

## TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE INTERPRETATION OF THE COUNCIL AND ITS DOCUMENTS

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*Contemporary proposals regarding an appropriate hermeneutic for interpreting Vatican II vary in their emphasis on three elements: the conciliar process, the conciliar documents, and the shifting contexts from which future generations interpret the council and its documents. Drawing on these insights, this article outlines six principles, which the author proposes as basic for ensuring a comprehensive interpretation of the council.*

THE 1985 EXTRAORDINARY SYNOD OF BISHOPS, 20 years after the close of Vatican II, proposed several hermeneutical principles that remain valuable for guiding discussion 50 years after the council's opening.<sup>1</sup> Since this synod, reflection has continued as to the appropriate hermeneutics for interpreting the council and its texts. The literature provides rich reflection on the range of issues at stake. Leaving aside one-dimensional approaches

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<sup>1</sup> "The theological interpretation of the conciliar doctrine must show attention to all the documents, in themselves and in their close inter-relationship, in such a way that the integral meaning of the Council's affirmations—often very complex—might be understood and expressed. Special attention must be paid to the four major Constitutions of the Council, which contain the interpretative key for the other Decrees and Declarations. It is not licit to separate the pastoral character from the doctrinal vigor of the documents. In the same way, it is not legitimate to separate the spirit and the letter of the Council. Moreover, the Council must be understood in continuity with the great tradition of the Church, and at the same time we must receive light from the Council's own doctrine for today's Church and the men of our time. The Church is one and the same throughout all the councils" ("The Church, under the Word of God, Celebrates the Mysteries of Christ for the Salvation of the World," Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod (hereafter Final Report) I.5, [http://www.saint-mike.org/library/synod\\_bishops/final\\_report1985.html](http://www.saint-mike.org/library/synod_bishops/final_report1985.html)). This and all other URLs cited herein were accessed on May 5, 2012.

that, for example, exaggerate exclusively either “continuity” or “discontinuity,” or either “spirit” or “letter,” the major contributors to the hermeneutical debate, among many others, include Joseph Ratzinger, and now as Benedict XVI, Walter Kasper, Karl Lehmann, Giuseppe Alberigo, Hermann Pottmeyer, Giuseppe Ruggieri, Joseph Komonchak, Peter Hünermann, Gilles Routhier, Alberto Melloni, John O’Malley, Christoph Theobald, and Massimo Faggioli.<sup>2</sup> Different emphases are placed by these commentators on the three elements of (1) the conciliar process, (2) the conciliar documents, and (3) the reception of the council and its documents. Some take a more historical perspective, others a more theological perspective.

The framework proposed here attempts to bring together many of these insights under six hermeneutical principles. Each principle is formulated in terms of a dialectic, where the two terms of the dialectic are to be seen as mutually interpretative and existing in creative tension.<sup>3</sup> There is a certain overlap in the issues at stake in the dialectics. This overlap gives the framework a coherence. Furthermore, the overlap highlights how one principle alone, or just one term within a dialectic, can give a narrow view of the issues, and requires the other term or the other dialectics for mutual correction, for the sake of a more comprehensive and credible interpretation of the council and its documents 50 years on. At the beginning of the following six sections on each principle, a thesis states the central affirmations of the principle.

### THE COUNCIL/THE DOCUMENTS

*Principle One:* The documents of Vatican II must be interpreted in the light of the historical event (the council) that produced them; and the historical event must be interpreted in the light of the official documents that it promulgated.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For an examination of the different approaches to interpreting Vatican II, including his own contribution to the debate, see Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York: Paulist, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> I am not using the term “dialectic” here in a Hegelian sense.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term “event” here in a broad sense, referring simply to all the elements that made up “the council” from its being announced by Pope John XXIII on January 25, 1959, to the closing mass on December 8, 1965. This includes the motives and intentions of individual protagonists (as revealed in private diaries or minutes of conciliar commissions), informal meetings of bishops outside the formal meetings, bishops’ speeches in the aula, written interventions by individual bishops or groups of bishops, the work of drafting commissions and their *relationes* (“reports”) back to the council assembly, and the bishops’ voting on conciliar procedures, drafts, and final documents. When referring to Vatican II as a historic occurrence with greater epochal significance in the broad sweep of church history, the more narrow sense of “event” will be specified in the text.

When referring to “Vatican II,” a distinction can be made between “the council” as a multidimensional historical process and “the documents” it promulgated. A related distinction, used by the 1985 Synod of Bishops, is that between the “spirit” and the “letter” of the council. However, with both dialectics, as with all that follow, care must be taken not to set up the distinction as a dichotomy, pitting one pole against the other. They are mutually interpretive and require the careful interrelating of not only a hermeneutics of the authors and a hermeneutics of the texts, but also a hermeneutics of the receivers (the ones who are interpreting and applying the council and its documents from the later perspectives of forever-changing contexts).<sup>5</sup> Several hermeneutical points can be selected as significant if an interpretation of “the council” and its “16 documents” is to be comprehensive, and if it is to avoid setting the “spirit” and “letter” of the council in opposition.

First, the documents, in one sense, constitute a “fixed” criterion, a collection of documents that long outlives those who authored them. Without falling into a Romantic hermeneutic privileging “authorial intention,”<sup>6</sup> they could be legitimately termed expressions of “the mind of the council,” in the sense that, after much hard work and vigorous debate, they were voted on and promulgated by the overwhelming majority of the bishops of the world.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (New York: Paulist, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> “Any interpretation referring to ‘the mind of the Council’ . . . is problematic. It falls into the fallacy of a Romantic hermeneutic by reducing meaning to authorial intention and neglecting the complex compositional process behind the Council’s texts. The final texts are agreed-upon statements that have meaning independently of any authorial intention and by their nature provide an openness to diverse receptions” (Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “Vatican II,” in *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Chad Meister and James Beilby (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2013)).

