The Ecumenical Council

—an interview with the Very Reverend John M. Oesterreicher, director of the Seton Hall University Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies, who last year was appointed one of the consultants charged with preparations for the forthcoming Second Vatican Council.

What is the title of your position in connection with the preparations for the Ecumenical Council, and by whom were you selected?

The answer to the first part of your question is quite simple. I am one of several consultors of the Secretariat for the Unity of Christians. The answer to the second part is a little difficult. I was never told who proposed my name, but I think it was Cardinal Bea, the President of the Secretariat. In any case, the decree of appointment was in the name of the Holy Father and was signed by the late Cardinal Secretary of State, Cardinal Tardini.

How many other individuals are performing similar duties?

Altogether there are twelve preparatory commissions of which two, because of their special functions, are called secretariats. One of the commissions is known as the Theological Commission, another deals with the role and rule of bishops, again another with the lay apostolate. There is a Commission on the Eastern Churches, another on the liturgy, still another on the missions, and so on. Each commission is presided over by a Cardinal and made up of members and consultors. All in all, there are about 700 men.

Do they represent all nations of the world?

More or less. For obvious reasons, European representatives prevail. But it might interest you to hear that, at our last meeting at the beginning of March, Pope John visited and addressed us. As he approached me, Cardinal Bea said: "This is Monsignor Oesterreicher from the
United States.” I don’t know whether it was the combination of the two names, Oesterreicher and the United States, or the sight of so many from so many lands that prompted his remark. In any case, he joyfully exclaimed: “This is a real world congress! You truly represent the universal apostolate.”

What, specifically, are your duties in this post?

I’m afraid I cannot give a specific answer. Like everyone engaged in the work of preparation for the Council, I took an oath of silence. In broad terms, however, all workers for the Council prepare reports on questions to be considered and comment on the reports of others. These reports are discussed at meetings, worked over in subcommittees, and then given final shape for presentation to the Central Commission.

What is the Central Commission?

It is the Commission headed by the Pope himself, though he does not actually preside over all its meetings. Its members include the presidents of the individual commissions and a number of other cardinals, bishops, and advisers. It watches over the work of the other commissions, receives their conclusions, passes on them, that is to say accepts or rejects them, and, after approval by the Holy Father, reads them for presentation to the Council.

Why is a Council necessary since the Pope himself speaks infallibly?

It is true that, whenever the Pope solemnly speaks from the Chair of Peter, wishing to bind all the faithful, he teaches infallibly. But in proclaiming an infallible truth in the realm of faith or morality—which, incidentally, is rarer than most people imagine—he does not express his private opinions but draws on the storehouse of truth, on the doctrines the Church has held through the centuries. Staggering though its powers may be, the papal rule is no autocracy. Under and with the Pope, the bishops share in governing and shepherding the Church.

I grant that the Council is not necessary. But must something be necessary in order to be good? The forthcoming Council, however, is not only a good thing; it may well be of tremendous consequence. While the supreme authority of the Pope guarantees the unity of the Church, that godly company of bishops assembled for a Universal Council bespeaks the Church’s Catholicity. The very fact of the Council, then, may convince Christians separated from Rome that the dogma of papal infallibility in no way alters, rather does it strengthen the age-old doctrine of the infallibility of the entire Church.

How many delegates will attend the Council?

“Delegates” isn’t quite the right term. A delegate is really one who is empowered by others to act in their
name. Now, the members of the Council are the bishops of the whole world. It is true they represent the Church in the territories given to their care; still, the power invested in them does not come from the priests and people of their dioceses. Rather does it derive from their consecration, from the supernatural reality of their office. As the successors of the apostles, they are the appointed teachers of revealed truth, the prime witnesses to the faith.

In addition to the bishops, other prelates and the superiors general of the Church’s ancient religious orders will attend. Some bishops will be accompanied by a theologian or canonist of their choice and by a secretary, but these companions will have no right to vote. Not every bishop will avail himself of this privilege and not all bishops will be able to get to Rome, either by reason of age or of sickness or, possibly, because their governments will not permit them to leave. Roughly, then, there may be two or three thousand participants in the Council.

What facilities are being utilized to accommodate the anticipated influx of participants?

To accommodate the members of the Council and their company, the various religious houses will be used and, if necessary, some hotels.

Do you have an estimate of the probable duration of the Council?

Yes, if you do not forget that what you asked for is an estimate. The Council is to begin on the feast of the Motherhood of Our Lady, October 11, of this year. The first plenary sessions and committee meetings will probably last till some time in December so as to give all those bishops who wish it the opportunity of going home for Christmas. This recess may also give some of the committees to be established by the Council time for further study on, and wording and wording of, the decrees to be issued by the Council. It seems to be the hope of the Holy Father that the Council will be ended by Easter of next year. Let me repeat, this is only conjecture.

Is there a definite agenda for the Council? If so, what major questions will be considered?

