

VATICAN II: RELEVANCE AND FUTURE

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Vatican II has more than a simple historical interest. What truly counts is comprehending its contemporary relevance and bearing its heritage within ourselves today. If we focus on the council's governing ideas and adopt the Council Fathers' method of posing problems rather than limiting ourselves to commenting on the texts' conclusions, we can apply this heritage beyond what the council says to the questions that are ours today.

FOLLOWING REPEATED REQUESTS by opponents of Schema XIII who wanted to reduce its scope and authority,¹ *Gaudium et spes* (GS), the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, bears the following interpretive note:

In the first part, the Church develops her teaching on man, on the world which is the enveloping context of man's existence, and on man's relations to his fellow men. In part two, the Church gives closer consideration to various aspects of modern life and human society; special consideration is given to those questions and problems which, in this general area, seem to have a greater urgency in our day. As a result in part two the subject matter which is viewed in the light of doctrinal principles is made up of diverse elements. Some elements have a permanent value; others, only

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¹ Some wanted the schema to be titled simply *Nuntius* or *Epistola pastoralis a concilio ad homines huius temporis* or even *Litterae synodales a concilio ad mundum* or *Declaratio ecclesiae ad dialogum instituendum cum mundo huius temporis* or *Declaratio ecclesiae ad mundum hodieum* instead of being called a pastoral constitution. On this issue, see my article “Mener à terme l'oeuvre amorcée: L'éprouvante expérience de la quatrième période,” in *Concile de transition*, vol. 5 of *Histoire de Vatican II 1959–1965*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo (Paris: Cerf, 2005) 177, 181–82, 222.

a transitory one. Consequently, the constitution must be interpreted according to the general norms of theological interpretation. Interpreters must bear in mind—especially in part two—the changeable circumstances which the subject matter, by its very nature, involves.²

Since the closing of the council, the opposition has not let down its guard. They have consistently promoted the theory that the teaching of Vatican II, in particular that of *Gaudium et spes*, does not have a permanent value due to its pastoral character. According to those who uphold this theory, Vatican II is a council marked by the situation and spirit of the 1960s. Because of this, it might speak to the baby-boomer generation, but it would no longer have anything to say to the new generation and to our current situation. In other words, it would not have any contemporary relevance. Since this teaching does not have any permanent value—so the argument goes—the change in social context renders the opinions of the council outmoded on the cardinal question of the relationship of the church to the world, to cultures, and to non-Catholics and non-Christians. As a circumstantial teaching, it concerns only one era. As a pastoral council, its teaching's value would be so limited to a particular social context that, given the evolution of this context,³ its choices would be of little help for reflection on the future of Catholicism in the 21st century. In short, describing the council as “pastoral” becomes a pretext for denying it any significance today.

The current efforts to trivialize the teachings of Vatican II and to deny their contemporary relevance because of its alleged outdated character fail to notice that the theological qualification mentioned in note no. 1 of the preface to *Gaudium et spes* affirms that this teaching includes doctrinal and permanent principles. They also fail to recognize the historical character of *all* magisterial teaching and, in consequence, that such teaching is always affected by the era of its composition.⁴

² *Gaudium et spes (GS)*, preface, note 1, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. All URLs cited herein were accessed on June 10, 2013.

³ See Antonio Acerbi, “La réception de Vatican II dans un contexte historique changé,” *Concilium* 166 (1981), 123–33.

⁴ On this subject see the astute lesson in hermeneutics given by Pope Benedict XVI in his allocution to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2005. Discussing the 19th-century pontifical teaching on religious freedom and on church-state relations, he observed: “In this process of novelty in continuity, we must understand more clearly than we did before that the judgments of the Church concerning contingent facts—for example, certain particular forms of liberalism or the literal interpretation of the Bible—necessarily had to be themselves contingent, precisely because they referred to a particular reality that is by its nature mutable. It was necessary to learn to recognize that in such judgments only the principles express a durable aspect, often remaining in the background and motivating the judgment from the

This being said, the objection merits consideration, and we should ask what the contemporary relevance of Vatican II is. In other words, what is the permanent value of the teaching of this council, and how might it still contribute to guiding the church's journey 50 years after its close, at a time when the cultural, social, political, economic, and ecclesial context has changed profoundly? The clear position of Pope John Paul II on the question of the relevance of Vatican II is well known:

What a treasure there is . . . in the guidelines offered to us by the Second Vatican Council! . . . With the passing of the years, *the Council documents have lost nothing of their value or brilliance*. They need to be read correctly, to be widely known and taken to heart as important and normative texts of the Magisterium, within the Church's Tradition. Now that the Jubilee has ended, I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council as *the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century*: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning.⁵

The position taken by Benedict XVI during the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the council is no less clear concerning its contemporary relevance: "The Council documents contain an enormous wealth for the formation of the new Christian generations, for the formation of our consciences. Consequently, read it."⁶

RETURNING TO THE COUNCIL'S TEXTS: CHALLENGES, DIFFICULTIES, PROMISES

The two papal statements quoted above send us back to the texts of Vatican II, that is, to the richness of the council's documents. From that perspective, we might be tempted to think that the texts and the documents concern only a certain teaching or "content." This risks reducing the council to its pronouncements or to a certain content that we would appropriate for ourselves. Thus we would be tempted to search out the conciliar teachings that are still pertinent today and the ideas that we could take up to guide the church, to give it some vitality, and to give the church direction.

interior. The concrete forms of expression, on the other hand, are not as permanent. They are dependent on the historical situation and thus may be subject to change. Therefore, the fundamental judgments can remain valid, while the forms of their application in new contexts may vary" (*Acta apostolicae sedis: Commentarium officiale* 98 [2006] 40–53, at 49–50 [my translation]). In this way Benedict shows the historicity of all magisterial teaching.