<sup>7</sup> The successive drafts of the documents, including the *relationes* given by the drafting commissions to accompany each of the revised texts, with explanations of the changes over the prior text, can be found in the detailed *Synopses* being produced on each of the documents. For example, see Francisco Gil Hellín, ed., *Constitutio de sacra liturgia Sacrosanctum Concilium: Concilii Vaticani II synopsis in ordinem redigens schemata cum relationibus necnon patrum orationes atque animadversiones* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003); Francisco Gil Hellín, ed., *Constitutio dogmatica de divina revelatione, Dei verbum: Concilii Vaticani II synopsis . . .* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993); Francisco Gil Hellín, ed., *Constitutionis pastoralis de ecclesia in mundo huius temporis Gaudium et spes: Concilii Vaticani II synopsis . . .* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003). Detailed accounts of the drafting history for each document can be found in works such as Antonio Acerbi, *Due ecclesiologie: Ecclesiologia giuridica ed ecclesiologia di comunione nella “Lumen Gentium”* (Bologna: EDB, 1975); Riccardo Burigana, *La Bibbia nel concilio: La redazione della costituzione “Dei*

Second, while they constitute a “fixed” criterion once set in writing, the documents are nevertheless “finished in their unfinishedness.”<sup>8</sup> They “overflow” the context of their original production and reception; there is a surplus of meaning that future generations might legitimately discover in the texts, meanings, however, that might very well go beyond what the bishops explicitly intended. Once set in writing, the documents take on a life of their own; readers, posing new questions to the texts from new contexts, take them in directions both legitimate and possibly illegitimate; interpretations of particular texts that go beyond authorial intention may well be faithful (or unfaithful) to the overall vision of the council. Criteria are needed to discern the difference.

Third, among the 16 documents, the four constitutions function analogously like the four Gospels within the New Testament. They provide “the interpretative key”<sup>9</sup> for the other twelve documents. Nevertheless, subtlety is needed when applying this hermeneutical key; there is a certain hierarchy or ordering within the constitutions, a hierarchy of importance not necessarily captured and determined by the wording of the titles, with words such as “dogmatic” and “pastoral.” In this sense, the theological focus of *Dei verbum* (*DV*) can function as a lens for interpreting the more ecclesio-logically focused constitutions *Sacrosanctum concilium*, *Lumen gentium*, and *Gaudium et spes*.

Fourth, the development in the bishops’ thinking regarding issues across the four sessions of conciliar debate must be taken into account in interpretation, especially when interrelating the four constitutions. Over time, the conciliar assembly “learned” to be a council. Along the way it received into its thinking and its documents its own earlier documents. The bishops developed in their thinking, such that their later documents show development over the earlier ones, and therefore are to be seen as qualifying the previous statements.<sup>10</sup>

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*verbum*” del Vaticano II (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998); Umberto Betti, *La dottrina del Concilio Vaticano II sulla trasmissione della rivelazione: Il capitolo II della costituzione dogmatica Dei verbum* (Rome: Antonianum, 1985); Giovanni Turbanti, *Un concilio per il mondo moderno: La redazione della costituzione pastorale Gaudium et spes del Vaticano II* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> “In der Unfertigkeit fertig” (Leo Popper, as quoted in Hans Robert Jauss, “Horizon Structure and Dialogicity,” in *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989] 197–231, at 212).

<sup>9</sup> Final Report I.5.

<sup>10</sup> As Alberigo notes: “The conciliar assembly itself offered a model of a dynamic hermeneutic that takes into account the progressive expansion of its decisions. It is, in fact, perfectly clear that only the acquisition of an ecclesiology of communion, first in the constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium* and then in the constitution *Lumen gentium*, made further developments possible. The decree *Unitatis redintegratio* [*UR*] and the declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, but also the decree *Ad gentes* and

Fifth, the conciliar documents themselves are complex texts. In places they contain passages deliberately expressed either in an open-ended way or with juxtapositions of traditional and innovative formulations through which the council was able to reach a “consensus,” in a form of text to which the vast majority of bishops, despite their theological differences, could vote on affirmatively. The bishops did not set out to present systematic treatises; they intended that theologians after the council should bring such open-ended formulations and juxtapositions into a new synthesis.

Sixth, given the complexity of the texts’ history and final composition, the interpreter should beware of speaking in simplistic terms of “authorial intention.” The conflict of interpretations around Vatican II in the contemporary church often tends to center exclusively on how the bishops themselves interpreted what they were doing, what they set out to achieve, and the complex debates over the final form of the documents they promulgated. While the “spirit” of the assembly is highly relevant and captured in their voting, the historical significance of the council and the meaning of their texts are not to be restricted solely to what even they foresaw or intended. “History often tells what contemporaries did not know or consciously ‘live.’”<sup>11</sup>

Seventh, “the council” is more than its final documents, and what the council communicates goes beyond the written word of those documents. The documents cannot capture the whole of what the council was and is.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the spirit is more than the letter. For example, Joseph Ratzinger wrote after the third session regarding the change that was taking place in the bishops:

This spiritual awakening, which the bishops accomplished in full view of the Church, or, rather accomplished *as* the Church, was the great and irrevocable event of the Council. It was more important in many respects than the texts it passed, for

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finally the constitution *Dei verbum* contain propositions that presuppose the development already acquired by the council. This hermeneutical criterion, even if it was not always followed consistently, nevertheless constitutes a point of reference that cannot be ignored in postconciliar interpretation” (Giuseppe Alberigo, “Transition to a New Age,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 5, *The Council and the Transition: The Fourth Period and the End of the Council, September 1965–December 1965*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006] 573–644, at 604). On the shifts in perspective among the Australian bishops at Vatican II, see Ormond Rush, “The Australian Bishops of Vatican II: Participation and Reception,” in *Vatican II: The Reception and Implementation in the Australian Church*, ed. Neil Ormerod et al. (Melbourne: John Garrett, 2012) 4–19.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph A. Komonchak, “Vatican II as an ‘Event,’” in *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?*, ed. David G. Schultenover (New York: Continuum, 2007) 24–51, at 37.

