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An Alternative Middle Position: The Contribution of Joseph A. Komonchak to the Hermeneutics of Vatican II

Martin Madar

The article presents, analyzes, and evaluates the contribution of Joseph A. Komonchak to the ongoing debate over the proper interpretation of Vatican II. The article is organized around three issues of the conciliar hermeneutics which Komonchak has addressed: (1) the responsibility of the council for the collapse of pre-Vatican II Catholicism; (2) the continuity and discontinuity of Vatican II with the tradition of the church; and (3) the dynamics between the «letter» and the «spirit» of the council. The author argues that Komonchak's alternative middle position with regard to the hermeneutics of the council is not constructed on the theological data alone, but is also a result of his engagement with the social sciences.

Keywords: Komonchak, Vatican II, Hermeneutics, Event

1. *Introduction*

The pontificate of Benedict XVI (April 19, 2005-February 28, 2013) reignited the discussion concerning the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council. The pope himself set the discussion's «talking points» when just a few months after his election, in an address to the Roman Curia, he spelled out what in his view constitutes the proper hermeneutic of the Council¹. Although some expected him to unequivocally endorse the hermeneutic of continuity and reject the hermeneutic of discontinuity or rupture, the pope did not convey his position employing this dichotomy. While he unambiguously

¹ The Italian original of the address and translations into several languages may be found at the Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia_en.html (20th oct. 2015).

rejected the hermeneutic of discontinuity, as he described it, he nevertheless did not simply juxtapose it with the hermeneutic of continuity, but rather with the hermeneutic of reform, which somewhat ironically consists of both continuity *and* discontinuity, though on different levels.

This was not the first time Joseph Ratzinger stirred the waters of the proper interpretation of Vatican II, for as the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (hereafter CDF) he was at the forefront of the first round of the same discussion two decades earlier at the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops². Prior to the Synod's start, a book-length interview with Ratzinger was published providing his assessment of the Council and its implementation³. His gloomy evaluation of the state of the church in the Council's aftermath caused quite a stir and had a significant influence on the Synod's deliberations. As the Prefect of the CDF and then as the Pope, Ratzinger was also chief negotiator with the Society of St. Pius X which has rejected certain teachings of the Council and accused it of breaking with the normative tradition of the church. Ratzinger's name thus undoubtedly belongs among those whose views have most significantly shaped the discussion of the Council's hermeneutics.

Joseph Ratzinger has also been one of the principal interlocutors of Joseph A. Komonchak (1939-) whose contribution to the hermeneutics of Vatican II this article will investigate. Komonchak is a priest of the Archdiocese of New York and Professor Emeritus at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. Educated at the Gregorian University in Rome (STL, 1964) and at the Union Theological Seminary in New York (PhD, 1976) he is the premier U.S. scholar of the history and theology of Vatican II. Komonchak has published numerous articles exploring the topic of the Council's interpretation⁴. He is also the editor of the English edition of the

² For an excellent survey of the discussion and its delineation into two rounds see G. Routhier, *The Hermeneutic of Reform as a Task for Theology*, in «Irish Theological Quarterly», 77 (2012), 219-243.

³ See J. Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church. Joseph Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori*, trans. by S. Attanasio, G. Harrison, San Francisco 1985 [Italian orig. *Rapporto sulla fede*, Milan 1985].

⁴ J.A. Komonchak, *The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, in «Annual of the Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs», 4 (1985), 31-59; *Interpreting the Second Vatican Council*, in «Landas: Journal of Loyola School of Theology», 1 (1987), 81-90; *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholici-*

five-volume *History of Vatican II* to which he contributed with two studies⁵.

A chronological examination of Komonchak's bibliography suggests that a chief impetus for his engagement with the topic of Vatican II's hermeneutics was the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops convoked to review, evaluate, and celebrate the achievement of the Council. In the mid-1980s, significant disagreements over the proper interpretation of the Council already existed, and this was also reflected in the debates at the Synod. Three main typologies of the conciliar hermeneutics were in place: traditionalist, middle, and progressive. While most bishops at the Synod espoused the middle ground in between the progressive and the traditionalist positions, they did not identify with the middle position as presented by Ratzinger, its most prominent advocate. Komonchak has understood this to be an indication that the bishops were searching for an *alternative* middle position, and he undertook the task of constructing a version of it⁶.

The issues of Vatican II hermeneutics which Komonchak has engaged are: (1) the responsibility of the Council for the collapse of

sm, in «Cristianesimo nella Storia», 18 (1997), 353-385; *Vatican II and the Encounter between Catholicism and Liberalism*, in *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, ed. by R.B. Douglas, D. Hollenbach, New York 1994, 76-99; *Interpreting the Council: Catholic Attitudes toward Vatican II*, in *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*, ed. by M.J. Weaver, R.S. Appleby, Bloomington 1995, 17-36; *Vatican II as an «Event»*, in «Theology Digest», 46 (1999)/4, 337-352, reprinted in *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* ed. by D.G. Schultenover, New York 2007, 24-51; my references will be to the *Theology Digest* article; *40 Years after Vatican II: The Ongoing Challenge*, in «Liguorian», October 2002, 11-14; *Benedict XVI and the Interpretation of Vatican II*, in «Cristianesimo nella Storia», 28 (2007)/2, 323-337; with slight revisions, this article was also published in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. by M.J. Lacey, F. Oakley, New York 2011, 93-110; my references will be to the *Cristianesimo* article; *Novelty in Continuity*, in «America», 200 (2009)/3, 10-16.

⁵ J.A. Komonchak, *The Struggle for the Council During the Preparation of Vatican II (1960-1962)*, in *History of Vatican II*, ed. by G. Alberigo, J.A. Komonchak, Maryknoll 1995, vol. I, 167-356; *Toward an Ecclesiology of Communion*, in *History of Vatican II*, ed. by G. Alberigo, J.A. Komonchak, Maryknoll 2003, vol. IV, 1-93; Komonchak's other historical studies on Vatican II include *Thomism and the Second Vatican Council*, in *Continuity and Plurality in Catholic Theology: Essays in Honor of Gerald A. McCool, S. J.*, ed. by A. Cernera, Fairfield 1998, 53-73; *Roots and Branches: Studying the History of Vatican II*, in *Vatican II au Canada: Enracinement et réception*, éd. par G. Routhier, Québec 2001, 503-524. These historical studies of the Council will not be treated in this article.

⁶ See Komonchak, *Interpreting the Second Vatican Council*, cit., 83.

pre-Vatican II Catholicism; (2) the continuity and/or discontinuity of Vatican II with the tradition of the church; and (3) the dynamic interplay between the «letter» and the «spirit» of the Council. Komonchak believes that his alternative middle position is the most adequate, not only because it avoids the one-sidedness of the progressive and the traditionalist positions, but also because it is able to account for and explain more cogently than the middle position both the conciliar dynamics and the change that took place in Catholicism after Vatican II. What makes Komonchak's position distinctive is that it is not constructed on the theological data alone, but is also a result of his engagement with the social sciences. This is a trademark of Komonchak's entire theological project.