⁵ John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte* (January 6, 2001) no. 57, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte_en.html (emphases original).

⁶ Homily of Benedict XVI at Frascati, July 15 2012, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20120715_frascati_en.html.

This approach to the documents, however, reduces them to their content and their teaching and treats them as mere vehicles for the diffusion of ideas. Undoubtedly, this approach, which consists in searching the texts and documents for propositional content or teachings, is familiar to theologians. This method leads to establishing a list of conciliar teachings on such topics as religious freedom, the participation of everyone in the life of the church, the bishops, ecumenism, culture, family, Communism, the laity, the word of God, the catechism, war and peace, exegesis, the renewal of religious life, the ministry of priests, non-Christian religions, etc. An approach to conciliar texts by this method of analysis of content leads us to establish a quasi-interminable list of specific topics.

Necessary and legitimate though this analytical method is, it tends, if it is not accompanied by a more synthetic method, to dismember the conciliar corpus by reducing it to so many instructions on specific questions. It tends to concentrate on particular, isolated pronouncements, thereby preventing a grasp of Vatican II as a coherent whole or a unified ensemble and reducing it to an aggregate of specific teachings.⁷ In effect, it is possible to gloss and to comment *ad infinitum* on the teachings of the council—on *subsistit in*, for example, or on the hierarchy of truths—without ever arriving at a grasp of the council's central intuitions that should still be nourishing us today. Moreover, this method does not permit us to tie these teachings to the conciliar event in its varying dimensions; it detaches the texts and documents from the action of the Council Fathers themselves and from the conciliar milieu that produced them. They become disconnected from the experience that gave them birth and from the questions that constitute their origin. Although necessary, this analytic approach focuses on the content of the pronouncements and—if it is absolutized—risks being reductionist, in the sense that it cannot by itself truly give us access to the “teaching” of Vatican II. It risks fossilizing the living word addressed to the church for its growth and renewal. Reduced to the single dimension of a collection of pronouncements, Vatican II cannot represent the compass given to the church to guide it through the course of the 21st century, to use John Paul II's phrase, since it has been cut off from part of its vitality.

Fifty years after Vatican II, a narrow approach to the conciliar texts risks reducing the impact of the council and obscuring its innovative character, just as decadent Scholasticism and commentators—not to mention the neo-Scholasticism of the manuals—reduced the innovative power of the great, original Scholasticism and trivialized its intellectual élan and audacity to the point of making it sclerotic. If we limit ourselves

⁷ See Gilles Routhier, “L'herméneutique de Vatican II: De l'histoire de la rédaction des textes conciliaires à la structure d'un corpus,” in *Vatican II: Herméneutique et réception* (Montréal: Fides, 2006) 389–99.

to an analytical method developed within the framework and thought world of neo-Scholastics, we risk the same narrowing in our treatment of Vatican II, whose pronouncements we could endlessly comment on, and whose texts we could gloss to exhaustion. But this method arises from an intellectual framework foreign to the conciliar texts. To adopt it for reading these texts, which were not conceived and formulated within the framework of Scholastic categories, would therefore risk seriously distorting their teaching.

Attention to Foundational Ideas, Key Insights

From these considerations, I suggest that limiting ourselves to commentary on the texts and exegesis of their pronouncements is insufficient to bring into relief all the contemporary relevance, unity, and dynamic power of Vatican II. Another endeavor seems just as important: discerning the key insights of the council. I would like to recall here the example of Marie-Dominique Chenu, for whom Thomism must be considered not “as a defined system of inviolate propositions, but as a body of defining insights that are incarnate in conceptual ensembles only to the extent that they maintain their living light.”⁸ Without this perspective, we risk dulling and fossilizing the thought of Aquinas or missing its essence altogether. It is the same with Vatican II. Detached from the broad perspectives of the ensemble and cut off from their foundational orientation, analyzing particular pronouncements commits the same error made by the Thomistic synthesis of the neo-Scholastic era. The central insights and fundamental orientations are naturally not detached from the conciliar texts themselves, but to access them, we must read them according to a method different from that of commentary on, or exegesis of, particular pronouncements.

A more adequate reading demands a grasp of the whole, a synthetic approach that highlights the central axes, the load-bearing structures, and the internal dynamic of each of the documents and of the global architecture governing the document’s exposition. It would indicate the coherence and thrust, the movement of ideas, the cross-references of texts, the connections, the ideas that appear in several documents, the nodal questions, the categories that create structures, etc. The central insights, in my view, depend on the method that determined the composition of the texts and the styles used just as much as on the themes developed.

While we already have numerous textual commentaries, the council’s central insights have not yet received sufficient attention. The commentaries,

⁸ Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Une école de la théologie: Le Saulchoir*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Cerf, 1985) 123.

focused as they were on particular conciliar documents and pronouncements, were perhaps not capable of gaining the distance necessary to discern the fundamental posture of Vatican II. Recent works on the style of the council⁹ or on its pastoral form¹⁰ allow us to make some progress in this area, but much work remains to be done.

