

Of the four or five incidents that made the first session of Vatican II the most dramatic and the most decisive of the Council's four sessions, the first was Pope John's opening speech. Some of the highlights:

1. The pope's repudiation of the "prophets of doom" who can see nothing but prevarication and ruin in modern times, who think things are getting worse and worse, who speak as if the end of the world were at hand. He is here describing an attitude that has been called "Catholic catastrophism," which was very common in many RC circles over the previous century and a half, when various revolutions diminished the control the Church had over vast areas of human life. Such people, he said, tend to idealize the past as if it were always favorable to the Church and they tend to ignore the restrictions on the Church's freedom that came along with the support of the temporal authorities. Pope John asked the Council to consider whether humanity might not be entering a new order of things, under divine providence.

2. He said that the chief aim of the Council was the defense and presentation of the revealed deposit of faith. This would require "that the Church never turn her eyes from the sacred heritage of truth which she has received from those who went before; and at the same time she must also look at the present times which have introduced new conditions and new forms of life, and have opened new avenues for the Catholic apostolate." Notice the two-fold task, to be undertaken simultaneously, that the Council at once be faithful to the heritage of truth and be alert to the contemporary world. I imagine the pope as saying that the Council has to do what a good preacher has to do: preach the Gospel and know your congregation! "Our task," he says later, "is not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with an antiquity; eagerly and without fear, we must devote ourselves to the task our age demands, pursuing the path which the Church has followed for twenty centuries."

3. He did not want the Council simply to repeat what everyone already knew. He wanted a new and deeper comprehension of the faith and he wanted the ancient faith presented in a manner intelligible to contemporaries: "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the formulation in which it is clothed is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great account, with patience if necessary, measuring everything by the forms and proportions of a teaching authority primarily pastoral in character." That the Council should be "pastoral" and not dogmatic was an extremely important guideline for the bishops to follow.

4. He did not want the Council to issue a set of condemnations to combat errors, which, he said, often vanish as quickly as mist after sunrise. The Church had often been severe against errors in the past, and he acknowledged that there were errors to combat today. "But at the present time," he said, "the spouse of Christ prefers to use the medicine of mercy rather than the weapons of severity; and, she thinks she meets today's needs by explaining the validity of her doctrine more fully rather than by condemning."

If one knows the kinds of texts that were prepared for the Council, particularly by the preparatory Theological Commission, it is obvious that by these four points Pope John was distancing himself from that material and giving the bishops the authority of his own voice should they also find those texts inadequate to the challenges facing the Church. And when bishops were to declare their dissatisfaction with the prepared material, they would often invoke Pope John's description of the aims and methods of the Council.

For these reasons I think Pope John's opening speech was certainly the most important of all the papal speeches given at Vatican II, and I would even argue that it was the most important speech of the four sessions of the Council.