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Recommended Citation

This brief article summarizes clearly the three major healings in Vatican II, offering a renewed vision of Roman Catholicism. It helps clarify how and why Vatican II was a doctrinal council as well as a pastoral one.

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Vatican II: *Aggiornamento* as Healing

In 1959 Pope John XXIII stunned the world when, after being pope for only 90 days, he announced his plan to convene the Second Vatican Council (only the 21st ecumenical council in the life of the Church). Such a dramatic event was not at all expected from the elderly Pope John. Yet he recognized the serious need for renewal in the Church, and so made his call to begin the process of *aggiornamento* (“updating”). Many aspects of life in the Church needed to be brought up to date and deep divisions needed to be healed. This chapter will describe these divisions and how the council’s teachings brought reform and new life.

Earlier Councils

Roman Catholicism in 1959 was still profoundly shaped by an earlier gathering of all the bishops of the Church, the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The 16th century was, of course, a time of great upheaval in the Church. It was a time of serious abuses, needed reforms, regional politics, and bitter polemics.

The Council of Trent provided an urgently needed response, one that was very effective in revitalizing the life of the Church. Trent took a firm and clear stance on such issues as justification and the sacraments; it strengthened the role of the pope and bishops and began reforms to improve the education of clergy; it reformed and unified the celebration of the Mass and introduced catechisms for the education of the people.

The Church paid a high price for Trent's rigorous reform, however. The response, while clear, was also very defensive and authoritarian; the polemics did not allow acknowledging the Protestant reformers' valid insights. Trent chose to re-structure the

Church according to a medieval model: papal supremacy, absolute control of the diocese by the bishop, no lay participation in administration. The council also failed to restore people's participation in the Mass; Latin was continued and the vernacular prohibited (one of Luther's reforms was to translate the Bible into the language of the people).

Trent brought renewal to many areas of Church life: spiritual, intellectual, cultural and missionary. But, because of the negative elements, the reform of Trent gradually slipped into a rigid religion. More and more, Roman Catholicism reacted defensively to the growth of the modern world. The next ecumenical council, Vatican I (1869-1870), reinforced these authoritarian and reactionary elements.¹

The Spirit of Blessed John XXIII

What was energizing and renewing in the 1500s had become oppressive by the 1900s. So John XXIII opened the windows for some fresh air. His opening address to Vatican II set the tone for the council, calling not for condemnations but for patience and openness, acknowledging not only the errors but also the opportunities of the time, disagreeing with the prophets of gloom and offering an optimistic and pastoral view of the Church and the world. John affirmed that with Christ there is goodness, order and peace. The fundamental concern for the council, therefore, became the effective proclamation of the Christian truth for the 20th century. John stressed both authentic faithfulness to the tradition (*ressourcement*—a return to the sources—was another important dynamic in

¹ Thomas Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 214-228, 276-294.

the council) and the need to find appropriate expressions of that tradition in the modern world.²

With remarkable dedication and sometimes intense disagreement³ the council responded to John's challenge! Meeting in four sessions between 1962 and 1965, Vatican II produced sixteen documents and a renewed vision of Roman Catholicism. One way to view this renewal and reform is to consider three major divisions which the council began to heal: the division within Roman Catholicism itself, the division between Roman Catholicism and other religions (both Christian and non-Christian), and the division between Roman Catholicism and the world.

Healing Within the Church

Vatican II both reflected and addressed the differences within the Church. Although there is an uneven quality to the documents, three deserve attention here: the documents on revelation, liturgy and--most important--the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*).

The development of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) demonstrates well the progressive mentality of Vatican II. The original draft, written by a pre-council commission, emphasized traditional formulas in a defensive and negative tone. After spirited debate, the document was rejected by a majority of the council

² Pope John's Opening Speech to the Council, *The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter M. Abbott SJ (New York: The America Press, 1966), 710-719.

³ John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 5-8 and passim.

members and returned by John XXIII to a new commission for complete rewriting. This work made use of a 1964 *Instruction* of the Roman Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Historical Truth of the Gospels.” The *Instruction* stresses that attention be paid to the three stages that are part of the process of the formation of the gospels: “(1) the ministry of Jesus, (2) the preaching of the apostles and (3) the writing by the evangelists.”⁴

The new version of the Constitution on Divine Revelation then, finally approved in the last session of the council, relied on modern biblical and historical research. The document emphasizes that revelation is God's gracious self-manifestation. Saying yes to this personal encounter with God is faith. This experience is handed on orally (tradition) and in writing (scripture). Both scripture and tradition, of course, must be handed on by a living community which preserves and re-expresses their meaning, applying them to new situations. The renewed understanding of the Bible along with the emphasis on it in this document on revelation provides the basis for the inner renewal of the whole Church.