Yes, there will be a definite agenda, and it is the task of the Central Commission to prepare it. The fact that the forthcoming Council is to be a continuation of the First Vatican Council, which ended abruptly because of the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, and, no less, the names of the various commissions established give some idea of the questions the Council will consider. It will probably spell out the grandeur and power of the episcopal office, the dignity of the layman and his participation in the one priesthood of Christ. It may set forth some rules for further liturgical reform and the administration of sacraments; it may have something to say about our relationship to other Christians, to Jews, and about some of the tantalizing problems that face modern man. There may be pronouncements on the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, on man’s freedom and the role of his conscience, on the equality of the various Eastern rites with the Latin rite, on the functions of the territorial conferences of bishops, and many other topics. I’m afraid this may seem vague, but at the present time little more can be said.

Can we expect any “surprise” or unanticipated decisions from the Council, or will the preliminary work be so comprehensive that the work of the Council will consist primarily of making affirmative or negative decisions on questions presented to it?

Though the preliminary work of the various committees is comprehensive indeed, the Council is in no way confined to it. The Council is, after all, a sovereign body and we, the members and consultors of the preparatory commissions, are only its servants. On the other hand, it is bound by the teachings of the Church. If your question means: Will the Council revoke any of the Church’s dogmas? The answer is an emphatic No. Yet, there may be unanticipated decisions, depending on the one who does the anticipating.

Incidentally, one must not expect of the Council that it will answer all our questions and solve all the problems of the day. This is hardly possible. Even more important than its many important decisions-to-come are the pace it will set, the climate it will create, the awakening it will cause, and the inspiration it will bring about. As a matter of fact, it has already stirred up minds, it has even now strengthened theological thought and given new spiritual impulses.

Like all the Councils before it, the Second Vatican Council will make decisions and issue decrees; no ecstatic messages will be forthcoming. The Council will be a meeting during which some hard thinking will be done, where some lively discussions may be held, where arguments may go back and forth till the wording of its pronouncements becomes as clear and comprehensive as possible, till it is as balanced as truth requires. The pronouncements will display little passion; their fire and warmth will be hidden. No wind will blow over the Eternal City as did over Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. The transformation of society depends and will depend on us. If we hear not only with the ear but also with the heart, we may well help bring about a pentecostal outpouring of grace on the Church and on the world.
What needs do you feel dictated the convening of the Council?

The calling of the Council was a spontaneous act of the Holy Father, an inspiration that came to him suddenly while offering Mass at St. Paul’s Without-the-Walls on the feast of the Apostle’s conversion, January 25, 1959. In an encyclical letter of June, 1959, he stated that he expected from the Council an increase of faith, an inner reform of Christian life, and an adjustment of the Church’s discipline to the needs of our day. It is his hope that the Council will be a manifestation of truth, a display of unity, a sight of love so striking as to invite, by itself, those separated from the Church to see her in her true light and seek that unity which Christ so ardently prayed for.

To what extent will the Holy Father’s personality be of influence in the decisions of the Council?

Much of the Council-in-the-making, that is the Council in its present preparatory state, bears the stamp of his personality, and I hope that the actual Council will reflect his intuitive grasp of God’s will for our day. In any case, no decision of the Council is valid and binding until it is confirmed by Him.

Do you have any information about representatives of other religions who may attend?

As far as I know, no definitive decisions have been made, but in all likelihood observers from all major Christian bodies will be present. It must be our prayer that their presence will manifest the kinship of all who believe in Jesus as the Christ and Lord, as well as their affection and concern for one another.

Are all the sessions to be general sessions, or will there be a breakdown into sub-sections or committees with the responsibility of reporting their recommendations to the general gathering?

As I indicated before, there will be plenary sessions and meetings of committees.

Where will the conferences of the Council be held?

The plenary sessions will be held in the Basilica of St. Peter. For other meetings there are a great many ecclesiastical buildings in Rome to choose from.

One final question. What is the special purpose of the Secretariat to which you have been assigned?

In the words of Pope John himself, the Secretariat for the promotion of unity of all Christians is a sign of love for those who bear the precious name of Christian but are separated from the Church of Rome. Beyond its specific tasks for the Council, it is also to act as a sort of liaison between Catholics and other Christians, indeed between Catholics and all believers in the God of revelation, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and thus tighten the brotherly bond between them so that one day this now tenderly link may become firm, visible, and lasting.

Indicative of the universality of the Church is this array of expert consultors (left to right): Abbe’ Michalon (France); Father Toward (U.S.A.); Professor Bellini (Italy); Professor Feiner (Switzerland); Doctor Thyssen (Holland); Monsignor Oesterreicher; Monsignor Vodopivec (Yugoslavia—although at present in Rome); Monsignor Davis (England); Monsignor Habemeier (Germany); Monsignor Volk (Germany); Monsignor Maccarone (Italy); Monsignor Ewers (Rome); Bishop Hart (Scotland); Bishop Nierman (Holland); Bishop de Smedt (Belgium); Monsignor Willebrands (Secretary of the Secretariat).