

Introduction

Vatican II, Historicity of Theology, and Global Catholicism

This book collects and brings to a unity a series of my studies on Vatican II published in the last decade—a decade that has been quite momentous in the life of the Catholic Church and for the reception of the council. The succession of three popes (John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis) and the first resignation of a pope in the modern era are, in fact, only symptoms of deeper changes in Catholicism and in particular in the debate about Vatican II, the most important event in the history of modern Catholicism after the Council of Trent. In this sense, the fiftieth anniversary of Vatican II (2012–2015) has been not just a celebratory date like previous anniversaries, but a stimulus to renewed attention to that moment of change and reform in a Church that was not expected to change.

For some, not only was Vatican II not supposed to change anything in the Church, but the official debate and doctrinal policy on Vatican II attempted to reinforce the idea that Vatican II was over and done with. For a few years, between 2000 and the election of Francis, Vatican II was treated as a kind of uncomfortable memory. It was uncomfortable for Catholic traditionalists because Vatican II proved that tradition in the Church also means transition. For

Catholic radicals, it was uncomfortable because Vatican II reminded them that change in the Church takes time and implies not only dialogue with the world outside, but also mediation and compromise within the Church. This uncomfortable memory of Vatican II was, of course, asymmetric, as the traditionalists quite successfully convinced high-level Church officials of the need to bend the debate on Vatican II toward a “hermeneutic of continuity,” forgetting that Benedict XVI in his famous speech of December 22, 2005, spoke of “continuity and reform”—in other words, continuity and discontinuity.

In this sense, it is clear that the transition from Benedict XVI to Francis represents also a transition from one era in the debate on Vatican II to a new era, and not only because of the evident biographical differences between Benedict, the last pope who was at Vatican II, and Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the first pope who was ordained well after Vatican II, in 1969.¹ The event of the resignation of Benedict XVI and the beginning of Francis’s pontificate was a practical demonstration of the necessity of the Second Vatican Council for the theological, spiritual, and intellectual viability of Catholicism today. The recentering of the papal office around the episcopal ministry as bishop of Rome, the need to reconsider the functions of the Roman Curia, the emphasis on the Synod of Bishops as part of a more synodal Church, the message on the poor and on a poor Church—all these key elements in the pontificate of Francis are simply unthinkable without Vatican II.

This demonstration of the deep conciliar identity of the Catholic Church happened, since February 2013, with very few explicit mentions of Vatican II. But far from being forgetfulness, Francis’s lack or scarcity of direct mentions of Vatican II are part of the

1. See Massimo Faggioli, *Pope Francis: Tradition in Transition* (New York: Paulist, 2015).

new direction of the Vatican doctrinal policy about Vatican II (and not only). While the “pope theologian” Benedict XVI embraced the need to lead the debate, Francis leaves to historians and theologians the debate on the council. Benedict imagined a redirection of the reception of Vatican II, while Francis wants to speed up the reception and implementation of the pastoral council.

All this means not only a new start in the life of the Church along the trajectories drawn by Vatican II, an event that for the vast majority of contemporary Catholics happened before they were born. It means also a rediscovery of the profound historical nature of Christianity and of the Catholic Church in particular, and therefore the need for a renewed appreciation of historical theology, of Church history, and of the history of the Christian theological tradition as a fundamental way to understand Christianity.

Among the many changes brought by the papal transition of 2013, this is probably one of the most forgotten. The sensational change of pontificate has attracted attention once again to the protagonists of the council. This is hardly surprising in a mainstream culture that is anything but historically aware and is exclusively focused on the moment. But the present moment in the life of the Church contains enormously significant implications for the future of theological studies and for the role that theological studies can play in the future of Christianity at different levels.

1. The Role of History in the Study of Christianity and Catholicism

The first issue that arises from the alignment between the anniversary of Vatican II and the transition to the first non-European pope concerns methodology in the studies of Christianity and of Catholicism in particular. The twentieth century was the century

of the encounter between Catholic theology and historical consciousness.² In the last few decades, part of the anti-Vatican II rhetoric has clearly been nourished by an anti-historical surge in the mode of neo-essentialism. There is no doubt that the state of the health of historical theology reflects the health of the memory of Vatican II and its accomplishments and shortcomings.