The document that probably had the most immediate and visible impact on the Church was the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*). This document, based on the vast research and scholarship of the liturgical pioneers, led to the major revision of the Mass. Worship no longer would appear to be just the action of

⁴ Raymond Brown SS, *Reading the Gospels with the Church* (Eugene, Or: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 10. This book’s first two chapters offer excellent insights—in a very readable fashion—into the interpretation and adaptation contained in the gospels.

a priest, back turned to the people, speaking in a language most did not understand. The reformed liturgy would focus on community worship: the participation of the people, use of the vernacular, renewed emphasis on the scriptures. “In the restoration and development of the sacred liturgy the full and active participation by all the people is the paramount concern, for it is the primary, indeed the indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.”⁵ Although not all the changes were introduced as well as they might have been, the renewal of the liturgy began to heal the split between clergy and laity in the most important religious experience of everyday Christian living.

The significance of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church cannot be stressed enough. “Vatican II was a council of the church, for the church and about the church. And nowhere is the church’s own self-understanding—its sense of itself, its nature and its purpose—laid out as clearly as in *Lumen Gentium*.”⁶ Like the document on revelation this document was also drastically revised. Again, a first draft was rejected, and followed by a new document that was more biblical, historical and dynamic. By re-imagining the Church as the “people of God,” this final version radically changed the Church's self-understanding. It marked the beginning of the healing of deep divisions within the Church.

⁵ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery OP (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996), #14.

⁶ Edward P. Hahnenberg, *A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007), 37; see also 38-55.

One of these divisions was another kind of separation between clergy and laity. The document on the Church stressed the dignity and responsibilities of the laity and set aside the purely hierarchical point of view. Authority was now to be viewed in terms of service. An entire chapter of the document is devoted to the laity. But even more important, its basic image of the Church as the “new people of God” clearly emphasizes the human and communal nature of the Church rather than the institutional and hierarchical dimensions. Indeed, it stresses the fundamental equality of all in terms of vocation, dignity and commitment.

A second division within the Church was between bishops and pope. Vatican I had just completed its work on the papacy when Rome was invaded. It ended, therefore, without being able to discuss the rest of the Church. In its document on the Church, especially with its discussion of collegiality, Vatican II balanced that earlier council.

Vatican II states that all the bishops make up a stable body of people (a “college”) that is collectively responsible for the entire Church. The pope acts as head of this college. That is, the supreme authority in the Church is all the bishops together with and under the pope.⁷ This union of the primacy of the pope and the authority of the episcopal college begins a new and sometimes tension-filled era in the understanding of Church authority.⁸

Healing Between Catholicism and Other Religions

⁷ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Vatican Council II*, #22-23.

⁸ O’Malley, *What Happened*, 180-185, 302-305.

The second major division that Vatican II addressed was the division between the Roman Catholic Church and other religions (both Christian and non-Christian). The Constitution on the Church takes very seriously ecumenical tensions and opportunities and provides the foundation for dialogue that continues in more detail in several documents, including those on ecumenism, non-Christian religions, and religious freedom.

In the decree on ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), Vatican II significantly changes the Church's position relative to non-Catholic Christian communities. It treats them with respect and tries to understand and present their positions fairly. It states that the Spirit is at work in these communities, that they are part of the mystery of salvation.

“Moreover, some, even very many, of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements.”⁹An important implication here is Vatican II's acknowledgment that Christianity is not limited to Roman Catholicism.

Although brief, the declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions (*Nostra Aetate*) expresses a remarkable change, now highlighting the positive contributions and qualities of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism (which receives special attention). Other religions are included in a more general way. The Council

⁹ Decree on Ecumenism, *Vatican Council II*, #3.

declares that the “Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions.”¹⁰

The declaration ends with a strong rejection of all forms of discrimination or harassment based on race or religion.

Another dramatic breakthrough occurs in the declaration on religious liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*). The classical Catholic position, as expressed in the 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*, at best tolerated other religions and claimed preferential treatment for the Catholic Church by governments. The religious freedom that is now taken for granted in many countries has not been supported by the Roman Catholic tradition. Historically, numerous countries, including those in Europe, have seen many bloody persecutions related to religious liberty.¹¹

Vatican II’s document stresses the ethical foundations of the right to religious freedom. “The council further declares that the right to religious freedom is based on the very dignity of the human person as known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself.”¹² While the document emphasizes the responsibility to search for truth, especially religious truth, it insists that each person must be free from coercion, especially in religious matters. No one can be forced to act in a way that is contrary to personal beliefs; no one can be forcibly restrained from acting in accordance with those beliefs as long as the just requirements of the common good are observed.

¹⁰ Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Vatican Council II*, #2.

¹¹ See, for example, Bokenkotter, *Concise History*, 208-213, 248-260.

¹² Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Vatican Council II*, #2.

This declaration, not surprisingly, generated much controversy. The issue was not only religious freedom but also the underlying issue of the development of doctrine.¹³ The council was concerned about radically changing the position of the Church on religious liberty, a position firmly stated by Pope Pius IX. In the final session of the council, the document was approved by an overwhelming majority.