<sup>12</sup> An analogy with Scripture highlights the point. The revelatory event to which the scriptural writings witness surpasses the written witness.

these texts could only voice a part of the new life which had been awakened in this encounter of the Church with its inner self.<sup>13</sup>

As one example of how the documents did not capture the council's fullness, John O'Malley notes how the reform of the Roman Curia is mentioned only once in the entire collection of documents.<sup>14</sup> However, the issue was a cause of much heated discussion.<sup>15</sup> As O'Malley notes: "It is not the documents, therefore, that reveal how hot the issue was but the narrative of the battles for control of the council itself."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, as the council would itself teach with regard to the nature of divine revelation occurring not only in words but also in deeds, the council likewise taught and continues to teach not only in its words (its 16 documents) but also in its deeds or actions. The council made some symbolic gestures through which it taught by example, beyond the words expressed in its documents. These symbolic moments and gestures include the admission of Protestant observers and seeking out their observations; inviting Catholic lay observers, first men, then extended to a few women, including the Australian lay woman Rosemary Goldie.<sup>17</sup> Also papal gestures, although not strictly conciliar acts, did create a public perception as to what the council was doing—for example, Paul VI's gift of a papal tiara for the poor; his visits to India, Israel, and the United Nations; and his ecumenical gift of a Vatican reliquary of St. Andrew to the Greek Orthodox Church. All these too are related to the historical event of Vatican II and were, and are still, significant in shaping the contemporary reception of what the council was intending to do and the kind of church it was attempting to fashion.

Eighth, the hermeneutical points above, on the significance of the council being beyond what even the participating bishops understood or even imagined, as well as the council being more than its documents, can be

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist, 2009) 194, emphasis original.

<sup>14</sup> Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus* nos. 9–10.

<sup>15</sup> Cardinal Frings, in a speech to the assembly on November 7, 1963, allegedly written by his *peritus* Joseph Ratzinger, stated: "This reform of the Curia is necessary. Let us put it into effect." Quoted in Xavier Rynne, *Vatican Council II* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 222.

<sup>16</sup> John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University, 2008) 304.

<sup>17</sup> Goldie was present for the third and fourth sessions, sitting right up front, "on the plush chairs of St Andrew's tribune, alongside the male auditors and the theologians" (Rosemary Goldie, *From a Roman Window: Five Decades: The World, the Church, and the Catholic Laity* [Blackburn, Vic.: HarperCollinsReligious, 1998] 71). For more on the contribution by women auditors at the council and Goldie's particular role, see Carmel Elizabeth McEnroy, *Guests in Their Own House: The Women of Vatican II* (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

further explored through the historical category of “event” (in the narrow sense): the further in time we get from the council is not necessarily a disadvantage; a retrospective 50 years after an event in some ways enables a clearer judgment to be made regarding that event’s historical significance.<sup>18</sup> On December 8, 1965, the council itself entered into history to be received through time. From the viewpoint of a 50-year timeline, new perspectives on the historical significance of the council emerge.

In addition to these hermeneutical points concerning specifically the principle of interrelating the council and its documents, a further five hermeneutical principles can be singled out.

### PASTORAL/DOCTRINAL

*Principle Two:* The council and its documents are to be interpreted in light of the council’s primarily pastoral orientation; Vatican II’s reformulation of doctrine aimed to teach in words and actions that foster a more meaningful spiritual appropriation of God’s salvation and revelation by the people of God.

While remembering the qualifications noted above regarding the interpretation and significance of “authorial intention,” the intention of the pope who called and first orientated the council is an important element in interpreting the council and its documents. Pope John XXIII, in his opening speech, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, at the first session, expressed his desire that the council be primarily “pastoral,” and that consideration of doctrine be expressed in a pastoral way. Furthermore, the pope called for “a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character” and of a pastoral leadership style in which “the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity” characterizes the church’s way of governing and teaching.<sup>19</sup> The papal discourse had significant influence on the Council Fathers and is to be considered, according to Jared Wicks, as “the Council’s first great text.”<sup>20</sup> It became more than an opening address.

<sup>18</sup> See Komonchak, “Vatican II as an ‘Event.’”

<sup>19</sup> Pope John XXIII, “Pope John’s Opening Speech to the Council,” in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: America, 1966) 710–19, at 715–16.

<sup>20</sup> Jared Wicks, *Doing Theology* (New York: Paulist, 2009) 22. On John XXIII’s opening address as a continuing guiding norm during the council debates, Wicks writes: “In the early weeks of the Council’s deliberations, Council members began citing Pope John’s address in their comments in St. Peter’s as expressing the Council’s purpose, namely, as assembled not to condemn errors, but to promote pastoral renewal and the cause of Christian unity. The address also served as a norm in some members’ evaluation of draft texts prepared before the Council, for example, in positive assessments of the text on liturgical reform and in critical judgments on the text *The Sources of Revelation*, on scripture and tradition” (ibid. 141).



In many ways over its years of deliberation, the council enthusiastically adopted Pope John's pastoral focus, from the first session's debates on liturgy and revelation, to the last session's debates on the church in the world. The first line of the first document promulgated, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, begins: "The sacred Council has set out to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian lives of the faithful" (*SC* no. 1).<sup>21</sup> In a footnote reference after the title of the document promulgated on the last working day of the council, *Gaudium et spes* (*GS*), the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today states a principle that should be applied to all the council's constitutions, decrees, and declarations: "The Constitution is called 'pastoral' because, while resting on doctrinal principles, it seeks to set forth the relation of the Church to the world and to the [people] of today. In Part I, therefore, the pastoral emphasis is not overlooked, nor is the doctrinal emphasis overlooked in Part II."<sup>22</sup> In other words, *Gaudium et spes* is both a pastoral and a doctrinal constitution. Similarly, *Lumen gentium* is both "dogmatic" and pastoral, as are *Dei verbum* and *Sacrosanctum concilium*.

Christoph Theobald sees this "principle of pastorality" as *the* hermeneutical key for interpreting Vatican II.<sup>23</sup> According to him, the pastorality called for by John XXIII can be summed up in the axiom, "there can be no proclamation of the gospel without taking account of its recipients."<sup>24</sup> As the council would later teach: the primary receiver of God's revelation and salvation is the whole people of God; facilitating their reception of the gospel is of utmost importance for the effectiveness of the church's mission. The council's doctrinal statements regarding the church's life should be interpreted as directed to this pastoral aim; likewise, the ecclesiological reforms it proposed have as their ultimate purpose God's saving of human beings—which implies deep spiritual appropriation by believers of God's offer of salvation if God's intention is to be realized. The church is a servant of that salvific goal. The opening article of *Dei verbum* states this conciliar intention: "[This synod] wants the whole world to hear the summons to

<sup>21</sup> Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, new rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992) (hereafter Flannery translation).

