

Second vatican council essay sample



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The intervening period between the first and second Vatican Council was a time for both social and religious revolution. After World War Two, the new medium of television brought the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Liberation debate and many other social and political issues into the lounge rooms of millions of people every night, sparking debate and fanning the flames of change. The Christian world did not escape this mood of change and in an unprecedented response, the Second Vatican Council was held. Between the time of the First Vatican Council and the Second Vatican Council the church was very conservative, traditional and remained virtually unchanged.

The First Vatican Council addressed issues like rationalism and liberalism, and attempted to keep them separate from Catholicism. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2012) However, in the 1940's, 50's and 60's, concepts such as liberalism, communism, secularism, humanism, ecumenism and equality were all hot button issues that were affecting both the secular and religious world. Pope John felt that the First Vatican Council failed to address the pastoral aspects of the faith, so the Church decided to re-evaluate its practices and try to modernize the Catholic tradition by incorporating aspects of these ideologies into Catholicism. (Voice of Vatican 2, 2012) These religious paradigm shifts still influence our world today to a significant extent as topics discussed during the Council such as ecumenism, secularism, liberalism and equality continue to evolve within the Church today.

Vatican 2 was destined to be a radical shift from the conservative spirit which had overcome the First Vatican Council, and the general consensus was that the time was right for a review of the Churches practices.

(González, Justo L. The Story of Christianity. Vol. 2, 1985) While the initial catalyst of the council was Pope John XXIII, many external changes in the secular world played a significant role in assembling the council. Since the time of the First council, secularism had taken off and the Church no longer had the political power it once did. (González, Justo L. The Story of Christianity. Vol. 2, 1985) The age of discovery was over, and independence and liberalism were strengthening. Both the face of Europe and history were changed by the devastation of the two world wars and the age of technology and communication had begun. (González, Justo L. The Story of Christianity. Vol. 2, 1985)

Thousands of young people were starting to protest and demand an end to inequitable treatment of black Americans and women, in addition to the many more protesting for an end to the war in Vietnam. The traditional and moral standards of the 1930's and 1940's were being challenged like never before. Discussions of contraception and abortion in the 'Roe vs. Wade' debate, the increasing number of public schools and secular humanism taking over as the new religion in the media were all issues the Catholic Church was facing during this period of cynicism and uncertainty. (My Father's House, 2007) There was a growing tendency to distrust authority, and the Church needed to respond.

In a rare acknowledgement of current trends, Pope John XXIII called a council to re-evaluate the Churches practices and address the pastoral elements that were ignored during Vatican 1. The First Vatican Council was started by Pope Pius IX, in an attempt to defend Catholic followers from the influences of liberalism, modernity, the French Revolution and the Enlightenment while

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encouraging biblical literalism and Papal authority. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2012) This period between the First and second council placed great emphasis on upholding traditional values, beliefs and practices. During this time, the priest was seen in a very authoritative light; he never faced the congregation whilst performing mass and he always spoke in Latin. (Mark Pattison, Church News, 2005) There was also very little participation of the laity, meaning that there were no readers or ministers, everyone was just a mere observer. Communion was always received on the tongue in a kneeling position and marriage between Catholics and non-Catholics was frowned upon. (Mark Pattison, Church News, 2005) This was a very conservative and traditional time, in which the Church was very in-ward thinking. However, with growing pressure from the secular world to make the Church to adopt a more modern way of thinking, the Pope felt that changes needed to be made and he decided to hold a Second Vatican Council.

The Second Vatican Council expressed respect for the truth and goodness that came with modernization. (Patheos, 2012) The Pope believed that to keep that word of God relevant in people's lives, the Church should evolve with a changing secular society. The council was held at St Peters Basilica in the Vatican under Pope John XXIII, on the 11th of October 1962 and closed under Pope Paul VI on 8 December 1965 and addressed issues such as ecclesiology, liturgy, religious freedom and ecumenism. (New Catholic Encyclopedia, pg. 563, 1967) the time the council ended, the Church promoted a more liberal way of thinking. The structure of the Church had become less hierarchical and the role of the laity became more empowering. Readers during mass were introduced, ministers of the Eucharist and

leadership roles in parishes such as liturgical groups. As a result of the council, the role of the priest was less authoritative, with greater emphasis being placed on ‘ministering to the people’.

The priest now faces the congregation, speaks in the vernacular and communion is now received in the hand while standing. Pope John also called for the growth of ecumenism, by trying to unite the different denominations which he called the ‘separated brethren’ and promoted *Dignitatis Humanae* or religious freedom which states that the Church will support the dignity of the human spirit. These changes were made in an attempt to keep the church relevant in a modern world; however this does not mean that every Catholic shifted their paradigms with the Church. At the time of the council, and even now, there are many people within the catholic community who believe that the church became too liberal with the reforms made during the council. In saying that, Pope John’s call for a paradigm shift within the Church was extremely successful, as many of the changes made as a result of the Second Vatican council still influence our thinking today.

The Second Vatican Council was a major paradigm shift in the Church’s history, and still influences our thinking to a significant extent today. This is evident in the way concepts discussed at the council such as secularism, liberalism; ecumenism and equality continue to be issues the Church faces today. In Australia, for example, 23% of the population identify themselves as following ‘no religion’. (Australian Census Bureau, 2011) The Church continues to be criticised for being too conservative regarding issues such as abortion and contraception, in addition to being criticised for continuing to limit the role of women in the Church. (National Catholic Reporter, 2009)

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Many people also remain opposed to ecumenism, believing that Catholicism is the only Church founded by Jesus Christ and that religious liberty is to be condemned. (National Catholic Reporter, 2009)

These are all ongoing issues which the Church are being asked to consider, and the fact that people continue to discuss the changes made by the council shows just how relevant this paradigm shift is in our modern world. It can be concluded that the Second Vatican Council has had a tremendous influence on the post-modern world. The Church has undergone a dramatic change from the conservative time of the First Vatican Council, which sought to discourage Catholics from pursuing innovative ideas of the time, to the inclusive and liberal spirit of Vatican 2. Although there are still those who argue about whether or not the Church went too far, the general consensus is that the Second Vatican Council revitalised the Church in a very positive way. It is hard to imagine the Catholic Church maintaining any relevance in today's world without the changes adopted as part of the Second Vatican Council.