IN the mid-20th century, Pope John XXIII called an ecumenical council to address new issues in the Church and society that arose from changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, war, and the rise of fascism and communism.

The decisions that were made at the Second Vatican Council continue to shape how we practice our faith today. Recall the last time you went to Mass. The fact that the prayers and Scripture readings were in a language other than Latin and that there were lay ministers are just two of the changes that came about as the result of decisions made during the Second Vatican Council.

**Providing Direction for the Future**

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Pope John XXIII responded to the challenges of the 20th century by calling the bishops of the world to come together for the Second Vatican Council. Pope John XXIII hinted that he would convene a SACRED ART

This artwork depicts a meeting convened by Pope John Paul II during which bishops from all over the world met to reaffirm the message of the Second Vatican Council. Meeting such as these, called by the pope to discuss matters of doctrine and pastoral care, are called synods. The pope also has the authority to call for an Ecumenical Council, a gathering of all the world’s bishops. During a council, Church leaders exercise their role as members of the Magisterium. One of the main differences between a synod and an Ecumenical Council is that with the pope's approval, the decisions of an Ecumenical Council are official teachings of the Church. During a synod, however, the members offer suggestions to the pope, which may or may not become official teachings at a later time.
council in 1959, shortly after he was elected pope. It took more than two years, however, for Church leaders to prepare for this grand event.

Around 2,450 bishops, as well as theologians, members of religious orders, and lay people attended this council, which lasted from 1962–1965. Unlike many previous Ecumenical Councils, the goal of the bishops during the Second Vatican Council was not to respond to people who were teaching heresy. Rather, Church leaders explored how Church teaching could be made clearer. One of the outcomes of the council was the invitation to all Catholics to recognize their call to holiness so that they could be effective evangelizers in the world.

Renewal

During the Second Vatican Council, the bishops approved 16 documents that responded to major issues of the modern day. Some of the Church teachings that were emphasized in the council documents include the role of the **laity** as the People of God and the need for a renewed understanding of the Church and its mission in the modern era. One document, for example, reminds us that each baptized person should recognize his or her call from God to live a life of holiness. The document on the role of the Church in the modern world points out that all members of the Church are called to support goodness and correct evils in the world. The document on the liturgy called for further renewal in the Mass and allowed for priests to celebrate Mass in the language of the people rather than in Latin, as was the custom. In the document on divine Revelation, the council clarified the Church’s teaching on Scripture and Tradition and called for Catholics to read the Bible more frequently and with greater devotion. In the document on religious freedom, the Church reaffirmed its commitment to support and work for everyone’s right to religious freedom.

The Church continues to renew itself in response to the signs of the times. In 2011, Catholics in the United States began using a new edition of the **Roman Missal**. Previously called the **Sacramentary**, the **Roman Missal** is the book that contains all the prayers that are prayed at Mass. The most current edition of the **Roman Missal** is a closer translation of the Latin original.

**Our Catholic Character**

During the Second Vatican Council, Church leaders clearly stated that the Eucharist is the high point of our lives as Catholics. To help us enter more fully into the sacrament, the Council made changes in the way we celebrate the Eucharist. For centuries the Mass was prayed in Latin, with the priest facing an altar built into the wall of the sanctuary, with his back to the assembly. Holy Communion was received only under the form of bread. There were no lay lectors or extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. Choirs often sang for the people rather than with the people. In many parishes, congregations used English missals while following along with Latin prayers. Think about Mass in your parish today. How is it different from what is described here? The more participatory nature of today’s Mass can be attributed to the vision, understanding, and work of the bishops at the Second Vatican Council.