the aim to be considered before all others. (11)
- It reminds us it is never enough to simply follow the “letter of the law” making sure we are correct and proper. (11)
- It allowed for the removal of elements that are “out of harmony with the inner nature of the liturgy.” (21)
- It proposed a list of reforms, including simpler rites (50), more use of the Bible (51), the prayer of the faithful (52), roles for the laity (30), and others.

4. Pastoral Constitution on the CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD (in

Latin: *Gaudium et spes*) A very important, historic document speaking to the church and to all people about the hopes and dreams of the human family. The first document to address the whole world issued at such a council. Approved on Dec 7, 1965. Vote: 2309 to 75.

Here are the key points:

- "The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ." (1)
- We must look at and trust the signs of the times and understand the world in which we live. (Contrast with Pius IX's Syllabus of Errors in 1864: The pope "cannot and should not be reconciled and come to terms with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization...") (4)
- All human persons have dignity and are our responsibility. (Ch 1)
- Everyone must consider his or her neighbor as “another self.” (27)
- We should have respect and love for those who think differently than we do. (28)



- The church lives and acts in the world. "Let there be no false opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other." It isn't "the world against the church." It's "the world together with the church." (43)
- We must all seek the common good. (25-26)
- God's voice echoes in our very depths and is called "conscience." (16)
- We have an inborn hunger for God. (21)
- Treated problems of "special urgency": Households of faith, culture, economics, politics, & war and peace. Called all to support and seek the common good. (Part 2)

5. Decree on COMMUNICATIONS: A relatively weak, seldom read document, condescending in tone and addressed to the media and those who control it. This document is seen as out-of-touch with the overall theology of the council. Approved on Dec 4, 1963. Vote: 1960 to 164.



6. Decree on ECUMENISM: A major move forward for the church. Approved on Nov 21, 1964. Vote: 2137 to 11.

- Seeks restoration of ties not return to Rome.
- Admits blame for separation was on both sides.
- Calls for a change of heart to make ecumenism possible.
- Says that sharing in worship may at times be necessary for gaining of the grace of unity. (8)
- Encouraged dialogue and calls for the Roman Church to reform itself as part of the process of reunion.

7. Decree on EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES: A minor document giving Rome's perspective on the 6 main Eastern Rite churches: Chaldean, Syrian, Maronite, Coptic, Armenian, and Byzantine. It does, however, state an ardent desire for reconciliation and clearly proclaims the equality of the Eastern and Western traditions. Approved on Nov 21, 1964. Vote: 2110 to 39.

8. Decree on THE BISHOPS' PASTORAL OFFICE: A follow-up document to the one on the church. Approved on Oct 28, 1965. Vote: 2319 to 2.

- Gives a job description for bishop and stresses the need for shared decision making (collegiality).
- Calls for bishops to be servant leaders.
- Established diocesan pastoral councils.

9. Decree on PRIESTLY FORMATION: Relaxed the rules for training established at the Council of Trent 450 years earlier but still misses the mark for today's needs. A starter document, calling for training in Scripture, pastoral counseling, ecumenism, history, and personal formation. Allows for local training guidelines to produce priests more ready to deal with local pastoral realities. Approved on Oct 28, 1965. Vote: 2318 to 3.

10. Decree on APOSTOLATE OF THE LAITY: Has less influence than the Constitutions but important as the first document in the history of ecumenical councils to address itself to anyone other than the church's own clergy. Approved on Nov 18, 1965. Vote: 2305 to 2.

- Declares that the laity have a ministry by virtue of their baptisms, not merely a sharing in the ministry of the ordained.

11. Decree on THE MINISTRY AND LIFE OF PRIESTS:

A last minute document which failed to deal with celibacy and left the priesthood un-renewed in an otherwise largely renewed Catholic Church. A synod later (1970) tried to fix this. Approved on Dec 7, 1965. Vote: 2390 to 4.

- Calls on priests to support the laity.
- Reaffirmed celibacy for priests of the Latin Rite, while saying that celibacy is not demanded by the very nature of the priesthood but seems "suitable."



12. Decree on MISSIONARY ACTIVITY: Encouraged retaining local, "pagan" religious customs and incorporating the gospel into them, a radical idea. Also states that the whole church is missionary, meaning that all the people of God are called to introduce others to the faith. A document which is meant to consolidate all strains of ecclesiology discussed elsewhere. Promulgated on the last day of the council in 1965. Approved on Dec 7, 1965. Vote: 2394 to 5.

13. Decree on THE APPROPRIATE RENEWAL OF RELIGIOUS LIFE:

Urged religious women and men to (1) return to their roots, their reasons for being founded and to (2) adjust to the needs of changing times in the modern church. Does not repeat the teaching of Trent that religious life is a superior state to that of the married. Approved Oct 28, 1965. Vote: 2321 to 4.

14. Declaration on CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: A weak document which left most of the work to post-conciliar development. Still under study today. Approved on Oct 28, 1965. Vote: 2290 to 35.

15. Declaration on THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE CHURCH TO NON-CHRISTIANS (in Latin: *Nostra Aetate*) Earth-shaking document. Approved on Oct 28, 1965. Vote: 2221 to 88.

- Began as a statement only about our relations with the Jews but was widened to say that "the truth" is present outside the Body of Christ and is to be respected wherever it is found, mentioning in particular Hinduism, Buddhism, & Islam, as well as Judaism
- The Catholic Church, it states, encourages dialogue and opens itself to the contributions of these others.
- Most importantly, it states that the Jews cannot be blamed as a race for the death of Jesus; they are loved by God and every form of persecution or discrimination is condemned!

16. Declaration on RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: The most controversial of the Council. Began as a chapter in the document on ecumenism. Approved on Dec 7, 1965. Vote: 2308 to 70.

- Allows for the development of doctrine.
- Says that the freedom of persons requires that no one ever be forced to join the church.
- The church claimed freedom for itself in this document, but also for all religious practice of every kind everywhere.