<sup>22</sup> Flannery translation.

<sup>23</sup> On the council's reception of John XXIII's "principle of pastorality" and its centrality for a hermeneutics of the council and its documents, see Christoph Theobald, *La réception du concile Vatican II: I. Accéder à la source* (Paris: Cerf, 2009) 281–493.

<sup>24</sup> Christoph Theobald, "The Theological Options of Vatican II: Seeking an 'Internal' Principle of Interpretation," in *Vatican II: A Forgotten Future?*, Continuum 1005/4, ed. Alberto Melloni and Christoph Theobald (London: SCM, 2005) 87–107, at 94.



salvation.” The pastoral/doctrinal principle is at play, in some way, in all the other dialectics that follow.

### PROCLAMATION/DIALOGUE

*Principle Three:* The church’s mission is to proclaim boldly and steadfastly God’s loving offer of salvation to humanity in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit; proclamation of the Christian gospel will be ineffective without dialogic openness to the perspectives and contexts of the intended receivers of the proclamation, whether they be believers or nonbelievers.

Related to the council’s desire for pastoral effectiveness within the church was its desire for dialogic openness to the world and those “outside” the church. Once again John XXIII set the tone in his opening address, a tone adopted by the council and his successor, Pope Paul VI. The council deliberately avoids condemnation. The word *rapprochement*, while not used in the documents,<sup>25</sup> nevertheless captures what was clearly perceived at the time, by both its opponents and promoters in the assembly of bishops, as a clear shift in ecclesial policy, away from a church deliberately hostile to those around it to a church desiring engagement with those “others.” The council’s intention was to rebuild broken relationships that had impeded God’s effectiveness in the world. Furthermore, the church should seek to know the perspective, language, and mindset of the receivers of its message, in order that the “other” may see more clearly in the face of the Catholic Church “the genuine face of God.”<sup>26</sup>

Accordingly, the council sought a new start in relations with those “outside” it: with Eastern churches of the Great Schism of 1054; with the churches of the Reformation; with the Jewish people; with adherents of other religions; with those of no religious belief. The council extended this dialogic openness to “modernity,” to “the world,” to “culture,” to “history.” This openness manifests a clear desire to end the entrenchment mentality characteristic of the previous centuries of Catholicism, especially during “the long nineteenth century” since the French Revolution and its aftermath.<sup>27</sup> However, what is also clear is that neither John XXIII nor the

<sup>25</sup> “*Rapprochement* . . . is not part of the corpus of Vatican II in a material way, but it belongs fully to the aims of Vatican II” (Massimo Faggioli, “*Sacrosanctum concilium* and the Meaning of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 71 [2010] 437–52, at 452). Faggioli notes the frequency of the term *rapprochement* in the writings of Dom Lambert Beauduin (1873–1960), a pioneer in the liturgical and ecumenical movements prior to the council. O’Malley refers to Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens as “a disciple of Lambert Beauduin” (O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* 117).

<sup>26</sup> GS no. 19.

<sup>27</sup> On “the long nineteenth century,” see O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* 53–92.

council nor Paul VI ever understood such *rapprochement* as a capitulation to the Zeitgeist of liberalism, relativism, or indifferentism. The ending of a hostile stance was for the sake of a more compelling and more effective proclamation of God's Good News for all humanity.

The council embedded this deliberate shift in the language it used throughout its documents: a shift in tone away from hostile words toward "friendship words," such as brothers/sisters, cooperation, collaboration, partnership, freedom, and dialogue.<sup>28</sup> The last word "dialogue" (translating both *dialogus* and *colloquium*) became a key leitmotif for capturing this element of the council's vision.<sup>29</sup> For O'Malley, the council was concerned not only about the "what" of the church but also and ultimately about "how" the church should be; John XXIII's call for pastoral reform and its adoption by the conciliar assembly expressed their desire to change the very "style" of being church.<sup>30</sup> Hermann Pottmeyer interprets the council's vision for ecclesial reform as a call above all to create "a culture of dialogue" *within* the Catholic Church itself.<sup>31</sup> It is significant that in its treatment of the four concentric circles of dialogue, *Gaudium et spes* no. 92 begins with dialogue *within* the church, before going on to speak of dialogue with other Christians, with adherents of other religions, and with nonbelievers.<sup>32</sup>

A stark example of the shift in attitude—from monologue to dialogue—toward those "outside" the church is evident in the heading and content of *Gaudium et spes* no. 44: "What the Church Receives from the Modern World."

Nowadays when things change so rapidly and thought patterns differ so widely, the Church needs to step up this exchange by calling upon the help of people who are living in the world, who are expert in its organizations and its forms of training, and who understand its mentality, in the case of believers and nonbelievers alike. With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the whole people of God, particularly of its pastors and theologians, to listen to and distinguish the many voices of our times and to interpret them in the light of the divine Word, in order

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 306–7.

<sup>29</sup> See James McEvoy, "Church and World at the Second Vatican Council: The Significance of *Gaudium et Spes*," *Pacifica* 19 (2006) 37–57; James Gerard McEvoy, "Proclamation As Dialogue: Transition in the Church-World Relationship," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009) 875–903.

<sup>30</sup> For one formulation of his interpretation, see O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* 305–7.

<sup>31</sup> Hermann J. Pottmeyer, "Die Mitsprache der Gläubigen in Glaubenssachen: Eine alte Praxis und ihre Wiederentdeckung," *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift "Communio"* 25 (1996) 135–47, at 146–47.

<sup>32</sup> The council reverses the order in which Paul VI had treated the same circles of dialogue in his encyclical on dialogue, *Ecclesiam suam*, published on August 6, 1964, just five weeks before the start of the council's third session on September 14. See *Ecclesiam suam* nos. 96–117.

that the revealed truth may be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and more suitably presented.<sup>33</sup>

This passage was inserted just a few days before the last working day of the council, December 7, 1965, almost as a final reminder by the council of what it saw as one of its most important principles.