2. *An Alternative Middle Position*

In articulating his alternative middle position, Komonchak has been in conversation with the three most common interpretations of the Second Vatican Council, which he sets up as ideal types⁷. The first one is the «progressive» interpretation. This position sets a dramatic contrast between the pre- and the post-conciliar church, where the former is evaluated almost entirely in negative terms. Adjectives such as legalistic, triumphalistic, hierarchical, patriarchal, ghetto-like, clericalistic, and irrelevant are often used to describe it. The progressives see the accommodations to modernity, which the church finally made at Vatican II, and which it had resisted for over a century, as long overdue. They perceive the Council as the «new Pentecost». This view acknowledges that there have been problems and confusion in the church after the Council, but this has been mainly because of the intransigence of some, especially in the Roman Curia, who opposed the direction the Council was taking while it was in session, and who after its close continued to undermine the forces of renewal and resist the spirit of the Council⁸.

⁷ Komonchak notes that his typology roughly corresponds to that of Étienne Fouilloux in his *Histoire et événement: Vatican II*, in «Cristianesimo nella Storia», 13 (1992), 515-538. See *Vatican II as an «Event»*, cit., 351.

⁸ Komonchak, *Interpreting the Second Vatican Council*, cit., 82; See also *Vatican Council II*, cit., 1076; *Interpreting the Council*, cit., 19; *The Church in the United States Today*, in *The Spirit Moving the Church in the United States*, ed. by F. Eigo, Villanova 1989, 1-31, at 19; *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, 354; *40 Years after Vatican II*, cit., 13.

The second is the «traditionalist» interpretation. This view also sets a dramatic contrast between the pre- and the post-conciliar church, but this time to the disadvantage of the latter. Traditionalists speak with nostalgia of the pre-conciliar church and consider the Council a regrettable surrender of the church to the forces it had consistently opposed, namely liberalism and modernism. The most extreme version of this view would consider the Council heretical. The proponents of the traditionalist interpretation tend to concentrate on *Gaudium et spes* and *Dignitatis humanae* as two documents in which the Council accepted important developments and principles characteristic of liberalism and modernism. The problems and confusion that followed in the Council's aftermath are in this view blamed on Vatican II itself, for it gave rise to movements which were amplified by the radicals to the point of destroying the church⁹.

Komonchak observes that these two interpretations differ less on the details of what happened at the Council than on how to interpret it. The crucial point of contention for these interpretations is the church's relation to the modern world. Komonchak also notes that the differences between these two interpretations represent the «drama of the Council itself», and states that the Council «was not a peaceful event»; rather, that it «unfolded as a confrontation, even a battle, and those who witnessed it will remember with some vividness that the outcome was by no means secure»¹⁰.

It is clear to Komonchak that there is a lot of room in between these two rather extreme positions for a «middle position». This interpretation views the majority of the Council in positive terms but considers some developments that followed it to have been unfavorable to the church. The problems and confusion which settled upon the church after the Council are not blamed on the Council itself but mainly on the progressives who, with their appeal to the «spirit» of the Council, went far beyond what the conciliar texts have said as well as beyond the Council's intentions. This view blames the progressives for too eager an accommodation to the values of bourgeois Western culture, and advocates a return to the authentic Council and its authentic teachings. The

⁹ Komonchak, *Interpreting the Second Vatican Council*, cit., 82; See also *Vatican Council II*, cit., 1076; *Interpreting the Council*, cit., 19-20; *The Church in the United States Today*, cit., 19; *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 354-355; *40 Years after Vat II*, cit., 13.

¹⁰ Komonchak, *Interpreting the Council*, cit., 20.

proponents of this position, which Komonchak also calls «reformist», think that the Council was hijacked, but unlike the traditionalists, for whom this took place during the Council, the reformists claim that the Council was hijacked after it was over by those who misrepresented what the Council actually did. They deny that the Council authorized or represented a sharp break with the past. Rather, it was marked more by continuity than discontinuity. The ruptures of the kind advocated by the progressives they reject¹¹. Komonchak considers Henri de Lubac and Joseph Ratzinger the most prominent representatives of this view¹².

Komonchak's point of departure for his alternative middle position is what none of the three views just outlined seems to contest, namely, that following Vatican II «the everyday Catholicism that had existed right up through the reign of Pius XII had collapsed»¹³. Progressives consider this to be a positive thing. Traditionalists and the reformists deplore it, although they disagree on whether the Council itself should be blamed for the collapse. Komonchak believes that an adequate interpretation of the Council and of its aftermath is not possible without, first, a thorough analysis of the Catholicism which collapsed, and second, an evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses. Unless one understands this Catholicism, Komonchak does not think one can understand «either the drama of the Council itself or the even more remarkable changes which followed it». Nor can one «address the questions [of] why these occurred and whether the Council could be considered responsible for them»¹⁴.

Komonchak calls this Catholicism *modern Roman Catholicism* and provides an analysis of its main features¹⁵. With this term he refers to

¹¹ Komonchak, *Interpreting the Second Vatican Council*, cit., 82-83; See also *Vatican Council II*, cit., 1077; *Interpreting the Council*, cit., 33; *The Church in the United States Today*, cit., 19; *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 355; 40 *Years after Vat II*, cit., 13.

¹² Komonchak, *Interpreting the Second Vatican Council*, 83; *Interpreting the Council*, cit., 31-32. For de Lubac, see, for instance, Henri de Lubac, *The Church in Crisis*, in «Theology Digest», 17 (1969), 312-325; *L'Église dans la crise actuelle*, Paris 1969. For Ratzinger, see, for instance, Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report*, cit., 27-44; *Epilogue: On the Status of Church and Theology Today*, in *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for Fundamental Theology*, trans. by Sister M.F. McCarthy, S.N.D., San Francisco 1987, 367-393 [German orig. *Theologische Prinzipienlehre*, Munich 1982].

¹³ Komonchak, *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 355.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 356.

¹⁵ See Komonchak, *The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., and *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit.

«the social form the Catholic Church assumed in the century and a half between the Congress of Vienna and the Second Vatican Council»¹⁶. In response to the challenges that faced it, the Catholic Church constructed itself as a counter-society embodying a counter-culture. Komonchak argues that during this period the Catholic Church took on a new sociological and historical form that was as different from the Catholicism of the post-Tridentine period, which had preceded it, as the latter was different from its predecessor, Medieval Christendom, and this in turn from its predecessor, ancient Christianity.

Komonchak identifies the century between the Congress of Vienna (1814-15) and the pontificate of Pius X (1903-14) as the formative period of this modern Roman Catholicism¹⁷. He explains that during this period many Catholics believed they were engaged in a great battle which had its origins in the Reformation and was manifested most recently in the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic era. The principles on which the modern world was being constructed such as rationalism, the repudiation of authority and tradition, and individual autonomy, were altering the social and cultural position and the role of the church in society. In addition, the denial of religion's significance for the public sphere was seen by the church as a departure and even apostasy from the political, social and cultural ideal of Christendom. These developments were summed up by the name «liberalism»¹⁸. As a result, what many Catholics stood for in terms of truth and values was under attack, and throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries they fought against the principles of liberalism¹⁹.