This is not new to those who remember how long the very possibility of writing a history of the Council of Trent had been a matter of contention in the Church: four centuries, until the beginning of Vatican II. For more than three centuries after the end of the council in 1563, the *acta* of Trent were not available to scholars. The publication of the first scholarly history of Trent had to wait for Hubert Jedin, after World War II;³ the last volume of the complete edition of the documents of Trent was published only in 2001.⁴ Similarly, there is no question that having a long and detailed *History of Vatican II* published just thirty years after the end of the council was unprecedented, and was even considered threatening in some quarters.⁵ It is also not a coincidence that the Council of Trent

2. See Peter Hünermann, "Geschichtliches Denken und Reform der Kirche," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 34, no. 3 (2013): 741–54.

3. See Hubert Jedin, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient*, 4 vols. (orig. pub. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1949, 1957, 1970, 1975). English translation of the first two volumes by Ernest Graf, *A History of the Council of Trent* (London: T. Nelson, 1957 and 1961). Jedin's final two volumes were never translated into English.

4. See *Concilium Tridentinum: Diariorum, actorum, epistularum, tractatum nova collectio*, ed. Görres-Gesellschaft (Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 1901–2001). About the relationship between historians of the councils and ecclesiastical authorities, see the new edition of Paolo Sarpi's *Istoria del Concilio Tridentino*, rev. ed., ed. Corrado Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi, 2011). The Venetian Sarpi's book was published in London in 1619 and immediately condemned to the Index of Prohibited Books.

5. See Giuseppe Alberigo, ed., *Storia del concilio Vaticano II*, 5 vols. (Bologna: Il Mulino; Leuven: Peeters, 1995–2001), published in English as *History of Vatican II*, ed. Joseph Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995–2006). The *Storia del concilio Vaticano II* was published in Italian, English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian. It is often forgotten that the historiographical work on Vatican II fulfilled Paul VI's desire to have the council studied and analyzed with the help of the Archivio del concilio Vaticano II created by his decision immediately after the end of Vatican II. See "L'Archivio Vaticano II (1965–1999): Trentacinque

is being rediscovered precisely at this moment in the history of the reception of Vatican II.⁶

Here the historiographical work on Vatican II provided a sometimes-neglected service to Catholic theology as such at the turn of the twenty-first century. It is useful here to parallel with what Mark Juergensmeyer calls the “sociotheological turn” in religious studies. Juergensmeyer argues that the “sociotheological turn” represents “a third way—a path between reductionism (denying that religion can have any “real” importance) and isolationism (delinking religion from its social milieu).”⁷ In a similar way, it can be said that Church history—at least the Church history that engaged Vatican II—represents a third way between “ecclesiastical history” (important for the Church as an institution, mostly in an apologetical attitude) and an “intellectual history of theological ideas” (potentially detached from the impact of theological thinking on the Church as a community, and tendentially uninterested in the institutional-juridical element of the Church).

There is no question that we have witnessed a certain weariness of the classic, nineteenth- to twentieth-century “critical Church history” in these last few years. Church history is perceived to be still too “confessional” for the scholars of religion using the methods of “social studies,” and it is perceived as way too “secular” for theologians who think a nonhistorical approach is *the* way to be obedient to the Church. Vatican II—both the historical event and the historiography on Vatican II—disproves that weariness and is a powerful case for Church history as relevant both for the humanities

anni di inventari e pubblicazioni; Intervista a mons. Vincenzo Carbone,” in *Centro Vaticano II: Ricerche e documenti*, vol. 1, no. 0 (2000): 42–46.

6. See John W. O’Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

7. See Mark Juergensmeyer, “The Sociotheological Turn,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (2013): 939–48.

and for theology. A historical approach to theological ideas is one of those instances on which official Catholic culture often forgets the countercultural potential of its own intellectual tradition vis-à-vis our antihistorical, detemporalized, and present-obsessed culture.

