“Veni, Creator Spiritus”-- “Come, Creator Spirit” were the very first words with which the Second Vatican Council opened on October 11, 1962. Pope John XXIII intoned the words of that hymn as he knelt before the central altar at St. Peter’s in Rome. Neither he nor anyone else could have known how unexpectedly, how magnificently and how fully over the next three years the Holy Spirit responded to that request.

But all of that was in the future of the four sessions of the Council. It was as yet a story to be told. It is a story that has continued to be told over the last fifty years, up to this very day.

The prelude to that story took place during three years. It started in January, 1959 when Pope John announced, to the surprise of everyone and to the consternation of some, that he was going to call a general council of the church. Such a gathering is a truly unusual event in the life of the church; this would be only the twenty-first such council. The two most recent ones had begun ninety years before in Rome at the Vatican in 1869, and more than four hundred years before that at Trent in 1545.

After the preparations of three years and the pageantry of the opening day ceremonies came the patience, and sometimes the impatience, of day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-month work on recommendations, topics, subjects, categories, documents, and sometimes interminable interventions as the speeches were called. It was work so slow that only at the end of its second session in 1963 did the council officially promulgate its first document, “Sacrosanctum Concilum,” “The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” on the worship of God, the center of Christian life and prayer. Perhaps, with the changes in the celebration of the Mass that it brought, no other document made as clear to the ordinary Catholic that the Holy Spirit was indeed creatively responding to Pope John’s opening prayer, “Veni, Creator Spiritus.” Telling the story of that first document, “Sacrosanctum Concilum,” “The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” is the subject of our celebration tonight.