¹⁶ Komonchak, *The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 32. Komonchak says that for the notion of 'Roman Catholicism' he is indebted especially to the Swiss sociologist Franz-Xaver Kaufmann. See note 1 of *The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*.

¹⁷ The Congress of Vienna was a meeting of the ambassadors of European states which took place in Vienna from September 1814 to June 1815. Its purpose was to restore order after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Among its results was the restoration of the Pope (Pius VII) as the absolute monarch of the Papal States after these had been seized by Napoleon and the Pope had been arrested. For a history of the Congress see C.K. Webster, *The Congress of Vienna, 1814-1815*, New York 1963.

¹⁸ Komonchak provides an analysis of the encounter between Catholicism and liberalism in *Vatican II and the Encounter between Catholicism and Liberalism*, in *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, ed. by R.B. Douglas, D. Hollenbach, New York 1994, 76-99.

¹⁹ Komonchak, *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 357-358; *Interpreting the Second Vatican Council*, cit., 85.

Komonchak's thesis is that during the hundred and fifty years prior to Vatican II Catholicism was principally engaged with the social and political ramifications of the Enlightenment, not only with its philosophical, and theological dimensions. The broader issues were cultural, political, and social²⁰. Unlike at the time of the Reformation, however, when the disputes were over the basic aspects of the faith or the internal constitution of the church, the fight against the Enlightenment was over what role, if any, religion should play in the foundation and unity of society and over the religious responsibilities of States. During the post-Enlightenment period the church faced new challenges, and to confront them it had to become something different in form and structure from what it hitherto had been²¹. Thus, in response to the new challenges the church constructed itself as an alternative to the world of secular liberalism²².

Komonchak describes five central characteristics of this modern Roman Catholicism. The first one is the desire to restore medieval Christendom which was considered an ideal form of the relationship between the church and society. The church turned to the Middle Ages in support of its political and cultural project. Komonchak gives examples from the writings of the popes which show how official church teaching expressed a deep regret of the loss of Christendom and the desire to regain it²³.

Komonchak identifies «counter-revolutionary mysticism» and the «formation of Catholic associations» as the second and third characteristics of modern Roman Catholicism. They were a response to the challenges of modern society against which the church's leadership wanted to protect Catholics. With regard to the former, Komonchak explains that the situation of alienation from the emerging society and culture in which the church found itself played a significant role in the promotion of many devotions which marked Catholic life and

²⁰ Komonchak, *The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 34.

²¹ One of the presuppositions guiding Komonchak's discussion of the modern Roman Catholicism is that there is a distinction between the church as a theological theme and as a social form in which it is embodied during different historical periods. By modern Roman Catholicism Komonchak means the concrete self-realization of the church which took place during the 150 years before Vatican II.

²² Komonchak, *The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 36, 47; *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 360-361, 377-378.

²³ Komonchak, *The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 36-37; *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 361-363.

were constituent of Catholic identity in that period. There was an extraordinary growth in Marian piety, while the devotions to the Sacred Heart and to Christ the King also underwent significant development at this time²⁴. With regard to the latter, Komonchak explains that associations, which were not something new in Catholic life, changed in their purpose and goals during this period. While earlier their purpose was primarily religious, those associations that originated in the late eighteenth and especially in the nineteenth century began to operate with social and political goals, namely, they combated the spread of the Enlightenment, opposed the spread of liberalism, safeguarded Catholic rights, and supported Catholic identity²⁵.

The fourth characteristic of the modern Roman Catholicism was the increased centralization of the church upon Rome and the papacy. Komonchak explains that the church considered itself to be in a battle international in scope, and in order to be effective the defense had to be organized on the international level too. Thus, the papacy was the most fitting candidate for a leading role in this struggle. During this period the appointment of bishops by the pope gradually became the norm. National synods practically lost their significance. Local churches began to imitate Roman liturgical, canonical, and devotional customs and practices. Bishops' autonomy over their churches was diminished, almost reducing the bishops to the status of vicars of the pope. In previously uncommon ways, Catholicism was becoming Roman²⁶.

The fifth characteristic of Komonchak's account of modern Roman Catholicism concerns the direction of Catholic intellectual life; namely, it refers to the effort of the centralized ecclesial leadership to take direction of Catholic thought. Komonchak explains that during the pontificates of Gregory XVI and Pius IX noteworthy efforts by theologians in the fields of faith and reason and religion and modern society were viewed with suspicion at best, and at times were condemned. Under Leo XIII the philosophical and theological synthesis worked out by Thomas Aquinas was raised to the level of a norm to which everyone had to conform and by which everyone's work

²⁴ Komonchak, *The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 37-41; *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 363-369.

²⁵ Komonchak, *The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 41-42; *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 369-371.

²⁶ Komonchak, *The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 42-44; *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 371-373.

was evaluated²⁷. Beginning with Leo XIII the popes also began to regularly issue encyclicals through which they both supervised and directed the intellectual life of the church. Catholics were becoming accustomed to looking to the popes for authoritative guidance, and there was an increased subordination to Roman authority, especially in matters pertaining to bishops and theologians²⁸.

Komonchak argues that the result of these and other developments was the construction of a Catholic sub-culture. The church was ideologically at odds with both liberalism and its competitors – socialism and communism. It responded by constructing itself as «another world of meaning and value, a distinct social body within the larger society, a culture distinct from that which directed the ruling and planning classes»²⁹. This modern Roman Catholicism was «forced to compete in a marketplace of meaning and value not only with other religious bodies, but with secular systems which throughout the century gained more and more political power and more and more control over the minds of man»³⁰.

One may find Komonchak's designation of this Catholicism as «modern» to be rather odd since what he describes is a Catholicism which opposed central tenets of modernity, a Catholicism which was anti-modern. We are dealing here with a paradox, however. As Komonchak explains,

the paradox is that at the very moment in which the Church was repudiating the effects of the Enlightenment on society and culture, it was making use of important features of it in the articulation of its own life. Roman Catholicism presented itself as the antithesis of emancipation from tradition and authority; but it innovated in many areas of Church life, devotion, structure, and thought, and the authority which it exercised represents a classic illustration of that self-conscious, rationalized, and bureaucratized mode of thought in which Max Weber saw the distinctive mark of modernity. This anti-modern Roman Catholicism was very modern indeed³¹.

²⁷ See Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* [hereafter AAS] (August 4, 1879), 12 (1878-1879), 97-115.

²⁸ Komonchak, *The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 44-46; *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 373-376.

²⁹ Komonchak, *The Enlightenment and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, 47; *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 378.

³⁰ Komonchak, *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 378.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 383.