2. Vatican II and (Post)Modernity

There is also a second reason that reveals the relevance of reflecting on Vatican II, fifty years after its conclusion and in future perspective. The clash around Vatican II as “continuity” versus “discontinuity” in the Catholic tradition has been completely unfruitful from an intellectual point of view. One of the most notable features of the debate in the last few years has been the reaction against a “traditionalist” reading of Vatican II and especially against the creeping and silent acceptance of this “traditionalist” narrative of Vatican II by Catholic theology and Catholic leadership (including some quarters in the Roman Curia).⁸ In other words, in the last few years, it has become more important than ever to monitor the exchanges between the traditionalist, anti-Vatican II milieu on the one side and official Catholicism on the other, in order to estimate the influence of traditionalism on official Catholic doctrinal policy and in order to verify how little mainstream Vatican II theology has penetrated the traditionalist camp.⁹ What Alberto Melloni called “the third quest” in the studies on Vatican II during the decade 2003–2013 (between the fortieth and fiftieth anniversaries) gave a clear result in terms of the intellectual achievements of that debate, with the

8. See *Vatikan und Pius-Brüder: Anatomie einer Krise*, ed. Wolfgang Beinert (Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 2009). See also Klaus Schatz, “Ein kirchliches 1789? Zu einer traditionalistischen Sicht auf das Zweite Vatikanum,” *Theologie und Philosophie* 88, no. 1 (2013): 47–71.

9. See especially Giovanni Miccoli, *La Chiesa dell'anticoncilio: I tradizionalisti alla riconquista di Roma* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2011).

names of Peter Hünemann; John W. O'Malley, SJ; and Christoph Theobald, SJ, standing out above all others.¹⁰

What is going to be more relevant, in a future perspective of a Catholic historiography that rejects the illusion of self-sufficiency, is the issue of periodization—namely, the position of Vatican II on the issue of modern versus postmodern. Vatican II was undoubtedly a modernizing council, of the Catholic Church and of Catholic theology, as Vatican II tried to come to terms with a modernity condemned during the “long nineteenth century.”¹¹ Less explored is the triangular relationship between Catholic tradition, Vatican II, and postmodern culture. While Vatican II dealt with the huge changes in geopolitics (end of the empires, decolonization, de-Europeanization, and the Cold War), the cultural landscape of Western society after 1975 is affected by changes in “biopolitics” (abortion, contraception, homosexuality, bioethics).¹² In other words, the perception of the postmodern and of its relevance for Catholicism is much more evident today, at fifty years from Vatican II, than when the studies on Vatican II began in the mid-1980s.

Vatican II closes the anti-modern period of Catholic theology and magisterium, but what remains to be investigated is its relationship with postmodernity. A simple answer is, sometimes, to see in Vatican II and in the 1960s of Catholic theology the last breath of a modern world that has been abrogated by postmodernity. In this, the debate on Vatican II raises a serious methodological issue for Catholic culture and Catholic theology in postmodernity: that is, the issue of

10. See the introduction to the new edition of the *History of Vatican II* in Italian: Alberto Melloni, “Il Vaticano II e la sua storia: Introduzione alla nuova edizione,” in *Storia del concilio Vaticano II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, 2nd ed. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012), 1:ix–lvi, esp. 1:xliv–li.

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

12. See Stephen Schloesser, “Dancing on the Edge of the Volcano: Biopolitics and What Happened after Vatican II,” in *From Vatican II to Pope Francis: Charting a Catholic Future*, ed. Paul Crowley (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), 3–26.

the compatibility between understanding Vatican II (and Catholicism in the twentieth century, for that matter) and tending to deconstruct Church history in a series of narrower fields of “Catholic studies” defined by gender, ethnic-national culture, local versus global, etc. It is a legitimate question whether or not understanding Vatican II historically and theologically still needs a general, classical “Church history” kind of approach, which is less and less practiced in academia (both secular and ecclesiastical) for various reasons, without giving up the new methodological insights of postmodern historical and social studies. In other words, the studies on Vatican II are at crossroads where a tradition of historical and theological studies still done with a “universalistic” approach meets a postmodern approach to the subject.¹³ But the debate on Vatican II needs more and more to be part of a long-term understanding of Church history and of the history of the ecumenical councils, as is clear from a recent book dedicated to the “idea of reform” in Church history.¹⁴