Healing Between Church and World

The third major division addressed by Vatican II was the separation of the Church from the world. Discussed in many documents, this topic was the specific focus of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). This significant document clearly expresses and symbolizes the spirit of Vatican II, for it is the only document to have originated directly from a suggestion (by Cardinal Suenens) made during the council itself. With it Vatican II begins a realistic dialogue with the modern world. The council accepts the progressive cultural and social movements of modern history and, grounded in its faith, optimistically describes the building of the human community.

This long document is divided into two parts. The first spells out a religious anthropology that is the foundation of many conciliar, papal and episcopal documents.

¹³ Hahnenberg, *Concise Guide*, offers keen insight into this fundamental issue in many of the council's debates: "If revelation itself is not primarily words *about* God, but a living encounter *with* God [as expressed in the Constitution on Divine Revelation], then we can admit that our limited human words often fail to capture this mystery. In such a view, doctrinal development is our becoming more and more conscious of all that is contained in God's offer of friendship. What is present implicitly from the beginning gradually becomes explicit in the church as we grow in our relationship with God." 153.

Included in this description are discussions of the dignity of the person, the interdependence of persons and societies, the significance of human activity in the world, and the role of the Church in the modern world. The second part applies this Christian understanding of the person in community to some of the most critical problems of the contemporary world: marriage and family, the proper development of culture, economic and social and political life, and war and peace. The most distinctive note sounded throughout this progressive and optimistic text is that of the Church putting itself consciously at the service of the human family, as expressed in the now famous opening lines: “The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.”¹⁴

The separation of the Church from the world is overcome in yet another way—in the Church's own self-understanding. That is, Vatican II marks the beginning of the Church understanding itself from a global perspective. Karl Rahner SJ (who was very involved in the council) compares the significance of this breakthrough to the opening of the early Christian community to the Gentiles more than 1,900 years ago. Rahner uses the image of “world-Church” to describe this new self-understanding.¹⁵ By world-Church Rahner means that Roman Catholicism is no longer a European and Western religion that has been “exported” to the rest of the world. It has now allowed itself truly to be

¹⁴ Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Vatican Council II*, #1.

¹⁵ Karl Rahner, *Concern for the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 77-102.

shaped by a whole variety of cultures from Latin America, Asia and Africa.

Past and Present

Vatican II stands as a remarkable example of renewal and reform. With its emphasis on the Bible, the council turned again to the foundation of the Christian experience and found renewed means of expressing that experience in the modern world. Deep divisions within the Church began to be healed; aloofness and separation from other religions and the world itself were seriously addressed. Scholars, some of whom had been questioned or silenced in pre-council days, first prepared the way by their scholarship and then actively worked with the bishops at the council to help create a new vision of the Church. Vatican II carefully considered the signs of the times and responded by moving Roman Catholicism beyond its siege mentality to become an open and pastoral community in the world.

Just as with individuals, however, diseases and divisions also re-emerge in the people of God. The years immediately following the close of the council were marked by a wide variety of responses, including bitter debates about appropriate liturgical celebrations and about structures of authority. “Thanks to the Second Vatican Council, Catholics [were] forced to re-examine many of their most cherished practices and traditions. Such a process was bound to be disruptive, but the sheer magnitude of the crisis it provoked astonished everyone.”¹⁶

In recent years as polarization increased in the Church, the debate about the proper

¹⁶ Bokenkotter, *Concise History*, 386; see also 368-386.

interpretation of Vatican II intensified. In his article “Misdirections”¹⁷ Vatican II scholar John O’Malley SJ addresses some of these controversies concerning issues that “should be of concern to all Catholics who cherish the heritage of the council.”¹⁸ In pointing out how not to interpret Vatican II, O’Malley clearly also makes positive points.

Several of these points address the interpretations that downplay the significance of the Second Vatican Council. O’Malley stresses that Vatican II was a doctrinal council as well as a pastoral one. It taught many things though “in a style different from previous councils.”¹⁹ He emphasizes that significant change happened in the council. Similarly he affirms continuity but also discontinuity in its teachings; the healings expressed in collegiality and religious liberty are examples of such change.²⁰

Given the examples of healing and the need for new healing, the purpose and inspiration of Vatican II, expressed in the council’s Opening Message to Humanity, still offers sound direction for all Christians today: “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we wish to inquire how we ought to renew ourselves, so that we may be found increasingly faithful to the gospel of Christ.”²¹

¹⁷ John W. O’Malley SJ, “Misdirections: Ten sure-fire ways to mix up the teaching of Vatican II,” *America*, 208/3 (4 February, 2013) 25-27.

¹⁸ O’Malley, “Misdirections,” 25.

¹⁹ O’Malley, “Misdirections,” 25.

²⁰ O’Malley does not give these examples in the article, but see his book, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 8-14, 254-258, 302-305.

²¹ Opening Message to Humanity, *The Documents of Vatican II*, 3-4.

This article is taken from *Disciples: Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*, published in 2018 by Lectio Publishing, LLC; available at <https://www.lectiopublishing.com>.