The historical study of modern Roman Catholicism has allowed Komonchak to argue several points with regard to the interpretation of Vatican II. First, while those espousing the progressive, traditionalist, or the middle view agree that everyday Catholicism as it existed until the pontificate of John XXIII collapsed, Komonchak is able to pin down with more precision what had collapsed. His answer is that it was a particular historical and social form of the church, the one he calls modern Roman Catholicism.

Second, the traditionalist and the middle positions deplore the collapse of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, even though they disagree on whether the Council is responsible for it. Those who hold the former view say «yes», and those who hold the latter say «no». Komonchak explains that Henri de Lubac and Joseph Ratzinger – the most prominent advocates of the middle view – insist that the popes and bishops who made Vatican II happen never intended the Council to be a revolution or to produce a new church, but rather they desired a spiritual renewal and pastoral reform in the church. Although Komonchak agrees with de Lubac and Ratzinger on this point, he does not think that the question of the Council's responsibility for the collapse of the pre-Vatican II Catholicism can be resolved by solely examining the intentions of those involved. By adopting an insight from sociology and historiography, he contends that historical agents never know in advance all the implications and consequences of their actions. Choices they make often do have consequences they never intended. Yet, in spite of that, it may be argued that they are the cause of the undesired effects. Komonchak explains that what from the point of view of theology appears to be merely a reform, from the point of view of sociology may be something like a revolution, and he thinks that neither de Lubac nor Ratzinger take this sufficiently into consideration³².

Third and still with regard to the responsibility for the collapse of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, Komonchak's position is that Vatican II is in fact responsible for the collapse because it called into question some of the most important features of modern Roman Catholicism. Komonchak maintains that in three important ways the Council called into question the logic of modern Roman Catholicism. The Council offered a more nuanced and a more positive assessment of

³² Komonchak, *Interpreting the Council*, cit., 29-33; *Interpreting the Second Vatican Council*, cit., 83.

the modern world than had been typical before. This happened with particular force in the documents on the church in the modern world and on religious freedom. Through this the inner logic and dynamic of modern Roman Catholicism, which stringently opposed the modern world, was compromised to the point that it could not sustain itself any longer. The Council also called for a reform of church worship, devotion, and practice. This happened suddenly in a church which for a long time rejected this very idea. As mentioned above, calling for a reform may be theologically sound. Sociologically, however, it represented an interruption in the processes by which in everyone's memory the church reproduced itself; moreover, the Council called these processes into question. Komonchak notes that sociologically this is a dangerous thing to do. Lastly, the Council called the local churches to achieve in their own places and cultures their realization of catholicity. This also constituted a break with modern Roman Catholicism's insistence on centralization and uniformity, and it questioned the normativity of the European and especially Roman ways of realizing Catholicism³³. These three decisions of Vatican II have had, according to Komonchak, a devastating effect on pre-Vatican II Catholicism.

Although Komonchak is usually on the side of the middle position, has worked out his own version of it, and considers the progressive and the traditionalist positions to be one-sided, in the case of assigning the Council responsibility for the collapse of the pre-Vatican II Catholicism, he agrees with progressives and traditionalists who he thinks are correct in finding in the Council itself a cause and explanation of many developments after the Council. Komonchak makes a serious effort to understand the Catholicism which dissolved in the aftermath of Vatican II, and he believes that everyone who wants to say whether this dissolution was a good or a bad thing should likewise analyze what was lost. Komonchak's critique of the progressives in this regard is that they do not show a willingness to understand and/or appreciate why pre-Vatican II Catholicism became what it was, nor are they willing to acknowledge that much about it was

³³ Komonchak, *Interpreting the Second Vatican Council*, cit., 87-89; *Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism*, cit., 384-385; *40 Years after Vatican II*, cit., 14; *The Ecclesial and Cultural Roles of Theology*, in «Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America», 40 (1985), 15-32, at 23; *The Church in the United States Today*, cit., 20.

attractive. As for the traditionalists, Komonchak believes that they make a mistake in considering modern Roman Catholicism as a timeless and necessary ideal. They are not able to conceive that in the nineteenth century the church could have responded differently to the challenges brought by the Enlightenment. Lastly, with regard to the middle position, particularly as this has been presented by Joseph Ratzinger, Komonchak thinks that it leans too much in the traditionalist direction in the sense that it is fundamentally hostile to liberalism in culture and society³⁴.

3. *Vatican II as an «Event»*

The previous pages have shown that Komonchak has approached the questions of interpreting the Council by making a serious attempt at understanding pre-Vatican II Catholicism as well as by learning from and appropriating the insights of the social sciences. Komonchak's logic for this has been grounded in his conviction that neither a judgment about the Council's responsibility for the collapse of the pre-Vatican II Catholicism nor an assessment of this collapse could be made without first studying the Catholicism which collapsed. At this point I will shift the discussion of Komonchak's contribution to the hermeneutics of the Council to the issue of Vatican II as an «event».

For Komonchak, the differences among the interpretations of the progressives, the traditionalists, and the reformists depend heavily on what one means by «Vatican II», particularly, whether one understands it to refer primarily to the Council's final documents or to the experience of the Council. The progressives and the traditionalists focus mainly on the latter, whereas the reformists concentrate on the former. Komonchak argues, however, that the question of the meaning and interpretation of Vatican II cannot be resolved simply by appealing to its texts (letter) or to the experience of the Council (spirit), but requires critical attention to a third category, that of Vatican II as an «event»³⁵. He argues his point primarily on historiographical grounds.

³⁴ Komonchak, *Interpreting the Second Vatican Council*, cit., 89-90.

³⁵ Komonchak, *Vatican II as an «Event»*, cit., 341. This article is the Fourth Annual Henri de Lubac lecture which Komonchak delivered at Saint Louis University on February 11, 1999.

Komonchak first worked out the distinction between «experience» and «event» in a presentation he gave at a symposium on Vatican II held in Bologna in December 1996³⁶. He explains that all three terms – event, experience, and final documents – appeared in the program of the symposium, but only two of them – event and final documents – appear in the proceedings which gathered the major papers delivered at the symposium³⁷. The omission of «experience» Komonchak considers to be an indication of his apparent failure to convince the participants, or perhaps just the editors of the proceedings, that the category «event» is not reducible to that of «experience»³⁸.

With the term «experience» Komonchak refers to the intentions, motives, encounters, decisions, and actions of the Council participants. It naturally refers to what happened during Vatican II, which was more than the production of texts. Komonchak points out that it is difficult to speak of a single «experience» of the Council except when the Council fathers took official and collective action. The «experience» of Vatican II, for Komonchak, is synonymous with the «spirit» of the Council. As products of that experience, the «final documents» survive as black marks on white paper. But unlike «experience», which is part of the past and has to be reconstructed by the critical work of historians, they continue to have an objective and continued existence³⁹.