In short, I am pleading here for studies that, while remaining attached to the conciliar texts, which we must read and reread, gain sufficient distance to arrive at a holistic reading of the council's work rather than remaining at a microanalytic reading of pronouncements. That approach risks diminishing the amplitude of the council's teaching. I contend, to the contrary, that bathed in its leading insights Vatican II still reveals itself as a design for the church's future, in the sense that its major insights concerning attitudes, postures, practices, and institutions shape mentalities and engrave the *aggiornamento* desired by the council into the body of the church. These fundamental insights are still capable today of guiding the church on its path.

RETURN TO THE METHOD OF POSING PROBLEMS

M.-D. Chenu, who deliberated over how to transport the Thomist heritage into the 20th century, warned his readers to pay as much attention to the questions Aquinas asks and to which he tried to reply as to his replies or conclusions. In sum, he invites the readers of the *Summa theologiae* to return again and again to his formulation of problems and to his manner of working on them, that is to say, to the intellectual

⁹ See Gilles Routhier, "El concilio Vaticano II como estilo," *Iglesia viva* 227 (2006) 3–44; "Il Vaticano II come stile," *La scuola cattolica* 136 (2008) 5–32; John W. O'Malley, "Erasmus and Vatican II: Interpreting the Council," in *Cristianesimo nella storia: Saggi in onore di Giuseppe Alberigo*, ed. Alberto Melloni et al. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996) 195–212, esp. 197–98; John W. O'Malley, S.J., "Vatican II: Historical Perspectives on Its Uniqueness and Interpretation," in *Vatican II: The Unfinished Agenda: A Look to the Future*, ed. Lucien Richard, O.M.I., Daniel Harrington, S.J., and John W. O'Malley, S.J. (New York, Paulist, 1987) 22–32; John W. O'Malley, S.J., "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?," *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 3–33, esp. 23; and Joseph Famerée, ed., *Vatican II comme style: L'herméneutique théologique du concile* (Paris: Cerf, 2012).

¹⁰ See Giuseppe Ruggieri, "La lotta per la pastorality della dottrina: La ricezione della 'Gaudet Mater Ecclesia' nel primo periodo del concilio Vaticano II," in *Zeugnis und Dialog: Die Katholische Kirche in der neuzeitlichen Welt und das II. Vatikanische Konzil*, ed. Wolfgang Weiss (Würzburg: Echter, 1996) 118–37; and Christoph Theobald, "Le Concile et la 'forme pastorale' de la doctrine," in Bernard Sesboüé, *La parole du salut: La doctrine de la parole de Dieu, la justification et le discours de la foi, la révélation et l'acte de foi, la tradition, l'écriture et le magistère*, Histoire des dogmes 4, ed. Bernard Sesboüé and Christoph Theobald (Paris: Desclée, 1996) 471–510.

procedure incorporated in his exposition. For the regent of Le Saulchoir, beyond the centuries of distance,

connecting with Saint Thomas first involved finding again this state of inventiveness by which the mind returns, as to an ever-fertile source, to the *posing of problems* beyond the conclusions acquired since then. . . . It seems that the Thomist school, weighed down by its too heavy heritage and concerned exclusively with its conservation, renounced at the beginning of the 16th century this innovative and creative power that was at the very root of Thomism.

Therefore, it was necessary to move beyond conclusions, “to go back to the beginning and to take the foundational givens, there where . . . the *prob-lematic* continuously renews itself.”¹¹

This perspective is just as suggestive for the studies of Vatican II in proportion as the passage of time creates a gap between a situation prevailing at the time of the council and our own. It leads us not only to tease out the fundamental insights of the council but also to see how the Council Fathers posed problems and reflected on them. One must first identify the problems or the questions the Fathers had to confront; only then can one reflect on the motives that led them to pose these particular questions. According to Benedict XVI, who, as Joseph Ratzinger, served as a peritus at the council,

we can say that three circles of questions had formed that at the moment of the Second Vatican Council demanded a response. We had to find a new definition for the relationship between faith and modern science. This concerned not only the natural sciences; it equally concerned the historical sciences because, according to one school of thought, the historical-critical method claimed the last word in interpreting the Bible and claimed the total exclusivity of its interpretation of Sacred Scripture, being opposed on important points to the interpretation that the faith of the church had established. In the second place, we needed a new definition of the relationship between the church and the modern state that accorded a place to citizens of diverse religions and ideologies, comporting itself in an impartial way toward these religions and simply assuming the responsibility for an orderly and tolerant coexistence among citizens as well as for the freedom to exercise their religion. In the third place, this was tied in a more general way to the problem of religious tolerance—a question that demanded a new definition of the relationship between the Christian faith and the world’s religions. In particular, in the face of the crimes committed by the National Socialist regime, and more generally within the framework of a retrospective view of a long and difficult history, we had to evaluate and develop a new definition of the relationship between the church and the faith of Israel.¹²

I might present these issues a bit differently, but I can also easily agree with this position. If I were to add something to the questions awaiting resolution at the time of the council, I would list those that had appeared

¹¹ Chenu, *Une école de la théologie* 123.