### RESSOURCEMENT/AGGIORNAMENTO

*Principle Four:* Vatican II sought renewal and reform of the church by re-receiving many of the past forms and practices of the tradition; application of these past forms and practices to the present, however, demands critical adaptation for new times and contexts if genuine renewal and reform are to take place.

With the two terms *ressourcement* (“return to the sources”) and *aggiornamento* (“updating”), we come to the issues of “history” and “historical consciousness.” Bruno Forte has called Vatican II “the Council of history.”<sup>34</sup> It was the first council in the history of the church that explicitly worked out of a historical awareness.<sup>35</sup> The two leitmotifs in this dialectic capture two necessarily interrelated dimensions of that consciousness.

The notion of *aggiornamento* had long been central to the vision of historian Angelo Roncalli.<sup>36</sup> As Pope John XXIII, his explicit use of and allusions to the leitmotif, both before the council and during his opening address, are important factors to be considered in the continuing interpretation of Vatican II, because his leitmotif would enter into the imagination of the bishops in council and shape both their agenda and their expression of thought. Pope John’s

<sup>33</sup> GS no. 44, Flannery translation, slightly altered.

<sup>34</sup> Bruno Forte, “Le prospettive della ricerca teologica,” in *Il Concilio Vaticano II: Recezione e attualità alla luce del Giubileo*, ed. Rino Fisichella (Milan: San Paolo, 2000) 419–29, at 420.

<sup>35</sup> “The main novelty of Vatican II was rather its consideration of history as related to the gospel and the Christian truth. Whereas for the most part in the past there had been an awareness that history as experienced by human beings was ultimately of no importance for the understanding of the gospel (I use the term ‘awareness’, although ‘in reality’ it was never such a thing), the major question of the Second Vatican Council was precisely this, even if the words used (pastoral nature, *aggiornamento*, signs of the time [sic]) were not immediately understood clearly by all” (Giuseppe Ruggieri, “Towards a Hermeneutic of Vatican II,” *Concilium* 1 [1999] 1–13, at 3). See also Giuseppe Alberigo, “Cristianesimo e storia nel Vaticano II,” *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 5 (1984) 577–92.

<sup>36</sup> See Max Vodola, “John XXIII, Vatican II, and the Genesis of *Aggiornamento*: A Contextual Analysis of Angelo Roncalli’s Works on San Carlo Borromeo in Relation to Late Twentieth Century Church Reform” (PhD diss., School of Philosophical, Historical, and International Studies, Monash University, Melbourne, 2010); Michael Bredeck, *Das Zweite Vatikanum als Konzil des Aggiornamento: Zur hermeneutischen Grundlegung einer theologischen Konzilsinterpretation* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007).

successor Paul VI also embraced *aggiornamento*, considering it to be “the guiding criterion of the Ecumenical Council,” and indeed adopting it as an expression of “the aim and object” of his own pontificate.<sup>37</sup> Although the council documents never explicitly use the Italian word *aggiornamento*, the opening paragraph of its very first promulgated text, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, states: “It is the intention of this holy council . . . to adapt [*accommodare*] those structures which are subject to change [*mutatio*].”<sup>38</sup> For both popes of the council, as for the conciliar assembly, this *aggiornamento* could be characterized as a fresh reception (through personal and institutional renewal and reform) of “the treasure of revelation, entrusted to the church”<sup>39</sup> from the beginning: God’s self-communication in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, as it was witnessed to in Scripture and tradition, and as it is experienced in history and made evident through certain contemporary signs of the times. Without *aggiornamento*, this treasure would not be meaningfully communicated to (and, in turn, appropriated by) new generations.

While its aim was an *aggiornamento* of the church’s liturgy, the council’s first promulgated document, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, is simultaneously a work grounded on *ressourcement* of the tradition. According to Massimo Faggioli:

The advocates of the anti-Vatican II “new liturgical movement” are indeed right as they identify in *Sacrosanctum concilium* the main target since this constitution is the most radical instance of *ressourcement* and the most obviously antitraditionalist document of the council. The principle of *ressourcement* affected *Sacrosanctum concilium* like no other conciliar document; it is hard to find in the corpus of the documents passages more expressive of the very essence of the Church and driven by the idea of *ressourcement*.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, in the early debates on the document that would become *Dei verbum*, *ressourcement* of long-forgotten scriptural and patristic personalist notions of revelation and dynamic notions of tradition became important, as the bishops reflected on the nature of the divine revelatory event within history and its meaningful and effective transmission by the church throughout history. Likewise, toward the end of the council, when discussing the church *ad extra*, these earlier theological discussions on revelation and tradition were never far from the surface of debate as they discussed the constant need for *aggiornamento*:

The Church learned early in its history to express the Christian message in the concepts and languages of different peoples and tried to clarify it in the light of

<sup>37</sup> *Ecclesiam suam* no. 50, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_06081964\\_ecclesiam\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam_en.html).

<sup>38</sup> Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990) 2:820.

<sup>39</sup> *DV* no. 26, Tanner translation.

<sup>40</sup> Faggioli, “*Sacrosanctum concilium* and the Meaning of Vatican II” 451.

the wisdom of their philosophers: it was an attempt to adapt the Gospel to the understanding of all and the requirements of the learned, insofar as this could be done. Indeed, this kind of adaptation and preaching of the revealed word *must ever be the law of all evangelization*. In this way it is possible to create in every country the possibility of expressing the message of Christ in suitable terms and to foster vital contact and exchange between the Church and different cultures.<sup>41</sup>

In reaching back to the rich heritage of the faith for resourcing its updating, the work of the so-called *ressourcement* theologians in the decades prior to the council was vital.<sup>42</sup> This biblical, patristic, liturgical, historical, ecumenical, and theological scholarship was directly mediated to the council members through the theological *periti* present, either as assistants to individual bishops and national groups of bishops or as theological advisors on various conciliar committees.<sup>43</sup>

With a new historical consciousness, and a retrieval of the notion that the ultimate “source” of the faith throughout history is God’s continuing self-communication in Christ through the Spirit, a greater appreciation emerged in the council assembly that all expressions of that source’s reception by the church are historically conditioned, including Scripture itself. The council would teach that it was therefore appropriate for historical-critical methods to be applied to Scripture’s interpretation, albeit within the historical process of ongoing interpretation and application in the church’s living tradition. Similarly, the historical nature of doctrine was appreciated to a deeper degree; the American *peritus* John Courtney Murray believed that “development of

<sup>41</sup> GS no. 44, Flannery translation, emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> On the historical consciousness grounding the *ressourcement* scholarship by theologians of the so-called *nouvelle théologie*, see Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011); Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (New York: Oxford University, 2009); Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie—New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2010). Mettepenningen considers Vatican II’s appropriation (and, effectively, approbation) of the work of these theologians as the fourth phase in his history of *la nouvelle théologie*.

