
Fifty Years of Debate on Vatican II

From Paul VI to Francis (1965–2015)

If the history of the conciliar event is necessary for the hermeneutics of Vatican II, also the history of the reception of the council is part of our understanding of it. Every Catholic has developed consciously or unconsciously an historical-theological framework where the position of Vatican II in Church history is located. The interpretation of Vatican II today cannot be disconnected from an interpretation of the history of the interpretations of Vatican II in these last fifty years.

1. Vatican II: Acknowledged, Received, Refused (1965–1970s)

On December 8, 1965, the end of Vatican II meant the return of bishops and theologians from Rome to their local churches, but it did not mean the conclusion of the debates or the end of the Roman Curia's attempt to control the final outcome of the council. This was in contrast to 1564, when not long after the end of the

Council of Trent, Pope Pius IV established the Congregation of the Council in charge of interpreting the decrees of the council and forbade the publication of any glosses or commentaries on them. In 1965, although the final texts of the council had been approved and solemnly promulgated by Pope Paul VI in order to be translated and spread in the Catholic Church, the conclusion of Vatican II did not entail a prohibition on commenting on the final texts. Hence the end of Vatican II did not imply that the Holy See and Roman Curia held a strict monopoly on the interpretation of the council texts.¹ Rather, the first opportunity for theologians to debate the council's final documents was given by a series of commentaries on the texts, published for theologians, priests, seminarians, and religious men and women, and also a broad readership eager to gain more familiarity with the texts of Vatican II.²

Of particular interest is that the most important of these commentaries came not from bishops who oversaw the drafting process but from theologians acting during Vatican II as consultants (*periti*) in the official commissions or as private theologians serving their bishops during the preparations for their interventions in the *aula*, the plenary meetings in St. Peter's basilica and in the council commissions. Some of the authors of these commentaries (for example, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, Joseph Ratzinger, and Edward Schillebeeckx) became the main characters of the debate about Vatican II from the 1970s on. What is important to note now is the eminently academic background of these

1. For a more complete history of the debate on Vatican II, see Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York: Paulist, 2012).

2. For the first studies on the language of the final documents of Vatican II, see *Indices verborum et locutionum Decretorum Concilii Vaticani II*, 11 vols. (Bologna: Istituto per le Scienze Religiose, 1968–1986); Philippe Delhaye, Michel Gueret, and Paul Tombeur, eds., *Concilium Vaticanum II: Concordance, index, listes de fréquence, tables comparatives* (Louvain: CETEDOC, 1974).

commentators—theologians by profession and not always holders of ecclesiastical offices with direct pastoral duties.

In the meantime, the bishops were active on another level of the debate on Vatican II, having committed themselves to initiatives for an ecclesial reception of Vatican II through a significant wave of diocesan and national synods (Austria 1968–1971, the Netherlands 1970, and Germany 1972–1975) and the continental assemblies of bishops (for Latin America, the CELAM convened in Medellín in 1968). Moreover, the theological landscape of the first year of the post-Vatican II period began with a fruitful season of ecumenical dialogues.

This separation of tasks between theologians and bishops is a feature of the debate on Vatican II and a marker of post-Vatican II Catholicism, at least until the end of the pontificate of John Paul II. He acted as the last and only guarantee for Vatican II, sometimes in a rather nominalistic yet unequivocal intention to receive the legacy of the council. John Paul II revisited in a creative way some crucial teachings of Vatican II, such as, for example, ecumenism, in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995) and interreligious dialogue beginning with the World Day of Prayer in Assisi (1986) and in his travels, especially in the Middle East. In contrast, the role of the bishops and of the national bishops' conferences in the interpretation of Vatican II in the life of the Church was reduced under John Paul II. A more significant and clearer change happened in April 2005 with the election of Benedict XVI, who as cardinal prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1981–2005) had been a powerful interpreter of Vatican II and not a mere enforcer of John Paul II's doctrinal policies. An analysis not only of Benedict's famous speech to the Roman Curia of December 22, 2005, but especially of the most important decisions of Benedict XVI is essential in order to

understand the change happened in the approach of the papacy to Vatican II with the conclave of 2005.