¹² Allocution to the Roman Curia 49 (my translation).

as recurrent concerns during the century preceding Vatican II. First, there were questions concerning ecclesiology that were left hanging following the interruption of Vatican Council I. These questions had seen important developments as much in theology as in declarations by the magisterium in the first part of the 20th century: the exercise of authority and the magisterium, the theology of the episcopate and its corollary, collegiality.¹³ There was also the Marian question raised not only by an impressive number of encyclicals and two dogmatic definitions but also by a vigorous Marian movement deeply rooted in the Catholic faithful and by a theological reflection that did not at all move in the same direction. The missionary question, which had not been the subject of a single encyclical prior to the 20th century, also occupied the ecclesiastical foreground since the developments of missiology and the increasingly numerous interventions of the magisterium.¹⁴

When we consider the questions advanced by the commission established by Pius XI in April 1923 concerning a possible reopening of Vatican Council I, we already find all these questions awaiting a reply. Among the 39 questions contained in the list drawn up by theologians Edward Hugon and Alexis Lépicier of the preparatory commission are notably those concerning the church, its nature, its powers, its relationship with secular states, Catholic Action and the social kingship of Christ, Communism and socialism, and the dogmatic definitions of the bodily assumption of Mary and her universal mediation. As for the commission established by Pius XII on March 15, 1948, it considered approximately 50 themes, including the origin of the jurisdiction of bishops, the relationship between the magisterium and tradition, the inerrancy of Sacred Scripture and literary genres, questions concerning sexuality, and once again Mary's assumption.¹⁵

¹³ To the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* we must add all pontifical teachings concerning the laity, the holding of international congresses on the laity and the creation of COPECIAL (Permanent Committee for International Congresses of the Lay Apostolate of the Roman Catholic Church). Moreover, Pius XII had launched a renewal of religious life, beginning in 1951 with a series of Roman congresses for women religious educators and superiors general of papally approved religious congregations.

¹⁴ See the missionary encyclicals of Pius XI, *Rerum ecclesiae* (February 8, 1926); Pius XII, *Evangelii praecones* (June 2, 1951); and John XXIII, *Princeps pastorum* (November 28, 1959).

¹⁵ See Giovanni Caprile, "Pio XI e la ripresa del Concilio Vaticano II," *La Civiltà cattolica* 177.3 (1966) 27–39, completed in "Pio XI, la curia romana e il concilio," *La Civiltà cattolica* 120.2 (1969) 121–33 and 563–75; Santiago Casas, "Nouvelles données concernant la reprise de Vatican I sous Pie XI," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 104.3–4 (2009) 828–55; Giovanni Caprile, "Pio XII e uno nuovo progetto di concilio," *La Civiltà cattolica* 117.3 (1966) 209–27, reprinted and expanded as "Pius XII und das

It is in examining the new themes that spring up in the magisterium's discourse—themes representing a new development in the theological literature and those fostered by popular movements—that we can identify the list of questions awaiting answers. Several questions (on Catholic Action, the assumption of Mary, the church, and Scripture) had found answers, at least partial ones, in papal encyclicals or the dogmatic definition of 1950; but several questions remained to be answered, and new questions had emerged in the meantime. This is also true for the liturgy, which had been supported by a renewal movement that had developed since the beginning of the century and that had been the theme of several pontifical documents from the time of Pius X,¹⁶ the last one being Pius XII's encyclical *Mediator Dei*. Reform of the liturgy had been a primary concern—the liturgies of Holy Week and Holy Saturday and reform of the breviary, which is still in getting started. Among the new questions were ecumenism and especially a group of questions rooted in the pastoral and theological renewal that had arisen after World War I.

It is not sufficient, however, to draw up the list of questions waiting for a response and, eventually, to see the solutions that would be given by the council. The principal task is to study how the Council Fathers approached these questions. How did they work on them, with what method, beginning with what references, using what categories? Congar, recalling in 1971 his approach to the theology of ministry, observes that “the door by which *one enters into* a question determines the chances for a happy or less happy solution. The concepts one uses largely determines all that follows.”¹⁷ As he remarks, his first approach to ministry considered it from the perspective of the concepts of Thomistic philosophy, in particular from the category of the efficient cause of the church. In retrospect, this approach seemed to him of limited value and required him to go beyond it.

Similarly in the case of Vatican II, it is not simply a matter of enumerating the questions it treats and the teaching it proposes on each of them;

zweite vatikanische Konzil,” in *Pius XII zum Gedächtnis*, ed. Herbert Schambeck (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1977) 649–91; and François-Charles Uginet, “Les projets de concile général sous Pie XI et Pie XII,” in *Le deuxième concile du Vatican (1959–1965), Acte du colloque de Rome (28–30 mai 1986), Mélanges de l'École française de Rome* 113 (1989) 65–78.

¹⁶ One often finds his *motu proprio Tra le sollicitudine* (1904) cited but not his *motu proprio Abhinc duos annos*, where he discusses the reform of the breviary: “It will take a good many years before this liturgical edifice, composed with intelligent care by the Spouse of Christ to express its piety and its faith, can appear with the incrustations of time cleansed away and newly resplendent in dignity and good order” (*Acta apostolicae sedis* 5 [1913] 449–51, at 449–50) (my translation).

¹⁷ Marie-Dominique Chenu, “Mon cheminement dans la théologie du laïc et des ministres,” in *Ministères et communion ecclésiale* (Paris: Cerf, 1971) 9–30, at 17–18.

it is a matter of carefully examining in what perspective it situates the questions it considers, the method used to elaborate the conciliar teaching, the concepts that communicate this teaching, etc. In short, Vatican II takes up several questions from the second half of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th: on ecclesiology, Mariology, church-state relations, ecumenism, etc.; but it reframed the questions within a problematic that will permit them to be recast or situated in a new perspective. The conciliar texts themselves allow us to grasp this reframing (which concerns precisely the formulation of questions), because these texts contain much more than particular content or statement. Just as the reduction of Thomism to certain contents or conclusions, disconnected from the posing of problems that always arise in a given situation, had, as Chenu appreciated, fossilized and reduced Aquinas to a system, Vatican II today runs the same risk by a return to the texts and documents that is limited to a search for what was “said.” Such an approach ignores *how* the texts “speak.” The study of texts limited to an analysis of content leaves aside any recourse to more rhetorical approaches.