<sup>43</sup> On the effects of *ressourcement* theology within the final texts, see Gerald O’Collins, “*Ressourcement* and Vatican II,” in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal* 372–91. For a detailed study of the role before and during the council of theologians from the *ressourcement* Dominican “school” of Le Saulchoir (Marie-Dominique Chenu, Yves Congar, and Henri-Marie Féret), see Michael Quisinsky, *Geschichtlicher Glaube in einer geschichtlichen Welt: Der Beitrag von M.-D. Chenu, Y. Congar, und H.-M. Féret zum II. Vaticanum* (Berlin: LIT, 2007). For assessments on the role of such theologians at Vatican II, see Alberigo, “Transition to a New Age” 602–4; Jared Wicks, “Theologians at Vatican Council II,” in *Doing Theology* (New York: Paulist, 2009) 187–223.

doctrine” was “*the* issue under the issues” at Vatican II.<sup>44</sup> Such “development” was an element of ongoing *aggiornamento*. A further consequence of this engagement with recent historical methods of scholarship, when applied to interpreting the whole sweep of church history, was a rediscovery by the Council Fathers of great diversity within the tradition, and especially the rediscovery of a richly diverse Catholicism before the Counter-Reformation (or “Tridentine”) Catholicism that still shaped the Catholic Church so pervasively up to the eve of the council.

Within the various streams of the tradition being resourced, the patristic period was especially privileged, particularly the writings of Augustine. The growing appreciation of the tradition’s rich diversity led at times to significant differences in preferred elements for retrieval. For example, while the early sessions of the council showed a united group wanting to reject the then-dominant “neo-Scholasticism” in favor of a more biblical and personalist theology from the patristic period, there were those who, all the same, did not want to reject the deep Catholic insights of recent historical *ressourcement* of a Thomas Aquinas before the Scholasticism of the centuries following him, a Scholasticism that dominated Catholic theology immediately before the council and shaped the initial schemas presented to the council. The differences between these conciliar groups would more and more mark the council’s work and can be found woven throughout the later documents.<sup>45</sup> It can be broadly described as the Augustinian and Thomist threads within Catholicism. In the end, the council documents attempt to safeguard *both* the Augustinian and the Thomist approaches. Both Incarnation and Cross are highlighted: God’s coming as a human being consecrates creation and human history as the *locus* where God is to be found ever new; however, within that creation and history, evil and sin continue to impede God’s reigning in the world.

The citations in the main text and footnotes of the documents reveal the council’s desire to ground its positions in the rich tradition of Christianity highlighted by this *ressourcement*, going back to its first scriptural witness. Certainly there is an obvious concern to appeal to earlier popes, especially Pius XII (who makes up half the references to previous papal teachings). Showing the relationship with the previous council, Vatican I, was also seen to be important, as indeed was Vatican II’s relationship with Trent. However, even here the appeal to Trent’s authority, which had so dominated

<sup>44</sup> John Courtney Murray, “This Matter of Religious Freedom,” *America* 112.2 (January 9, 1965) 40–43, at 43.

<sup>45</sup> See Joseph A. Komonchak, “Le valutazioni sulla *Gaudium et spes*: Chenu, Dossetti, Ratzinger,” in *Volti di fine Concilio: Studi di storia e teologia sulla conclusione del Vaticano II*, ed. Joseph Doré and Alberto Melloni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000) 115–53.

the period of “Tridentine Catholicism,” is recontextualized, as Joseph Komonchak notes: at Vatican II, “the tradition was no longer read in the light of Trent; Trent was read in the light of the tradition.”<sup>46</sup> That tradition was “the great tradition” of the church, a “living tradition” going back to the earliest church.<sup>47</sup> However, these footnote references are only surface indicators of the council’s *ressourcement*. What is invisible, except for its pervasive effects, are the decades of preconiliar scholarship in biblical, patristic, liturgical, historical, ecumenical, and theological studies, mediated to the council through its *periti*.

With this principle of *ressourcement/aggiornamento*, Vatican II took on a historical consciousness and embraced a dynamic understanding of tradition: *ressourcement* is to *aggiornamento* as tradition is to reception. The history of tradition shows continuous adaptation; what is constant in that process is the need for reinterpretation for new times and contexts.

### CONTINUITY/REFORM

*Principle Five:* The church is the one community of faith through time as a sacrament of God’s offer of salvation; the form this sacrament takes in a particular time and place requires continual reform and must always be adapted to that context for the sake of the church’s ongoing effectiveness.

In the previous section, I indicated how *ressourcement* scholarship revealed rich diversity in the tradition and brought about the conciliar

<sup>46</sup> Joseph A. Komonchak, “The Council of Trent at the Second Vatican Council,” in *From Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations*, ed. Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella (New York: Oxford University, 2006) 61–80, at 76.