Differing from «experience», the term «event» for Komonchak refers not to a simple occurrence of something, but to a noteworthy occurrence, one that has consequences. Komonchak notes that at present there has been a revival of this category among historians, and that they almost always assume that «an “event” represents novelty, discontinuity, a “rupture”, a break from routine, causing surprise, disturbance, even trauma, and perhaps initiating a new routine, a new realm of the

³⁶ J.A. Komonchak, *Riflessioni storiografiche sul Vaticano II come evento*, in *L'evento e le decisioni: Studi sulle dinamiche del concilio Vaticano II*, a cura di M.T. Fattori, A. Melloni, Bologna 1997. *Vatican II as an «Event»* is a slightly revised version of this presentation.

³⁷ See Fattori, Melloni, *L'evento e le decisioni*, cit. This collection of essays contains two additional contributions on the topic of Vatican II as an «event». See É. Fouilloux, *La categoria di evento nella storiografia francese recente*, 51-62; P. Hünemann, *Il concilio Vaticano II come evento*, 63-92.

³⁸ Komonchak, *Vatican II as an «Event»*, cit., 350, note 4; *Roots and Branches*, cit., 517.

³⁹ Komonchak, *Vatican II as an «Event»*, cit., 338-339, 343.

taken-for-granted»⁴⁰. Komonchak refers to several historians who understand an event as an occurrence detached in one way or another from the whole set of repetitions and regularities that constitute the course of daily life⁴¹. For them, an event is something that does not go without saying. It refers to sequences of occurrences which start with a rupture of some sort and which transform structures⁴².

In Komonchak's view, it seems clear and hardly in need of demonstration that Vatican II was an «event» in the sense just described⁴³. He is aware, however, that this understanding would meet objections from the proponents of the middle position who do not accept that the Council constituted a break or rupture with tradition. For them, the notion of Vatican II's discontinuity with tradition has been exaggerated by both the progressives and the traditionalists, and they think that it can be asserted only at the expense of ignoring the texts of the Council. For Joseph Ratzinger, with whom Komonchak seems to be primarily in conversation from among the reformists, the notion of

before and after in the history of the Church, wholly unjustified by the documents of Vatican II, which do nothing but reaffirm the continuity of Catholicism, must be decidedly opposed. There is no “pre-” or “post”- conciliar Church; there is but one, unique Church that walks the path toward the Lord, ever deepening and ever better understanding the treasure of faith that he himself has entrusted to her. There are no leaps in this history, there are no fractures, and there is no break in continuity. In no wise did the Council intend to introduce a temporal dichotomy in the Church⁴⁴.

Komonchak considers Ratzinger's position to be largely theological and focused on the fidelity of Vatican II's texts with tradition. What Komonchak finds lacking is an engagement with what social sciences have to say with regard to the interpretation of history⁴⁵.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 339.

⁴¹ P. Grégoire, *L'événement-référence: notion d'événement et plans de références: l'individu, les systèmes d'information et l'histoire-mémoire*, in *L'événement, identité et histoire: Actes d'un colloque tenu à l'Université Laval en 1990*, éd. par C. Dolan, Sillery 1991; P. Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire*, Paris 1978.

⁴² Komonchak, *Vatican II as an «Event»*, cit., 339.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 340.

⁴⁴ Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report*, cit., 35.

⁴⁵ Komonchak, *Vatican II as an «Event»*, cit., 340-341.

In Komonchak's understanding, the judgment about whether Vatican II was an «event», that is, a rupture, cannot be based exclusively on the experiences, intentions, or motives of the Council's protagonists. These are only a part of the judgment that needs to be made. This judgment, for Komonchak, «is a historical judgment, which means that it is a historian's judgment»⁴⁶. Furthermore, appropriating the insights of historians such as Paul Veyne, Carl Becker, and Lucien Febvre, Komonchak explains that from the historian's perspective «an event makes sense only within a story»⁴⁷. In this understanding, an event is an episode within a plot. The overall story and its plot determine what will count as an event, and changing the story and the plot will also change which occurrences will be seen as events. Thus, the timeline is fundamental for any story. This insight is significant for Komonchak because he thinks that different understandings of the Council will ensue if the Council is placed at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the story one wants to tell. With regard to the Council documents, Komonchak thinks that different time-lines are appropriate for different texts in terms of what constitutes their beginning, and he denies that the dates of the texts' promulgation should be the end of the story. Rather, their reception should also be part of the timeline⁴⁸.

Komonchak thinks that there is sufficient data to warrant his claim that Vatican II constituted an «event». He points out that the very announcement of the Council, which was met with both hope and fear, was a surprise and a break with normal life of the church. He notes further that during the first session of the Council there were several dramatic moments such as the pope's opening speech, the postponement of the election of conciliar commissions, and the severe criticism of the schema *De fontibus* and its removal from the conciliar agenda. These data clearly represent a break with routine. In addition, from what contemporaries wrote about the Council when they referred to it as the end of the Counter-Reformation or of the Tridentine era, the end of the Middle Ages, even the end of the Constantinian era, it is clear that they sensed that something new and

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 344.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 345. See *Detachment and the Writings of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker*, ed. by P.L. Snyder, Ithaca 1958; L. Febvre, *Combats pour l'histoire*, Paris 1992. For Veyne see note 41.

⁴⁸ Komonchak, *Vatican II as an «Event»*, cit., 345-347.

unusual was taking place. This is true also about the post-conciliar period⁴⁹.

Komonchak agrees with the reformist position that appeals of the progressives to the «spirit of Vatican II» need to be controlled by the actual texts of the Council, which are what the Council participants agreed to say. But this is not an easy task, as if the final texts provided a straightforward answer to what the Council did. The full meaning of these texts, for Komonchak, can often be determined only when they are situated within their redactional history. When this is done, one can see that the differences between the officially prepared drafts for the Council and the final texts are significant enough to speak of break or discontinuity⁵⁰. He illustrates this with the example of *Dei verbum*. One way to understand this document is to start with its original draft *De fontibus* prepared for the first session of the Council, and then ask how it happened that the Council, which was for the most part expected to say what was in the original draft, said in the end what is in *Dei verbum*⁵¹. Another way is to start in the decades prior to the Council, which witnessed the rise of historical criticism of the Bible, its initial opposition by the Magisterium, and a first step towards its acceptance in the encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* of Pius XII (1943), and then to continue from *De fontibus* to *Dei verbum*. In both of these two ways Komonchak thinks that the conclusion seems clear that *Dei verbum* «intended to do something other than simply “reaffirm the continuity of Catholicism”»⁵².

Komonchak's article «Benedict XVI and the Interpretation of Vatican II» is one of his most recent engagements with the topic of the interpretation of the Council⁵³. The article analyses the Christmas

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 340, 344.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 342.

⁵¹ For instance, based on its title *De fontibus revelationis* ('On the sources of revelation'), the heading of its first chapter *De duplici fonte revelationis* ('On the double-source of revelation') and the text of paragraph 4, the Council was supposed to say that Scripture and Tradition constitute two sources of revelation. This two-source theology of revelation, however, is not present in the final text of *Dei verbum*. Instead, one reads there that Scripture and Tradition flow out from the same divine wellspring, that they are bound closely together, communicate with each other, and move toward the same goal (See *Dei verbum* 9). Nowhere in *Dei verbum* are Scripture and Tradition presented as two sources of revelation.