THE READING OF TEXTS AND THE APPROPRIATION OF THEIR METHOD OF COMPOSITION

We must take into account that Vatican II’s teaching is also of a methodological order, and working with the texts today should lead us to appropriate and deepen this method. This is preeminently the case with *Gaudium et spes*; the disputes surrounding its composition are an outstanding witness to this. As Bishop Mark McGrath of Panama underscores in his presentation of the constitution, its “gestation was not easy”:

The traditionalists considered this project with a critical eye and an air of amused disdain. For them it was evident that such earthy issues were not worthy of a council’s consideration. Even the so-called progressive theologians, who were already at work in brilliantly renewing the definition of the Church in the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium*, rebelled against anything that might resemble an empirical analysis of the world. They forcefully affirmed that a council must proceed according to the most certain theological method, that is to say, by starting from the principles of revelation, from which one draws norms of faith and morality. . . . During a tumultuous discussion between the members and experts of the mixed commission, held toward the end of November 1963, it became evident that the unusual character of the document still disoriented the commission. While a minority made clear its lack of interest in the document, the others were deeply divided over what method to follow. Some forcefully defended an exclusively doctrinal approach. Others referred to the two great social encyclicals of Pope John and claimed that it was only in starting with the problems of the world that one could interest the world, appreciate its problems, and enter into dialogue with it. . . . Confusing and painful at the time, this discussion was extremely fruitful. For the first time, the unique character of Schema XIII . . . appeared clearly to everyone. For this new type of document, it was necessary to invent a new method. It is this new method,

slowly elaborated, imperfect even in the last version of the constitution, that the reader must grasp if he or she wants to interpret the constitution correctly and pursue with the world the dialogue it inaugurates.¹⁸

Throughout the redaction of this constitution, McGrath notes, there is a reflection on the method to be employed if the Fathers wanted to address their contemporaries without falling into the traps of “juridicism” and “moralism.”¹⁹ In this perspective, “certain Fathers and experts wanted the document, if it was to get a hearing from modern humanity, to follow the example of the encyclicals *Mater et magister* and *Pacem in terris* by using a style and arguments accessible to everyone and, consequently, flowing from natural morality.”²⁰ The difficulties encountered in the course of the redaction of Schema XIII are “at the same time a question of tone and of substance,”²¹ a question of method and of style as much as a question of doctrine or theology.

We should not think that methodological questions concern only *Gaudium et spes*; they concern all the other documents as well. To take another example, the originality of the teaching of Vatican II on the liturgy, compared to the teaching of the Council of Trent five centuries earlier, derives in large measure from the method used in each of the assemblies. The teaching of Trent on liturgy (but not only on liturgy) intended to reply to the Protestant reformers who were denouncing abuses, notably in the area of the celebration of the liturgy and the sacraments. As a result, the council essentially worked on the basis of catalogues of propositions extracted from the writings of Luther and other reformers or from catalogues of abuses.²² These catalogues contained propositions diverse in their

¹⁸ Mark G. McGrath, C.S.C., “Présentation de la constitution: L’Église dans le monde du ce temps,” in *Vatican II: L’Église dans le monde de ce temps*, 4 vols., ed. Yves Congar, O.P., and M. Peuchmaurd, O.P. (Paris: Cerf, 1967) 2.1:17–30, at 18–19.

¹⁹ By which he means “that tendency to judge human and social situations in terms of abstract moral principles without sufficiently testing these principles by a constant return to the sources of revelation, a return that would prevent the principles and their formulations from hardening into outmoded schemas of thought and social situations; he is also referring to an insufficient investigation of moral conditions, that is to say, the real, current dimensions of human and social problems, studied by themselves before any application of moral judgments. This sort of a priori moralism lent itself easily to the formulation of unnuanced, inflexible, and unassailable moral positions” (ibid. 19).

²⁰ Roberto Tucci, S.J., “Introduction historique et doctrinale à la constitution pastorale,” in *L’Église dans le monde de ce temps* 1.1:33–127, at 56.

²¹ Henri Riedmatten, “Histoire de la Constitution pastorale sur ‘L’Église dans le monde de ce temps,’” in Karl Rahner et al., *L’Église dans le monde de ce temps: Constitution ‘Gaudium et spes’; Commentaires du schéma XIII* (Paris: Mame, 1967) 42–92, at 68.

²² As is well known, the decrees of Sessions 21 and 22 are the fruit of the examination of propositions contained in catalogues composed in 1547. They were

origin and content. This explains the uneasy feeling one has when considering disparate measures of a varied nature that have not been integrated into a coherent ensemble. As Heinrich Holstein observes:

One should also say that the way of proceeding imposed by Cervini beginning at the end of 1546, when [the Council Fathers] were preparing the decrees on the sacraments, conferred on the conciliar work a polemical vision and strongly restricted its field of vision. The sessions on the sacraments were prepared on the basis of catalogues of articles collected from the reformers, especially Luther. The regrettable consequence of such a procedure is threefold. It apparently gave the Council the negative task of refuting the Protestants instead of giving it the mission of illuminating and strengthening the faith of Catholics. It obliged the Council to let itself be guided by the reformers in a sort endlessly pursued tit-for-tat debate instead of taking a broader perspective and discerning what the unacceptable “novelty” or betrayal of the tradition was in the reformers as well as recognizing the ways of proceeding based in their common faith; finally, it was going to make the Council narrowly focus on texts separated from their context, sometimes cited only approximately.²³

As a result, we are not presented with an exposition on the nature of the liturgy or on the elaboration of the principles that might guide its renewal. Rather, the texts react either to abuses or to the words of reformers denouncing the abuses. The Council Fathers thus let themselves be guided in large measure by external events rather than proceeding to a holistic reflection on the liturgy.