The main commentaries on the final documents of the council represented an attempt to cast light on the deeper meaning of the texts against the background of the history of the debate, and to elaborate hypotheses on the Catholic Church's path after Vatican II. In the very first years after the council, the "ideological" spectrum of Catholic theologians on Vatican II seemed to be unanimous in their enthusiastic acceptance of the final documents and their view of the novelty of Vatican II, for example in ecclesiology, liturgy, biblical revival, ecumenism, religious freedom, and interreligious relations. The tensions between the "letter" and "spirit" of Vatican II did not play much of a role at that time, and neither did the supposed tension between the hermeneutics of "continuity" with the whole Catholic tradition and the awareness of a "discontinuity" from Catholicism of the past, especially of the "long nineteenth century" from Pius IX to Pius XII.³

Nevertheless, behind the acceptance of Vatican II as a major turning point, even in the ranks of theologians of the so-called majority, the nuances of how to read Vatican II—by applying, receiving, or interpreting it—could not conceal important differences. The focus on nuances of *how* to read could not conceal differences in thoughts about the content. That kind of theological unanimity about Vatican II, arising from the "moral unanimity" Paul VI sought for the approval of the final documents, would not last. Toward the end of the council, the debate concerning the content and the role of the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* revealed the division within twentieth-century theologians between the neo-

3. John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008) 53–92.

Augustinians (Daniélou, de Lubac, Ratzinger, von Balthasar) and the neo-Thomists (Chenu, Congar, Rahner, Lonergan, Schillebeeckx).⁴

The foundation of the journal *Concilium* in 1964 represented the most notable attempt to spread the message of Vatican II by a group of scholars representing the vast majority at Vatican II (Hans Küng, Yves Congar, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx). By 1970, the group had already had important defections (Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger), signaling a rupture in the theologians' attitude toward Vatican II. A new international review, *Communio*, was founded in 1972 by Joseph Ratzinger (elected Pope Benedict XVI in 2005), Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Henri de Lubac as an attempt to offset the progressive Dutch-based journal *Concilium* and to "scan the turmoil and confusion of battling ideologies and the clash of philosophies of life at the present day."⁵

The impact of 1968, a politically intense year around the world, on the Catholic Church and Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) had its toll on the reception of Vatican II and produced the first revisions of the council's interpretations, inaugurating less enthusiastic and more wary views of the council. These revisions were also a way of reading the council that had more to do with ideological standpoints than with the history of theology and Church history. On one hand, the controversies of the early seventies for the Catholic Church did not bring together again the theologians of Vatican II, but contributed to an increasing rift between the interpretations of Vatican II. In particular, Paul VI's final defeat in drafting *Lex Ecclesiae Fundamental* (Fundamental Church Law), which tried to canonize a narrow ecclesiological interpretation of

4. See Joseph Komonchak, "Augustine, Aquinas, or the Gospel *sine glossa*? Divisions over *Gaudium et Spes*," in *Unfinished Journey: The Church 40 Years after Vatican II*, ed. John Wilkins (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 102–118.

5. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Communio—a Program," *Communio* 1 (1972): 3–12.

Vatican II, made the Holy See more and more wary toward some implementations of Vatican II. The debates on the need for this Fundamental Church Law between 1965 and the mid-1970s (a law that was never promulgated but was “recycled” in many parts of the 1983 Code of Canon Law) showed the variety of interpretations of Vatican II present inside the Roman Curia and within the former “progressive” majority at the council.