⁵² Komonchak, *Vatican II as an «Event»*, cit., 342.

⁵³ The full bibliographical data for this article are given in footnote 4. *Novelty in Continuity* is a popular version of this article.

address of the pope delivered to the Roman curia on December 22, 2005. In it the pope took up the issue of the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council. From his analysis of the pope's address one could conclude that Komonchak does not consider the pope's proposal to interpret the Council through the lens of the «hermeneutic of reform» to be in conflict with his own view that Vatican II constituted an «event».

The immediate context for the pope's address was the fortieth anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council. As part of the larger context, it should be noted that in 2005 a collection of essays by Italian Archbishop Agostino Marchetto was published, in which he was severely critical of the five-volume *History of Vatican II* produced by the so-called «Bologna school» and edited by Giuseppe Alberigo⁵⁴. Komonchak was part of this project both as a contributor and as a general editor of the English-language series. Among the criticisms Marchetto raised of the *History of Vatican II* was that it interprets the Council too much in terms of discontinuity and rupture. Upon the election of Joseph Ratzinger to the papacy, there were high expectations that he would address the issue of the interpretation of Vatican II and criticize the approach of the «Bologna school» by taking the side of its critics.

The pope indeed addressed the issue shortly after his election in the aforementioned address to the Roman curia. He argued that in vast areas of the church the implementation of the Council has been difficult because two contrary hermeneutics came face-to-face and quarreled with each other. In the pope's view, one of them caused confusion and the other has been bearing fruit silently but more and more visibly. The Pope called the former hermeneutic a hermeneutic of discontinuity or rupture and the latter a hermeneutic of reform⁵⁵.

The pope expressed displeasure with the hermeneutic of discontinuity or rupture, and he said that it

risks ending in a split between the preconciliar and the postconciliar church. It asserts that the texts of the council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the council. It claims that they are the result of com-

⁵⁴ See A. Marchetto, *The Second Vatican Council: A Counterpoint for the History of the Council*, trans. K.D. Whitehead, Scranton 2010 [Italian orig. *Il Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II: Contrappunto per la sua storia*, Città del Vaticano 2005].

⁵⁵ Benedict XVI, *Interpreting Vatican II*, in «Origins», 35 (2005)/32, 534-539.

promises [...] However, the true spirit of the council is not to be found in these compromises but instead in the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts. [...] Precisely because the texts would only imperfectly reflect the true spirit of the council and its newness, it would be necessary to go courageously beyond the texts and make room for the newness in which the council's deepest intention would be expressed [...] ⁵⁶.

The pope claimed that this hermeneutic misunderstands the nature of the Council and proposed the hermeneutic of reform to counteract it.

The pope illustrated his notion of the hermeneutic of reform by referring to three sets of questions, which he considered to have been pressing upon the church at the time of Vatican II. The first two concerned the relationship between faith and modern science and between the church and the modern state, and the third had to do with the problem of religious tolerance. With regard to these three concerns the pope stated:

It is clear that in all these sectors, which together form a single problem, some kind of discontinuity might emerge. Indeed, a discontinuity had been revealed but in which, after the various distinctions between concrete historical situations and their requirements had been made, the continuity of principles proved not to have been abandoned. It is easy to miss this fact at a first glance.

It is precisely in this combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels that the very nature of true reform consists ⁵⁷.

The pope then further illustrated this point on the issue of religious freedom. Since he acknowledged that his hermeneutics of reform contains not only continuity but also discontinuity – even though at different levels – it should be evident that his hermeneutic of reform is not in inverse relation to the hermeneutics of discontinuity.

Komonchak finds it strange that the pope sets up the dichotomy between these two hermeneutics. He thinks that the pope might have better contrasted the hermeneutics of discontinuity with that of continuity or fidelity, and similarly the hermeneutics of reform with that

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 536.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 538.

of revolution. Instead the tension was set up between discontinuity and reform. Komonchak points out, however, that no necessary tension exists between these two since any genuine reform requires some discontinuity. In the absence of change one cannot speak of reform⁵⁸. The pope himself affirmed this point when he said that the true reform consists in a combination of continuity and discontinuity. Thus, Komonchak concludes that based on the pope's address «a hermeneutics of discontinuity need not see rupture everywhere; and a hermeneutics of reform, it turns out, acknowledges some important discontinuities»⁵⁹.

Komonchak also understands the pope's speech as in no way repudiating the *History of Vatican II*. He suggests, rather, that the pope's choice of religious freedom as the key illustration for his hermeneutics of reform indicates that the main target of the pope's speech was the Society of St. Pius X – a group of Catholic traditionalists that rejected the Council⁶⁰. The teaching on religious liberty has been among the chief reasons for their opposition to Vatican II. Ever since they entered into formal schism in 1988, when their founder, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, illicitly ordained four bishops, the Vatican has been making significant attempts to overcome the schism.

Komonchak explains that the issue of continuity or discontinuity can be examined from different standpoints – doctrinal, theological, sociological, and historical. From a doctrinal standpoint, he sees a clear continuity of Vatican II with tradition. The Council neither discarded nor promulgated any dogmas, although it did recover some doctrines which had been neglected in recent centuries. He gives the examples of the collegiality of bishops, the priesthood of all the baptized, the theology of the local church, and the importance of Scripture. From the theological standpoint, Komonchak notes that Vatican II was the fruit of the renewal movements (biblical, patristic, liturgical, and ecumenical). In the decades prior to the Council these movements and theologians associated with them were viewed at times with disapproval and suspicion by the Magisterium, which was reflected in the schemas prepared for the Council by the Roman

⁵⁸ Komonchak, *Benedict XVI and the Interpretation of Vatican II*, cit., 326.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 335; *Novelty in Continuity*, cit., 13.

⁶⁰ Komonchak, *Benedict XVI and the Interpretation of Vatican II*, cit., 336; *Benedict XVI and the Interpretation of Vatican II*, in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, cit., 104-105; *Novelty in Continuity*, cit., 13-14. Gilles Routhier argues the same point in his *The Hermeneutic of Reform as a Task for Theology*.

curia. At the first session of the Council, however, these texts were generally met with disapproval from the majority of the Council fathers⁶¹. The leadership of the Council, hitherto in the hands of the curial bishops and those who thought alike, thus became available also to bishops who were open to the renewal advocated by the theologians associated with the biblical, patristic, liturgical, and ecumenical movements. Some theologians who were till then viewed with suspicion by the Vatican were made official conciliar experts⁶². In this, Komonchak sees considerable discontinuity. He affirms the same from the sociological or historical standpoint, from which Vatican II was experienced as an event – a break with routine⁶³.