While Trent was being moved by a reforming and anti-Reformation current,²⁴ Vatican II also leaned on two movements: (1) on the one hand, a movement of liturgical restoration that developed in the West in the 19th century against the background of an antimodern reaction characteristic of the period before it saw a second founding with Dom Lambert Baudouin in the framework of a liturgical pastoral movement complemented by youth

first studied by theologians at Bologna in August 1547, then at Trent under Julius III in December 1551 and January 1552. Moreover, the Decree on What One Must Observe and Avoid in the Celebration of the Mass (Session 22, September 17, 1562) comes from a memorandum on Mass abuses drawn up at the end of July and dated August 8, 1562. “It is an interminable enumeration by chapters (celebration, vestments, time and place, conduct of the assembly) of everything it is possible to imagine—and to do—as a fault, a negligence, or carelessness” (Heinrich Holstein, “La 22^e session: Doctrine et réforme,” in *Histoire des conciles œcuméniques*, 12 vols., ed., Gervais Dumeige, vol. 11, *Le Concile de Trente 1551–1563* [Paris, Fayard, 2005²] 296–326, at 309). This memorandum was discussed during the course of seven general assemblies held between September 10 and 15.

²³ Heinrich Holstein, “Les décrets doctrinaux et réformateurs de la 13^e session: L’Eucharistie,” in *Le concile de Trente 1551–1563* 39–73, at 57.

²⁴ The call for church reform had become urgent especially after 1520. In 1537 a group of cardinals had collectively drawn up a document entitled *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia*, calling for deep reform of the church.

movements (scouting and Catholic Action), a movement accompanied by the reflection and the reforming measures of the Pius XI and Pius XII; (2) on the other hand, a considerable broadening of horizons with the emergence of the young churches in the 20th century.²⁵

The waters of these two rivers were going to run together at Vatican II, which was going to benefit from the long period of maturation of the ideas of the century that prepared the council.²⁶ These different movements, moreover, are not simply tributaries of cultural and social evolutions; they are accompanied by serious developments in liturgiology because of important work on ancient liturgical sources. In effect, liturgiology at the time of Vatican II had gained appreciable depth and extension. It was not comparable to the state of liturgiology at the time of the Council of Trent.

Through this example, then, one can see concretely to what degree the posing of problems and the method used in their treatment is determinative. It is on this very point that Vatican II is innovative: if it arrives at a teaching that renews the questions, it is because it has proceeded from the beginning with a different methodology. This is not simply a question of Vatican II's originality; its contemporary relevance is equally in question. This appears in the guidelines given by John XXIII in his opening speech. The working method at Vatican II did not consist in refuting errors or repressing abuses grouped into catalogues but in positively exposing Christian doctrine or, in the pope's words, "by making the Church's doctrine stand out more advantageously."

²⁵ This emergence is too often neglected in studies of the liturgical renewal. On this question, see Johannes Hofinger, S.J., ed., *Liturgy and the Mission: The Nijmegen Papers* (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1960). During the fifth study week session of the Central Preparatory Commission, Cardinal Valerian Gracias of Bombay, referring to this study week, said that it was a matter of the *Vox clamantis in deserto*. On the question of requests concerning liturgical adaptation in India, one could go further back to the study week on the relationship between Christianity and culture held in Madras in 1956. See the Madras Cultural Academy, *Indian Culture and the Fullness of Christ* (Madras: Madras Cultural Academy, the Catholic Centre, 1957). The report deals with art, architecture, music, etc. See Paul Pulikkan, *Indian Church at Vatican II: A Historico-Theological Study of the Indian Participation in the Second Vatican Council* (Trichur, Kerala: Marymatha, 2001) esp. 29–42, 98–107, and 210–20; Paul Pulikkan and Mathijs Lamberigts, "The Vota of the Indian Bishops and Their Participation in the Liturgy Debate during the Second Vatican Council," *Questions liturgiques* 78 (1997) 61–79; Mathijs Lamberigts and Anthony Njoku, "Vatican II: The Vota of the Anglophone West African Bishops concerning the Sacred Liturgy," *Questions liturgiques* 81 (2000) 89–121; and Gilles Routhier, "De nouvelles idées pour l'Église catholique: Contributions des jeunes Églises à Vatican II," in *L'espace missionnaire, lieu d'innovations et de rencontres interculturelles*, ed. Gilles Routhier and Frédéric Laugrand (Paris: Karthala, 2002) 247–70.

²⁶ See Gilles Routhier, Philippe J. Roy, and Karim Schelkens, eds., *La théologie catholique entre intransigeance et renouveau: La réception des mouvements préconciliaires à Vatican II* (Leuven: Universiteitsbibliotheek, 2001).