The research on Vatican II has made huge steps forward in these last twenty-five years, thanks to the variety of methodologies and approaches: theological history of Vatican II (history of ideas), biographical approach (prosopography of Vatican II), social history of Vatican II (groups of influence, think tanks), history of canon law, history of bureaucracy (of the Roman Curia and of the elites of the Church), history of the mass-media perception and transmission of

13. About this, see Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, “The Burdens of Church History,” *Church History* 82 (June 2013): 353–67.

14. See Christopher M. Bellitto and David Z. Flanagin, eds., *Reassessing Reform: A Historical Investigation into Church Renewal* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012). *Reassessing Reform* can be read as a Festschrift for a book, in this case Gerhart Ladner’s *Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), but it has also clear implications for the debate on Vatican II: “The majority of the essays in this volume presume this narrative of *continuity with change* in the idea of reform. . . . The concept of *continuity with change* has implications not only for the medieval and early modern centuries, but also for the debates concerning Vatican II.” Bellitto and Flanagin, *Reassessing Reform*, introduction, 9.

the event, and history of the “outsiders” (women of Vatican II, lay people, ecumenical observers, etc.). Church history as a discipline has a lot to learn from other methodologies, and this might well be the key for its survival as a historical discipline in the no-man’s-land between historical theology, secular history, and social studies. But the studies on Vatican II also tell us a lot about the need to respect the object of study: an ecumenical council of the Catholic Church.

3. The History of Vatican II and Global Catholicism

A third reason for the importance of Vatican II concerns how a historical understanding of the Church and of theology is related to the global Church. From a theological perspective, the relevance of the historical studies about Vatican II and of historical theology in general also depends on how much of an impact historical thinking can have on the Church as an institution and as a community of believers. Far from being a completely detached discussion that takes place in the ivory tower, the theological and historiographical question on Vatican II has had an impact on the life of the Church. It is difficult to ignore the impact that O’Malley’s book *What Happened at Vatican II* had in rescuing the memory of Vatican II.¹⁵ In that year, in 2008, the project for the *History of Vatican II* had been concluded already for a few years (the last volume had been published in 2001), and most “Vatican II Catholics” and theologians considered the legacy of the council in grave danger.¹⁶ Vatican II recovered the historical awareness of Catholic theology; in a similar way, in the most delicate moment in the reception of Vatican II half a century

15. O’Malley’s *What Happened at Vatican II* has been translated into Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Polish.

16. About this, see Massimo Faggioli, “Council Vatican II: Bibliographical Overview 2007–2010,” *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 32 (2011–12): 755–91; and “Council Vatican II: Bibliographical Survey 2010–2013,” *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 24, no. 3 (2013): 927–55.

after its conclusion, historians rescued the council from the grip of an ideological debate fueled in some ecclesiastical quarters by persons interested in taming the council for political-ecclesiastical considerations in the name of an abstract “continuity” and in spite of the basic historical facts about the most important religious event in twentieth-century religious history.

This rescue is important not only because, in the words of Avery Dulles, “True theology must not panic when scholarly inquiry threatens to demolish what had previously been regarded as unassailable truth.”¹⁷ The historical dimension of Vatican II and its discontinuities are also necessary to recover the relationship between the council and the global identity of Catholicism. The attempts to de-historicize theology and to submit Vatican II to the ideology of “absolute continuity” lead necessarily to a re-Europeanization of Catholicism, which has become more global than ever. Here is where intellectual debate on theology meets the pastoral dimension.

The event of Vatican II is still having consequences, sometimes at a deep level. The discontinuities introduced by the council still emerge, not only with regard to the Church of the early twentieth century, but also concerning the epochal consequences of the council for the global Church. In the history of the Catholic Church, incidents are many, but events charged with consequences such as Vatican II are few. Vatican II is certainly a uniquely consequential event in the last four centuries of the Church’s history.

17. Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 156.