While Komonchak's analysis of the pope's speech is well taken, an examination of Benedict's interpretation of Vatican II based on that address apart from his actions as the pope allows us to see only one side of the coin. The other side contains such imprints as the pope's decision to expand the permission to celebrate the pre-Vatican II liturgy and his approval of the document *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, both of which, however, may be difficult to square with his hermeneutic of reform. The difficulty is that these actions seem to imply a hermeneutic of the Council that does not allow for discontinuity and thus appears to be at odds with the pope's hermeneutic of reform.

In his 2007 apostolic letter *Summorum Pontificum*⁶⁴, issued on his own initiative, Pope Benedict widened the permission to celebrate the pre-Vatican II liturgy. The pope established that the Roman Missal promulgated by Paul VI in 1970 be regarded as the ordinary expression of the Roman Rite, and the Roman Missal promulgated by St. Pius V in 1570 and reissued by Blessed John XXIII in 1962 be considered its extraordinary expression⁶⁵. *Summorum Pontificum* ex-

⁶¹ E.g. the schemas on divine revelation (*De fontibus revelationis*) and on the church (*De Ecclesia*).

⁶² For instance, Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, and John Courtney Murray.

⁶³ Komonchak, *Benedict XVI and the Interpretation of Vatican II*, cit., 335-336; *Novelty in Continuity*, cit., 13-14.

⁶⁴ Benedict XVI, Apostolic letter *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* (July 7, 2007), in «Origins», 37 (2007)/9, 129-132.

⁶⁵ *Summorum Pontificum*, art. 1, cit., 131. On what to properly call the extraordinary rite see J.F. Baldovin, *Reflections on Summorum Pontificum*, in «Worship», 83 (2009)/2, 98-112, at 98.

panded the provisions hitherto regulating the celebration of the un-reformed liturgy which had been established by John Paul II in *Quattuor abhinc annos* and in *Ecclesia Dei*⁶⁶. While John Paul II allowed local bishops to establish places in their dioceses where Mass could be celebrated according to the 1962 Missal, with *Summorum Pontificum* Pope Benedict effectively sanctioned any Catholic priest in good canonical standing to celebrate the pre-conciliar liturgy without seeking his bishop's permission, as long as there was a stable group of faithful who adhered to the earlier liturgical tradition. Benedict also surprised many when he asserted that the Roman Missal of John XXIII was never abrogated⁶⁷. The pope explained that the motivation for his decision was the fact that following the renewal of the liturgy mandated by Vatican II «in some regions no small numbers of faithful adhered and continue to adhere with great love and affection to the [pre-conciliar liturgy]»⁶⁸. In the accompanying letter to *Summorum Pontificum* he added that with the *motu proprio* he intended «an interior reconciliation in the heart of the church»⁶⁹.

Although one can agree with the sentiment of the pope, it is difficult to see his decision to widen the use of the pre-Vatican II liturgy as being in conformity with his hermeneutic of reform. While this hermeneutic is supposed to be made of both continuity and discontinuity, the pope's decision seems to lay stress only on the former. This latter point appears to be clear also in the letter that accompanied *Summorum Pontificum* in which the pope says that «in the history of the liturgy there is growth and progress but no rupture [...] It behooves all of us to preserve the riches that have developed in the church's faith and prayer, and give them their proper place»⁷⁰. There can be no doubt that the bishops at Vatican II intended substantive and theological changes of the liturgy and not merely minor

⁶⁶ See Congregation for Divine Worship, *Circular letter Quattuor abhinc annos* (October 3, 184), in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 76 (1984), 1088-1089; John Paul II, *Apostolic letter Ecclesia Dei* (July 2, 1988), in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 80 (1988), 1498.

⁶⁷ *Summorum Pontificum*, art. 1, cit., 131. On the question of abrogation see C.J. Glendinning, *Was the 1962 Missale Romanum Abrogated? A Canonical Analysis in Light of Summorum Pontificum*, in «Worship», 85 (2011)/1, 15-37.

⁶⁸ *Summorum Pontificum*, cit., 130.

⁶⁹ Benedict XVI, *Letter Accompanying motu proprio Summorum Pontificum*, in «Origins», 37 (2007)/9, 132-134, at 134.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

adjustments which would be optional⁷¹. The kind of renewal they envisioned thus could not take place without some discontinuity. It should be noted, however, that change and discontinuity have not been anomalous features in the development of the Roman Rite. John Baldovin in fact argues that «the idea that the Roman Rite has not known profound and radical reforms is a myth»⁷².

Reflecting on *Summorum Pontificum*, Nathan Mitchell explains that it has been typical for the Roman Church to preserve the riches of the past not by reviving old liturgical forms, but rather by creating a new synthesis. In this way past liturgical renewals achieved historical continuity, which has not been canceled by novelties; rather, the novelties made it possible⁷³. Mitchell believes that by creating a new synthesis made of both continuity and discontinuity the Roman Missal promulgated by Paul VI followed the traditional method of liturgical renewal of the Roman Rite. Retreating to a past liturgical form thus can make one wonder to what extent reform is truly the Pope Benedict's hermeneutic of Vatican II.

The same is the case with the CDF's 2007 *Responsa*, document approved by Pope Benedict⁷⁴. It was issued to clarify «the authentic meaning of some ecclesiological expressions used by the magisterium that are open to misunderstanding in the theological debate»⁷⁵. The document consists of responses to five questions brought to the attention of the CDF because in the aftermath of Vatican II they received erroneous interpretations, which has led to confusion and doubt. The bottom line of the *Responsa*, as best seen in question one, is that «the Second Vatican Council neither changed nor intended to change [the Catholic doctrine on the church]; rather it developed, deepened and more fully explained it»⁷⁶. Here again one notices that the emphasis is on the continuity, and discontinuity

⁷¹ See for instance, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, #s 4, 21, 50, 66, 67, 71, 72, 73, 76, 77.

⁷² Baldovin, *Reflections on Summorum Pontificum*, cit., 101.

⁷³ See N.D. Mitchell, *The Amen Corner: Summorum Pontificum*, in «Worship», 81 (2007)/6, 549-565, at 552-558.

⁷⁴ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church* (June 29, 2007), in «Origins», 37 (2007)/9, 134-136. In the aftermath of *Summorum Pontificum* and the *Responsa*, it has become clear that both these documents were part of a plan to achieve reconciliation with the Society of St. Pius X.

⁷⁵ CDF, *Responses*, cit., 135.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

receives no attention as a hermeneutical category for the Council. The CDF and the pope come close to saying that nothing happened at Vatican II.