As for *Sacrosanctum concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the council wanted to serenely present the fruit of conciliar discernment, which had sorted out of what the various liturgical movements (reflections and experiences) prior to the council had to offer to the church. The discernment of the Council Fathers maintained, at the end of reading the long tradition and listening to the appeals of the church, what would best serve the welfare of the Western churches struggling with modernity and the young churches struggling with cultural diversity. The method of responses to errors and abuses adopted by Trent yielded to a method of discernment, the council being a moment of spiritual discernment par excellence. Because of this method Vatican II was able to offer a coherent and well-structured presentation of the liturgy; Trent could not arrive at this because of the method it had adopted. This methodological difference, resulting from a difference in context, is determinative if we want to understand what each of the councils ended up achieving.

Going even further, the awareness of the insertion of the Catholic Church into a great diversity of cultures led to posing the liturgical problem in other terms. At the time of Trent, Christendom was limited to a homogeneous part of the world—which can be seen in the very composition of the conciliar assembly: generally speaking it consisted of members from Spain and Italy and parts of France and Germany.²⁷ Consequently, the preoccupation of the Fathers of Trent was the Reformation; it was sweeping the nations of Europe and manifested itself by the adopting a vernacular liturgy, which had to be countered at all costs. By contrast, what preoccupied the Fathers at Vatican II was the encounter of the church with various cultures and the expression of Christianity in the diversity of cultures. This could not help but open a new chapter in the relationship between the church and the local traditions and customs of different peoples inhabiting territories unknown to the Fathers of Trent.²⁸

²⁷ At Vatican II, the Council Fathers came from 116 nations, of which 849 came from Western Europe (32%), 601 from Latin America (23%), 332 from North America (13%), 250 from black Africa (8%), 174 from the Communist bloc (7%), 95 from the Arab world (4%), 256 from the Asian world (10%), and 70 from Oceania (3%). As far as the Council of Trent was concerned, although it was convoked to open on March 15, 1545, it could not commence before December 13 of that year because in March almost no one was present. When it finally opened, it counted 31 Council Fathers, the majority of whom came from Italy. In its first phase (1545–1547), the number of Fathers did not go above 70, practically all of whom were Spanish or Italian. In the last phase, the number of Fathers varied between 150 and 200.

²⁸ See my article “La liturgie aux prises avec un monde et une Église en mutation,” *La Maison Dieu* 260 (2009) 153–81, reprinted in *Il Concilio Vaticano II: Recezione e ermeneutica* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2006) 85–104.

In consequence, even if Trent and Vatican II wanted to foster a liturgical reform, the two councils developed disparate types of teaching, differentiated by their respective way of posing the problem. The method that directs the reflection thus ends by determining the content of the resulting presentation: the answer to give to a catalogue of abuses or of *dicta* of the reformers in the one case;²⁹ in the other case, the proposal of a future path for the church based on a long reflection that draws on traditions and liturgical precedents worldwide and is tested by prolonged experimentation and apprenticeship, all of which permits careful discernment. In one case, the horizon is limited to Latin and Mediterranean nations; in the other case, it includes the whole world and diversity of peoples and cultures.

This contrasting of Vatican II and Trent permits us to better grasp how the reading of texts and the recourse to documents enables us to understand not only the content or the teachings but also what Chenu calls “the posing of the problems”; thus the contrasting brings out the originality of Vatican II. The same exercise can be done with the other conciliar texts. In fact, when we examine the first debate on *De ecclesia* (December 4–7, 1962), it is clearly the “posing of the problem” that generates the entire discussion, without even taking into account that the debaters are clearly interested in the *modus loquendi*, in method, in basic structural concepts, and in the style of the presentation. Reading the conciliar texts thus comes down to interesting us in the elements that are too often neglected.

We can say that the problems taken up by Vatican II (church-state relations, religious freedom, Mariology, the relationship between the episcopacy and the papacy, the laity, liturgy, etc.) are not new. In fact, several were already the subject of teaching documents during the century preceding Vatican II. The novelty resides precisely in “the posing of the problems,” the method used to treat them, the fundamental concepts on which the reflection is based, etc. In other words, learning from Vatican II consists not only in regularly studying its conclusions and commenting on its pronouncements; it also consists in relearning, with the Council Fathers, how to pose questions and work on them. That is where much of the contemporary relevance and fertility of Vatican II reveals itself.

If we are convinced, as Congar was, that “the door by which *we enter into* a question that determines the chances of a happy or less happy solution,” we must take up today’s questions by examining through which door the

²⁹ It seems to me that the instruction from the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship *Redemptoris sacramentum* reconnects with the method set forth in the summer of 1562 without underestimating the influence that the use of such a method has on the results obtained. The term “abuse” appears 36 times in the text. Without denying that such abuses can exist, it is still important to reflect on the consequences that such a method of reflection, with its starting point in the question of abuse, might have.

Council Fathers entered into a question, sometimes after months of debate during which they continually returned their work to the workshop—and then we must consider the method used in treating these questions. Finally, if it is true that “the concepts we use at that point are largely determinative for what follows,”³⁰ we must also pay attention to the dominant concepts they use. For example, the decision not to use *societas perfecta* to speak of the church, but to consider it rather in the light of *mysterium*, *populus Dei*, or *realitas complexa*, is determinative. Similarly, the designation of priests under the rubric *presbyteri* rather than *sacerdoti* in the decree *Presbyterorum ordinis* is critical for the conception of presbyteral ministry, even if it is recalled too infrequently today. We could multiply examples of this type.