The former “conservative” minority at the council proved more coherent in its fight against Vatican II. The small sect created by Monsignor Marcel Lefebvre in 1970, the Society of Saint Pius X, represented quite effectively the awkward (to say the least) features of a contemporary Catholicism deliberately rejecting Vatican II and attached to a premodern theological culture and antidemocratic political worldview.⁶ The excommunication of Monsignor Lefebvre in 1988 did not have significant effects on the debate about Vatican II, but at the beginning of 2009, Benedict XVI’s lifting of the excommunications of the four bishops ordained by Lefebvre in 1988 cast significant light on a veiled yet very active rift within European and North American Catholicism concerning the role of Vatican II. On the other hand, the issue of modernity in Catholicism was going to be part of the most important pontificate in the post-Vatican II period. John Paul II’s election in 1978 unleashed a new impulse for the reception of Vatican II by a bishop of Rome who, as bishop of Krakow, had been very active at Vatican II in the commission for the drafting of the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* and later as the author of a bulky commentary on Vatican II.⁷

6. See Marcel Lefebvre, *J'accuse le Concile!* (Paris: Clovis, 1976).

7. See Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II), *U podstaw odnowy: Studium o realizacji Vaticanum II* (Krakow: Polskie Towarzystwa Teologicznego, 1972).

2. Vatican II Celebrated and Enforced (1980s–1990s)

In the 1980s and 1990s, the debate on Vatican II focused less on the contributions from academia and began to become more influenced by the doctrinal policy of the Holy See, especially by Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (appointed in 1981). Both were first-rank participants at Vatican II—the first a prominent bishop from Poland (the most Catholic country in the Soviet-controlled Eastern European bloc), and the second a theological counselor of Cardinal Frings of Cologne (one of the most important German bishops and a courageous critic of the Roman Curia during the debates on the floor of Saint Peter). These two men shaped a complex and sometimes contradictory Vatican policy toward the heritage of the council and its role for contemporary Catholicism.

After the theological interpretation of Vatican II that took place in the recodification of canon law, which led to the Code of 1983,⁸ John Paul II convened an extraordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 1985 on the twentieth anniversary of the conclusion of the council to overcome polarization and bring about greater consensus. The 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops and its *Final Report* provided the debate with some guidelines for the interpretation of the council, without questioning the riches of Vatican II or its key role for the future of the Catholic Church. The synod's *Final Report* of 1985 affirmed that “the Council is a legitimate and valid expression and interpretation of the deposit of faith as it is found in Sacred Scripture and in the living tradition of the Church. Therefore we are determined to progress further along the path indicated to us by the Council.” The synod was clear in recognizing the “deficiencies and

8. See Eugenio Corecco, “Aspects of the Reception of Vatican II in the Code of Canon Law,” in *The Reception of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua, and Joseph Komonchak (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1985), 249–96.

difficulties in the acceptance of the Council. In truth, there certainly have also been shadows in the post-council period, in part due to an incomplete understanding and application of the Council, in part to other causes. However, in no way can it be affirmed that everything which took place after the Council was caused by the Council.”

Concerning the issue of how to interpret Vatican II, the 1985 synod was resolute in explaining that “it is not licit to separate the pastoral character from the doctrinal vigor of the documents. In the same way, it is not legitimate to separate the spirit and the letter of the Council.” As for the relationships between the documents of Vatican II, the synod did not establish a clear hierarchy, even if “special attention must be paid to the four major Constitutions of the Council, which contain the interpretative key for the other Decrees and Declarations.”