<sup>47</sup> The notion of “living tradition” can be highlighted as one example of the council’s appropriation of *ressourcement* scholarship (as indeed it can be highlighted as an example of how ongoing *aggiornamento* goes to the heart of the church’s mission). The notion pervades the whole of *DV* no. 8, though the actual phrase *traditio viva* is not explicitly used. However, phrases can be found such as “the enlivening (*vivifica*) presence of this tradition” and “the living voice of the Gospel (ringing out) in the church.” It is later used explicitly in *DV* no. 12, in reference to “the living tradition (*traditio viva*) of the whole church.” The phrase *traditio viva* is found too in *UR* no. 17. Regarding the drafting of *DV* no. 8, Ratzinger notes: “It is not difficult . . . to recognize the pen of Y. Congar” (Joseph Ratzinger, “Chapter II: The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler [New York: Herder, 1969] 181–98, at 184). Le Saulchoir Dominican Yves Congar played a significant role on the subcommission that formulated *DV* no. 8. The two parts of his work on tradition in French were published just before (1960) and during the council (1963). See Yves M.-J. Congar, *La tradition et les traditions: Essai historique* (Paris: A. Fayard, 1960–1963), translated as *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (London: Burns & Oates, 1966).



shift away from understanding Catholic identity in terms of a monolithic Tridentine Catholicism. There, continuity had been understood as “uniformity through time”; continuity had meant the continuation of Tridentine Catholicism. In the early 20th century, any theological attempts to go beyond that vision were severely resisted, as happened during the Modernist controversy. Many of the bishops at Vatican II, who had been formed as seminarians between 1910 and 1940, would have had that anti-Modernist Catholicism deeply engrained in them. This section now extends discussion of the issues of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, but brings explicitly to the fore the tension that results in the interplay between them: the necessary tension between constancy and change, sameness and novelty, in effecting an *aggiornamento* of the tradition. “Although [the Italian *aggiornamento* and the French *ressourcement*] express almost diametrically opposed impulses—the first looking forward, the second backward—they are both geared to change.”<sup>48</sup>

It should not be surprising that during the council and then during its aftermath we find being played out an ecclesiastical version of *la querelle des anciens et des modernes*, a seemingly eternal quarrel over the old and the new, tradition and innovation, the past and the present.<sup>49</sup> From the very first day of the council in his opening speech, John XXIII raised this issue of continuity and adaptation. Of course, he said, the deposit of faith (divine revelation) is a nonnegotiable; what demands constant attention is the effective proclamation of this good news; the church, through this council (he urged), must look to anything in its life that is impeding this proclamation, by removing it or reforming it. The council did go on to embrace an agenda for renewal (*renovatio*) and reform (*reformatio*).<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> John O'Malley, “Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?,” in *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* 52–91, at 63.

<sup>49</sup> The phrase comes from a 17th-century literary debate in France. See Hans Robert Jauss, “Ursprung und Bedeutung der Fortschrittsidee in der ‘Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes,’” in *Die Philosophie und die Frage nach dem Fortschritt*, ed. Helmut Kuhn and Franz Wiedmann (München: Pustet, 1964) 51–72; Jauss, “Antiqui/moderni (Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes),” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, 13 vols., ed. Joachim Ritter et al. (Basel: Schwabe, 1971– ) 1:410–14.

<sup>50</sup> The two nouns are used in a few places in the documents. *Lumen gentium* no. 8 speaks of *renovatio* (renewal): “The church . . . , clasping sinners to its bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal.” *Unitatis redintegratio*, in two articles, uses together both *renovatio* (renewal) and *reformatio* (reform or reformation): all Christian communions are required to undertake “the task of renewal and reform” (*UR* no. 4); “Every renewal of the church, essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to the church’s own calling. . . . In its pilgrimage on earth Christ summons the church to continual reformation [*perennem reformationem*], of which it is always in need, in so far as it is an institution of human beings here on earth” (*UR* no. 6, Tanner translation).

Much recent discussion has narrowed debate over the correct interpretation of Vatican II to the issue of continuity versus discontinuity. Benedict XVI has used this dichotomy to structure initially his own deliberate foray into the debate, nevertheless attempting thereafter to rename what he considers the proper terms of that debate—continuity/reform.<sup>51</sup> Joseph Komonchak, in his analysis of Benedict's 2005 speech to the Roman Curia, identifies Lefebvrites as the real target of the pope's criticism of a radical "hermeneutics of discontinuity." According to Komonchak, the pope's proposed "hermeneutic of reform" is much more subtle than its detractors would claim:

The "reform" that Benedict sees as the heart of the council's achievement is itself a matter of "novelty in continuity," of "fidelity and dynamism"; indeed, in what is something like a definition, the pope says that "true reform" consists precisely in a "combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels." It oversimplifies his position to see it as counterposing continuity and discontinuity, as is often done. It is no less an oversimplification to reduce the question of interpreting Vatican II to the same choice between continuity and discontinuity. Is there anyone who sees only continuity in the council, or anyone who sees only discontinuity? Pope Benedict's description of "true reform" invites an effort to discern where elements of continuity and elements of discontinuity may be found.<sup>52</sup>

What constitutes the precise elements of discontinuity introduced by Vatican II has been variously listed. For example, Peter Hünemann notes that the council desired four major breaks with the past: a break with 1500 years of Christendom, where church and state have common goals and work as one; a break with the 1000-year division between Eastern and Western Christianity; a break with the 500-year separation between Catholics and Protestants; a break with the 100 years of tense Catholic "lingering on the threshold of the modern."<sup>53</sup> Karl Rahner's thesis is well known: Vatican II marks an epochal change in the history of the church, from a Hellenistic model to a truly "catholic" world church.<sup>54</sup> I have already noted O'Malley's thesis regarding the deliberate and dramatic shift in the desired "style" of being church. Others could be noted.

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On the occurrence of the two terms, see Philippe Delhay, Michel Guéret, and Paul Tombeur, eds., *Concilium Vaticanum II: Concordance, index, listes de fréquence, tables comparatives*, Informatique et étude de textes 7 (Louvain: CETÉDOC, 1974) 553.

<sup>51</sup> For the December 22, 2005 "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia," see Benedict XVI, "Interpreting Vatican II," *Origins* 35 (2006) 534–39.

<sup>52</sup> Joseph A. Komonchak, "Benedict XVI and the Interpretation of Vatican II," in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, ed. M. Lacey and F. Oakley (New York: Oxford University) 93–110, at 105.

<sup>53</sup> See Peter Hünemann, "Kriterien für die Rezeption des II. Vatikanischen Konzils," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 191 (2011) 126–47.

<sup>54</sup> Karl Rahner, "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," in *Concern for the Church*, Theological Investigations 20 (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 77–89.