Being prepared to learn from the Council Fathers by giving ourselves to a thorough reading of the council’s texts permits us to enter into their way of proceeding, to assimilate it, and to make it ours today. That is where the contemporary relevance of Vatican II imposes itself. We could possibly approach the texts by beginning with our contemporary questions and ask ourselves how these had been posed at the time of the council and how they had been treated. If we did this, it seems to me that we could identify five broad groups of questions that belong as much to our current situation as they did to Vatican II. The Council Fathers handled these questions and so must the current generation. These questions are: (1) the encounter with others and the relationships we are called to maintain with non-Catholic Christians, non-Christians, and those who have rejected religion; (2) the insertion of Christian uniqueness into a pluralistic society or the proposing of the gospel to all people of good will; (3) the fraternal life of Christians, the relationship between Christians in the church, and the consecrated symbols and forms of their life together; (4) the perpetual reform of the church such that its witness to the gospel becomes more and more transparent; (5) the encounter with the living God through the liturgy, listening to God’s word, diverse cultural expressions, diverse spiritual paths, etc. If we want to understand the teaching of Vatican II on each of these questions, we must not only know the content of this teaching, but we must also examine how the questions were asked at the time of the council: the choice of a perspective, the chosen point of entry, the concepts adopted, etc. We must also be attentive to the method adopted for the treatment of these questions. Reading these texts requires going to such a depth.

CONCLUSION

Claiming that Vatican II, its texts and documents, remain relevant 50 years after the council closed involves considering its documents as

³⁰ Congar, “Mon cheminement” 17–18.

classics of Christian thought. Otherwise, they belong to one particular era, and they are outdated. In that case these texts would have nothing imperishable or permanent about them. They would only be texts of circumstance, limited to their world and too closely tied to the circumstances in which they were composed. They could not be contemporary for us. Only the classics have this power and capacity to speak to different eras, to transcend the contingencies of time and place. They can be made perennially current. It is only the classics that we reread, restage, reperform, and reinterpret.

So it is with the texts of Vatican II. These are documents that we must read and reread, following the lead of Benedict XVI because, as John Paul II wrote, “With the passing of the years, *the Council documents have lost nothing of their value or brilliance.*” Certainly, we must reread them, but in order to let ourselves be surprised by them, in order to discover something always new in them. That is the real challenge, because calling a classic back into the spotlight involves making something new arise. It is not simply a matter of repeating what we know is found there or of endlessly glossing or commenting in a repetition of the first commentators. Otherwise, like the commentators on the *Summa theologiae*, we are going to sterilize the conciliar texts with our form of reductive neo-Scholasticism. The reading of a classic changes us; we do not simply find there what we were expecting to find.

At the time of the council, these texts “energized” the church, gave it vitality, because what they said did not simply correspond to what had been expected; rather, it represented a new language, a new way of speaking, a captivating style that drew and captured our attention. If today we merely read the conciliar texts to find in them what we expect and to confirm what we think, Vatican II is not a classic, and it immediately loses its relevance. As Hans Robert Jauss emphasizes, if the gap between the work and the measure of our hope narrows to the point “that the receptive consciousness is no longer forced to reorient itself toward the horizon of a still unknown experience, the work is similar to ‘culinary’ art, to a simple pastime,” because the text no longer demands “any change of horizon, but on the contrary perfectly fulfills the aroused expectation” and “satisfies its desires.”³¹

We do not read the conciliar texts simply to be comforted in our ideas, our ecclesiology, our own conception of ecumenism, etc. We read them in order to be changed, to be drawn forward, to be challenged to enter into the world of a text that draws us beyond our own world. This is as true for the defenders of Vatican II as for its detractors. We can refer to Vatican II in order to be comforted in our own positions by reducing the texts to a

³¹ Hans Robert Jauss, *Pour une esthétique de la réception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978) 53.

reservoir of *dicta* supporting our own theories. Conversely, we can oppose Vatican II because the content we find in it contradicts our own theories. These two positions are similar and merely represent two sides of the same coin. In neither case we do not want the reading of these texts to transform us, to take us somewhere else, to challenge us. Such reading becomes a dead letter, because we know in advance what the texts say and what they contain.

We must be prepared to find in these texts a power to transport us from our received ideas, locked away in glosses and commentaries, and we must agree to read these texts with new eyes, as if we were discovering them for the first time. This is what seems to me to be our most urgent task today. If we are not astonished by these texts, it is because they have become inert for us.

To bear within ourselves the heritage of Vatican II consists not in simply reviewing its history, nor in simply taking up the work of commentary and restating what is already found in the earlier commentaries. In 1985 Hermann Joseph Pottmeyer called for a new generation of commentaries on the conciliar texts.³² What should we understand by the term “a new generation of commentaries”? In my opinion, we can answer this only if we agree, starting with today’s questions, to make a fresh interrogation of the conciliar documents, considered not as a collection of pronouncements and conclusions, but rather as the action of an assembly that grasped these questions in an original way, worked on them according to an appropriate method, and so managed to produce a discourse that astonished a generation and that can captivate a new generation today. At that moment we can grasp the “deed” of the Council Fathers and, with them, find again that state of effervescence that led them to think through in a fresh way the questions confronting the church during the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, by actually managing to speak a new language on the diverse questions that concern us today.

³² Hermann Josef Pottmeyer, “Vers une nouvelle phase de réception de Vatican II: Vingt ans d’herméneutique du Concile,” in *La réception de Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and J.-P. Jossua (Paris: Cerf, 1985) 42–64, at 61.