While it is not possible to analyze here such a complex topic as the ecclesiology of Vatican II, two observations should suffice to point out that the claims of the *Responsa* with regard to Vatican II changing the Catholic doctrine on the church can hardly withstand critical investigation. First, the documents of Vatican II contain many positive statements about the non-Catholic churches, not to mention non-Christian religions⁷⁷. As Francis Sullivan explains, «one would look in vain for such positive statements about the non-Catholic churches and communities in any papal document prior to Vatican II»⁷⁸. Second, the decades following the Council witnessed unprecedented Catholic involvement in the bi- and multilateral theological dialogues both on global and local levels aimed at the restoration of the visible unity among the divided Christian churches. In addition, Catholics began to pray with non-Catholic Christians, collaborate on various social justice projects, and were no longer prohibited from attending liturgical ceremonies of non-Catholic Christians such as weddings and funerals. If the Council did not change what Pius XI taught in *Mortalium animos* and Pius XII in *Mystici corporis*, those dialogues, which were sponsored by popes and bishops all over the world, were at odds with Catholic doctrine. While these two observations question the claim of the *Responsa* that Vatican II did not change the Catholic doctrine on the church, they also point out that the hermeneutic of continuity is incapable of accounting for all that happened at Vatican II, and that it is also an oversimplification of what happened. These brief comments on *Summorum Pontificum* and the *Responsa* call attention to a possible lack of coherence between Pope Benedict's hermeneutic of reform as explicated in his 2005 Christmas address and the hermeneutic implicit in these two documents.

⁷⁷ See for instance, *Lumen gentium*, #15; *Unitatis redintegratio*, # 3; *Nostra aetate*, #2.

⁷⁸ F.A. Sullivan, *The Meaning of Subsistit in as Explained by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, in «Theological Studies», 69 (2008)/1, 116-124, at 124.

4. Evaluation and Conclusion

Komonchak's work on the hermeneutics of Vatican II can be seen as one piece of a mosaic whose inscription reads «Something Happened at Vatican II»⁷⁹. It fits in with and complements those interpreters who place Vatican II in the overall continuity with the tradition and at the same time acknowledge that the Council made a significant break with it⁸⁰. Komonchak focused on three issues of the conciliar hermeneutics: (1) the Council's responsibility for the collapse of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, (2) the continuity and discontinuity of Vatican II with the tradition of the church, and (3) the dynamic between the «letter» and the «spirit» of the Council. The conclusions he has reached are nuanced, carefully argued, and carry a persuasive force. The significance of Komonchak's contribution lies not in providing a comprehensive set of rules or guidelines for interpreting the Council but in articulating an alternative middle position which not only stands between the progressive and the traditionalist views on the conciliar hermeneutics, but also modifies the dominant middle position of Joseph Ratzinger. While Ratzinger and Komonchak share many conclusions, Komonchak's middle position more adequately accounts for the dynamics of the Council and for the change that took place in Catholicism after its close.

Komonchak's treatment of the question of the Council's responsibility for the dissolution of pre-Vatican II Catholicism is a *par excellence* example of his approach to the hermeneutics of Vatican II in which a theological lens provides the primary but not the entire and adequate view of what happened at the Council. He is right in noting that to adequately address the question at hand it is not enough to merely point out the intentions of the Council Fathers who never desired radical changes in the church but only its renewal. Komonchak's point that theological and sociological interpretations of one and the same phenomenon such as Vatican II can diverge considerably is well taken. It allows him to argue that, by revising its attitude toward modernity, the Council caused an interruption in the way the

⁷⁹ See M. Faggioli, *Council Vatican II: Bibliographical Overview 2005-2007*, in «Cristianesimo nella Storia», 29 (2008)/2, 567-610, at 571-573.

⁸⁰ See for instance, O. Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles*, New York 2004; J.W. O'Malley, *The Style of Vatican II: The «How» of the Church Changed during the Council*, in «America», 188 (2003)/6, 12-15.

church was reproducing itself for several generations, and in the face of this interruption modern Roman Catholicism was not able to sustain itself. This may be a challenging conclusion for some to accept because of the authority ecumenical councils enjoy, but it is a conclusion that is supported by evidence.

Komonchak's appropriation of the notion of «event» from historiography has allowed him to discuss the issue of the Council's continuity and discontinuity with tradition within a conceptual framework that is not theologically reductionist. Not just as any occurrence, but as a noteworthy occurrence, one that represents novelty, break from routine, even discontinuity, the notion of Vatican II as an «event» is expansive enough to situate the Council's (micro) ruptures within a larger continuity with tradition. Referring to the Council as an «event» has become a trademark of the so-called «School of Bologna» and its five-volume *History of Vatican II*, and it has been met with heavy criticism in some circles. Perhaps the most attention has been given to objections raised by Archbishop Marchetto in his *The Second Vatican Council: A Counterpoint for the History of the Council*. Marchetto's criticism is difficult to assess, however, because one does not find a sustained discussion of the event-character of the council in his book⁸¹. His criticism remains on the level of assertions, not arguments. One gets the impression that Marchetto rejects the notion of Vatican II as an «event» simply because it affirms discontinuity of the Council with tradition. It is difficult to see, however, how a position that the Council was not discontinuous with tradition can be maintained since the contrary can be demonstrated directly from the Council's documents. In his review of Marchetto's book, John O'Malley pointed out that creating an absolute dichotomy between continuity and discontinuity of the Council with tradition is unintelligible to historians because it gives the impression that nothing happened at Vatican II, which would be rather odd to conclude, to say the least⁸². Neil Ormerod is right when he suggests that with regard to Vatican II hermeneutics «the underlying issue is not one of continuity/discontinuity but of authenticity/unauthenticity of the

⁸¹ For instance, Komonchak's discussion of Vatican II as an «event» is treated in only one full page. See Marchetto, *The Second Vatican Council*, cit., 393-394.

⁸² See J.W. O'Malley, A review of *The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council: A Counterpoint for the History of the Council* by Agostino Marchetto, in «Journal of Religion», 91 (2011)/4, 557-558.

development»⁸³ that was authorized by the Council. While Marchetto seems to equate discontinuity with unauthenticity, Komonchak would defend the discontinuities by arguing that they actually represent recovery of a forgotten memory of the church. One may wonder with Stephen Schloesser «how much purposeful forgetting – repression or amnesia – is required to make a case for continuity»⁸⁴.

The balanced and nuanced character of Komonchak's alternative middle position is perhaps best seen on the issue of the dynamics between the role of the «letter» and the «spirit» of the Council in understanding Vatican II. While he agrees with the middle or the reformist position that the spirit of Vatican II needs to be controlled by the letter of its final documents, he also maintains that the documents can often be understood only against the background of their editorial history – a point not sufficiently acknowledged by the reformists. Komonchak's suggestion that one way to understand the «letter» of Vatican II is to compare and contrast the initial drafts, which were prepared for the first session of the Council and which the Council was expected to confirm, with the final texts of the Council is well taken. One would undoubtedly find many instances of continuity and discontinuity between them.

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⁸³ N. Ormerod, *Vatican II-Continuity or Discontinuity? Toward an Ontology of Meaning*, in «Theological Studies», 71 (2010)/3, 609-636, at 613.

⁸⁴ S. Schloesser, *Against Forgetting: Memory, History, Vatican II*, in «Theological Studies», 67 (2006)/2, 275-319, at 277.