The synod pointed out the fact that “the theological interpretation of the conciliar doctrine must show attention to all the documents, in themselves and in their close inter-relationship, in such a way that the integral meaning of the Council’s affirmations—often very complex—might be understood and expressed.” As for the “continuity-discontinuity” issue, the *Final Report* did not take a position for or against theological or historiographical “schools,” but reaffirmed the complex relationship between tradition and transition in Catholic theology.⁹

John Paul II’s complex and sometimes contradictory orientation toward Vatican II, his decision to convene the Synod of 1985, and the overall result of the synod for the state of the debate on Vatican II were somehow overshadowed by *The Ratzinger Report*, timed to be published for the opening of the synod and aimed at exerting pressure on the bishops and on public opinion, in order to make

9. See *The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod* (Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986).

a case for rethinking the approach to Vatican II and to point out the responsibility of Vatican II in the crisis of post-Vatican II Catholicism.¹⁰ However, the Synod of 1985 provided theologians and historians with the opportunity to reflect on the reception of Vatican II twenty years after its conclusion. The publication of important collections of studies between 1985 and 1987 showed an obvious plurality of opinions toward Vatican II and some differences between bishops and scholars, but not necessarily an unyielding tension and opposition between different hermeneutics of Vatican II.¹¹

At the same time, the doctrinal policy of the Holy See toward some key issues of Vatican II, such as ecclesiology, began unfolding from the mid-1980s on, both through the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the International Theological Commission of the Holy See. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a new profession of faith (March 1, 1989) for the faithful who were called to exercise an office in the name of the Church, such as vicars general, episcopal vicars, rectors of a seminary, professors of theology and philosophy in seminaries and Catholic universities, and superiors in clerical religious institutes and societies of apostolic life. The letter to the bishops about the “ecclesiology of communion” (*Communiois Notio*, May 28, 1992), and the “declaration on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church” about the relationship between Christ, the Church, and the non-

10. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985).

11. See Alberic Stacpoole, ed., *Vatican II Revisited: By Those Who Were There* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1986); Alberigo et al., *The Reception of Vatican II*; Norbert Greinacher and Hans Küng, eds., *Katholische Kirche, wohin? Wider den Verrat am Konzil* (Munich: Piper, 1986); Timothy E. O’Connell, ed., *Vatican II and Its Documents: An American Reappraisal* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1986); René Latourelle, ed., *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives: Twenty-five Years After (1962–1987)*, 3 vols. (New York: Paulist, 1988–89); Lucien Richard with Daniel T. Harrington and John W. O’Malley, *Vatican II, the Unfinished Agenda: A Look to the Future* (New York: Paulist, 1987).

Christian religions (*Dominus Iesus*, August 6, 2000) marked two other important steps in the Roman reception of Vatican II. From the standpoint of the post-Vatican II governance of the Catholic Church, John Paul II's apostolic constitution *Apostolos Suos* (May 21, 1998) on the status and authority of episcopal conferences reinforced one of the basic assumptions of the International Theological Commission chaired by Cardinal Ratzinger—that is, the need to scale back some aspects of the post-Vatican II decentralization and empowerment of national bishops' conferences. It seemed that power was being reclaimed by the Church's head in Rome at the expense of the Church's body throughout the world.

3. Vatican II Historicized (1990s–2000s)

Notwithstanding the pressure of John Paul II's Vatican doctrinal policy on Catholic theologians, the most important wave of studies and research on Vatican II began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In an international conference at the Centre Sèvres in Paris in December 1988, Giuseppe Alberigo started the enterprise that had its conclusion in 2001 with the five-volume *History of Vatican II*, subsequently published in seven languages.¹² Employing as a point of departure the first sources edited by Monsignor Vincenzo Carbone in the *Acta et Documenta* and *Acta Synodalia*,¹³ the first commentaries¹⁴ and

12. Giuseppe Alberigo, ed., *History of Vatican II*, 5 vols., English version ed. Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995–2006), also published in Italian, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian.

13. The official documents of the governing bodies of Vatican II (commissions, plenary assemblies) and of the participants were published in *Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando*, series I, *Antepreparatoria* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1960–61); series II, *Praepreparatoria* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964–94); *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1970–99).

14. *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil: Konstitutionen, Dekrete und Erklärungen lateinisch und deutsch Kommentare*, Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche, 3 vols. (Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 1966–68), trans. Lalit Adolphus, Kevin Smyth, and Richard Strachan as Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary*