

Editorial

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

PERHAPS with hope or perhaps with foreboding, but almost certainly with a sense of Church history in the making, as the fall of 1962 turns into winter Christians everywhere will be looking towards Rome. For all of us the Second Council of the Vatican will be something too big to ignore. In Roman Catholic eyes, of course, this great assembly will be nothing less than the latest in a long line of "ecumenical councils" stretching back to A.D. 325 and the First Council of Nicaea. From many other Christians, though they cannot assess it quite so highly, it will still command respect as a gathering of the largest segment of the living "historic episcopate." Others again, to whom the official composition of the Council may mean relatively little, will yet take a sympathetic interest in it because of its importance for the common life of so great a body of Christian believers. Some, finally, will see it as a threat, no less dangerous because subtly disguised, to the truth of the Gospel and the liberty of Christian men. But none of us, however we may feel about it, will be able to shut our eyes to it.

No doubt the Second Vatican Council will necessarily devote most of its time and energy to the domestic affairs of the Roman Catholic Church. As an assembly of the responsible leaders of that Church, it will find its agenda in the most pressing needs of the Roman Catholic community. (Only those who have forgotten the age-old use of the title "ecumenical" to designate a generally acknowledged council of bishops will jump to the conclusion that the Council's chief business is with "ecumenicity" in the current sense.) As a review article in this number by one of our Associate Editors points out, Roman Catholic life and thought have undergone many striking developments in our own time. The present Council—the first since the rather abrupt termination of the First Vatican Council in 1870—will obviously have to take account of the new viewpoints and ask how far they should affect the official structure of Roman Catholicism. If fuller knowledge and changed circumstances clearly demand a more or less extensive reshaping of worship, discipline, and organization, then the assembled episcopate will have an important part to play in the formation of new patterns. One may well wonder whether time can be found for so much as a glance in other directions.

Yet even if the Second Vatican Council does not speak directly into the contemporary "ecumenical" dialogue, it is almost certain to touch on several of the chief and pressing concerns of the ecumenical movement, and in that way at least to say something to us all. To cite only two possibilities, there is good reason to suppose that the Council will address itself to the questions

raised by that great reformation of public worship which we know as the "liturgical movement" and to the problem, left insufficiently clarified in 1870, of the relation between the pope and the other bishops. But it is just these issues of the nature of authentic Christian worship and the true norm of Church order that most conspicuously concern "ecumenists" outside the Roman Church. Consequently, any serious discussion of liturgy or of episcopacy that may take place at the Council will naturally find an attentive audience among Orthodox, Protestant, and Anglican Christians.

Still more important, perhaps, for the "ecumenical" cause is the recognition given in the plans for the Second Vatican Council to a new trend in interchurch relations. The Council may not be immediately concerned with the deepest differences between Roman Catholics and their "separated brethren," but in one respect at least it will symbolize a fresh awareness of the tragedy of our separation and a new hope of reconciliation. Thanks to Pope John XXIII's generous invitation and the ready response of many other Christian leaders, a significant number of non-Roman-Catholic "observers" will enjoy a close-up view of the Council's activities. It would be unrealistic to minimize either the hostility stirred up by centuries of strife and mutual recrimination or the doctrinal barriers that would remain even if goodwill were to triumph decisively over hostility. But from the standpoint of faith it would seem no less unrealistic to ignore the striking witness to God's almighty grace in the widespread agreement that the quest for understanding should replace barren polemic and that we should learn once more to see each other as brothers in Christ, dedicated to one purpose and inspired by one hope.

This *Journal* has both valued contributors and faithful readers among Roman Catholics, but they will not be the only members of our family to ask God's blessing on the Second Vatican Council. By its very nature the *Journal* is committed to promoting mutual understanding among Christians, and we know that all who support our work and share our aims will pray that God will use the Council to set forward the renewal and reintegration of his whole Church militant.

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