The Second Vatican Council, held from 1962 to 1965, was a unique gathering of the bishops of the Catholic Church. Not only did it produce the longest of the official church documents but more importantly, it wasn’t convened for a specific reason. As a result, the church was able to look introspectively at its own identity and what role it played in the wider world. Because this had never been done before, there was wide criticism and a general sense of confusion about the messages of the documents. One of the major points of contention was whether or not the Second Vatican Council recommended and itself revealed a genuine attitude of open, mutual dialogue between the Catholic Church and the wider world. Since the First Vatican Council seemed to foster a conservative attitude, the tone of the Second Vatican Council was hard to accept. Some evidence suggests that the Catholic Church was not willing to compromise its teachings for the sake of camaraderie and to fit in the modern world, but other sections reveal an encouragement to find common ground and create dialogue. Overall, the consistent language of inclusion and reoccurring call to action in developing a relationship with the wider world far exceeds in force the idea that the church did not want to foster these relationships. Moreover the Church remains firm in its beliefs but seeks to open dialogue for the sake of peace and community, through areas of common ground.

In order to fairly analyze this controversial topic, it is important to understand its scope. Firstly, the “genuine attitude” needs to be understood as a desire for the greater good of both parties rather than one. Therefore, one must be careful to identify the intentions of the documents
and whom they wish to strengthen. Secondly, the concept of “open, mutual dialogue” can be interpreted in two ways. One way is developing an environment of mere tolerance and the other is an active search for common ground, where beliefs may be compromised. Lastly, it is imperative to appreciate what it means for the council to “recommend and reveal” this attitude, and to understand it in both a literal and suggestive way. These clarifications create a platform to see the argument from both sides and understand where the confusions lie.

Initially it is difficult to see why the Second Vatican Council would seek to encourage lines of communication and dialogue with the wider world, given the number of competing religions and ideologies. However it becomes clear that it is necessary, in order to demonstrate consistency and to be relevant. As a result there is a strain between what needs to be done and why, bringing about the question of authenticity of intention. In *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Council writes about the freedom of conscience and religion in society. The document begins by stating: “We believe that this one true religion exists in the Catholic and Apostolic church, which the Lord Jesus entrusted the task of spreading it among all peoples”,¹ thus emphasizing its unwillingness to relent on the tenets of the faith to promote its growth. It then goes on to say that it is a human right to freely choose and practice any religion, without the fear of coercion and persecution. Laying out this right may seem merely as a means of understanding the coexistence of religions but it is later used to emphasize the Catholic Church’s rights. Moreover it goes on to claim rights for itself in section 13, “As the spiritual authority appointed by Christ the Lord with the duty imposed by divine command, of going into the whole world and preaching the Gospel to every creature, the church claims freedom for itself in human society and before every public

authority.”2 This promotion of others to promote itself can be interpreted as a pseudo-genuine attitude of open, mutual dialogue. A similarly questionable “genuine attitude” is found in Gaudium et Spes, the document addressing the church in the modern world. Though it mentions having dialogue, it encourages it in order to bring others to the church, as is apparent in section 62: “Every effort should be made therefore, to make artists feel they are understood by the church in their artistic work and to encourage them, while enjoying a reasonable standard of freedom, to enter into happier relationships with the Christian community.”3 This excerpt not only suggests that Catholics should mislead the world into perceiving a sense of support but also shows its unwavering position on its view of the world and its desire to bring everyone to its standards. This makes open dialogue difficult, especially if the world’s problems with the church stem from their firm beliefs on modern issues regarding technology, and the dignity of human life. The Second Vatican Council stays true to their previous stances on abortion and euthanasia4 in Gaudium et Spes, and does not leave it open for negotiation or progressive dialogue. Moreover, its view on the family make it clear that the promulgation of life and defense of it is at the center of marriage,5 which is not completely in line with progressive western views. Furthermore, areas of the Second Vatican Council documents seem to suggest open dialogue only regarding certain aspects but in many cases, it doesn’t seem open to changing to satisfy the world. However when it does suggest having open dialogue, it seems to the benefit of the Church.

Conversely, there are a number of instances where a seemingly authentic desire for open, dialogue is present in the documents. Most prominently in its language of inclusion and many

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2 Vatican II, Dignitatis Humanae, 13.
3 Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes, 62.
4 Ibid., 51.
5 Ibid., 50.
calls to action, it is evident that the council is promoting dialogue by suggesting points of
communion and asking Catholics to “enter with prudence and charity into discussion and
collaboration with members of other religions.”\(^6\) Towards the beginning of \textit{Gaudium et Spes}, the
council talks about “offer[ing] the human race the sincere cooperation of the church in fostering
a sense of sisterhood and brotherhood”.\(^7\) In order to dispel ideas that this may be for insincere
reasons, the council continues to say, “The church is not motivated by earthly ambition”,\(^8\) but
rather “to carry on the work of Christ under the guidance of the holy Spirit.”\(^9\) Therefore it is
possible to see a “genuine” desire to relate with the world. This idea is reinforced further on in
the document through an outline of the mutual benefits of the relationship between the church
and society in section 40.\(^10\)

In \textit{Nostra Aetate}, the document regarding the church and non-Christian religions, the
council goes through the world’s major religions and suggests focusing on similarities. The
strongest example of this is the relationship with the Muslims. In addition to saying that the
Church has a “high regard”\(^11\) for them, it also highlights connections, despite theological
differences, such as Jesus’ divinity.\(^12\) Interestingly, the council seems to compromise on
concepts, which would have previously been seen as blasphemous, as a means of developing
relationships. This is an ongoing theme throughout Nostra Aetate but nonetheless succeeds in
demonstrating an attitude of interchange. The genuineness of these calls to action is also seen in
the language used. Careful attention is made in the words chosen to reflect the attitude it wants to

\(^7\) Vatican II, \textit{Gaudium et Spes}, 3.
\(^8\) Ibid., 3.
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) Ibid, 40.
\(^12\) Ibid.
convey, using terms such as “sincere”\textsuperscript{13} and “courteous”,\textsuperscript{14} as well as reminding the reader that though people may be in error, they never lose their dignity.\textsuperscript{15}

Though the first view holds some merit, it is difficult to sustain the argument in its entirety when looking at the wider context of the various documents of the council. The idea that the Second Vatican council revealed a genuine attitude of open and mutual dialogue is evident as a reoccurring subject throughout \textit{Dignitatis Humanae}, \textit{Gaudium et Spes} and \textit{Nostra Aetate}. Despite this, an intermediate view can be held where open, mutual dialogue is promoted but the Church does not waver on what it believes and these beliefs shouldn’t be compromised in any case. Though documents are respectful of other religions, denominations and even atheists and encourages friendly discussions for the sake of peace, fraternity and salvation, they also reaffirm social and theological teachings of the Church. The points of similarity and common ground are only a basis to develop mutual understanding and respect, which if followed still glorifies God through the practice of the virtues of charity and patience.

In conclusion, though it may seem that the documents of the Second Vatican Council contradict themselves, particularly regarding a sincere attitude of openness to the wider world, the evidence suggests that the Council attempted to open the lines of communication and fraternity between the Catholic Church and the wider world in its language of inclusion, respectful reference to other religions and identifying mutual benefits as a result of improving these relationships. Furthermore, in context, the Council maintains its interpretation on various aspects of human life even if they don’t align with other world-views but suggest that dialogue

\textsuperscript{13} Vatican II, \textit{Gaudium et Spes}, 21.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 28.
should begin with common ground. In this way, the Church and the rest of society can approach each other with an attitude of mutual understanding and respect.
Bibliography