What constitutes the elements of continuity that Vatican II perpetuated, albeit in a renewed way? Certain fundamental features are considered by Vatican II to be permanently enduring elements of the Catholic Church: evangelization; the Scriptures; the seven sacraments; service of neighbor, especially the poor; ordination and the threefold order of bishop, priest, and deacon; religious life; the papacy; conciliar government; authoritative teaching; prayer and the call to holiness; etc. Vatican II addressed all these, and in its intention to bring about their renewal, it certainly saw itself and its vision to be in continuity with these elements of Catholicism.

I would argue, however, that Vatican II's fundamental enduring element is more *theological* than *ecclesiological*. One of the most significant teachings of the council is its retrieval of the nature of divine revelation as first and foremost God's loving, personal self-communication to humanity in Christ through the Spirit, and not simply a communication of divine truths. Ultimately, in any discussion of the council and continuity, the *continuum* it primarily focused on, in the end, was not so much "the church" but more so "the treasure of revelation entrusted to the church":<sup>55</sup> God's continuous revelatory and salvific presence and activity in human history in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit.<sup>56</sup> It is this that never changes. Ecclesio-logically, "continuity" relates to the church's ongoing reception of that *continuum*. In that reception, the church is *semper ipse sed nunquam idem* (always itself but never the same)—always itself as receiver of God's revelation, yet constantly needing to reform itself so that it might be a more effective sacrament of that salvific revelation. Preservation of ecclesial continuity is maintained by always being effective in that mission. *Dei verbum*'s notion of "living tradition" captures the ecclesial "mirror" of the divine *continuum* in history. In that sense *Dei verbum* is as much about the church as *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*; the living tradition is the church living the gospel in its daily life in whatever period in history.

### VISION/RECEPTION

*Principle Six:* The bishops of Vatican II proposed a vision for renewing and reforming the Catholic Church; that vision requires ongoing reception and implementation by the whole people of God for its realization.

Vatican II envisioned a renewed and reformed Catholic Church. In fashioning its vision, "the Council by no means claims encyclopedic completeness";<sup>57</sup> moreover, "the Council did not claim to be expressing the final word on the subjects it treated, only to be pointing out the direction

<sup>55</sup> DV no. 26.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. no. 2.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Hünemann, "The Ignored 'Text': On the Hermeneutics of the Second Vatican Council," in *Vatican II: A Forgotten Future?* 118–36, at 126.

in which further reflection should develop.”<sup>58</sup> However, it did try to be comprehensive.<sup>59</sup>

In hermeneutically reconstructing what the council envisaged and what it outlined in its documents, it is helpful to keep in mind “the hermeneutical function of distanciation.”<sup>60</sup> An author of a text (in the world behind the text) commits a vision to writing by producing a text that imagines “a world” (the world of the text). The text projects and proposes this world to an implied reader and ultimately to a reader in the “real” world, inviting the reader to imagine that proposed world in his or her own context (the world in front of the text). In the reader’s application to the real world, vision can become a reality, no matter how distant in time the receiver is from the production of the text.

Similarly, the bishops of Vatican II committed their vision to writing in 16 texts. The increasing distance in time from the council does not leave us at a disadvantage; through the dynamic nature of writing, of texts, and of reading, we have access to the conciliar vision—through hermeneutical reception. The council documents project a world in front of the text, and that world is a proposed way of being church in the face of the rest of humanity and ultimately before God. This projected world is what could be called “the vision of Vatican II.” The dominant features of how the council imagined the church need to be brought to synthesis; receivers in new contexts must, however, reimagine and apply that vision for their own time and place. The conciliar vision requires reception for its realization—contemporary receivers of those texts are invited to imagine that envisioned church now, five decades later, in a very different context from the one in which those texts were first produced, the 1960s. New questions may arise in the new contexts and be posed to the conciliar texts for answers—questions, however, that individual conciliar texts did not intend to answer, or questions that the

<sup>58</sup> Joseph Doré, “Vatican II Today,” in *ibid.* 137–47, at 142.

<sup>59</sup> “No subject escaped their attention: from Revelation to listening to the signs of the times, from marriage to international peace, from education and the communications media to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, from the nature and mission of the Church to the redefinition of its various functions, ministries, and states of life, the bishops managed to depict a renewed vision of Christianity on a planet embarking on globalization, even to put forward a programme of reform that exceeds anything we might have dared to imagine earlier. None of the twenty preceding councils showed so much daring and ambition: allowing a consensus to emerge among those more than two thousand prelates from all continents and obtain their agreement on the responses to be made to virtually all the questions facing the Church at the dawn of a new age for humanity—such is the absolutely unheard-of legacy of these great twentieth-century assizes” (Theobald, “Theological Options of Vatican II” 87).

<sup>60</sup> For what follows, see Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (London: Continuum, 1991) 75–88.

bishops could not have even envisaged at that time. Nevertheless, receivers may indeed find answers to those new questions, from a comprehensive interpretation of the council and all its documents, as they imagine the whole conciliar vision realized in their new context.

The vision of the Second Vatican Council is hermeneutically reconstructed from a new context by taking the council and its documents as a whole, along all timeframes and from all hermeneutical perspectives (authors-texts-receivers). First, the *documents* themselves are to be read as a whole, both intratextually and intertextually; furthermore, they are to be interpreted intertextually within the whole textual tradition of the church, reaching right back to the Scriptures.<sup>61</sup> Second, *the council* too has to be read within a longer context—as a historical ecclesial “event” to be now situated, 50 years later, in the context of a 2000-year living tradition. Third, since Vatican II (“the council” and “the documents”) has now entered history, it must be interpreted within a comprehensive theological epistemology, interrelating Scripture and tradition (of which Vatican II is now an element). According to the council’s own “principle of pastorality” (as formulated by Theobald, “there can be no proclamation of the gospel without taking account of its recipients”<sup>62</sup>), it is the intended recipients of the conciliar vision who are now part of the council’s history, because it is they who will apply it (or resist applying it). Those potential recipients make up the whole people of God, who the council emphasizes is the primary recipient of divine revelation. Therefore, there is a wide circle of voices and authorities within the contemporary church who are to participate in that comprehensive reception and assessment by the whole people of God (the *sensus fidelium*, theologians, and the magisterium).<sup>63</sup>

Alois Grillmeier has highlighted three dimensions of conciliar reception following councils in the early church: kerygmatic, theological, and spiritual reception.<sup>64</sup> They are helpful categories for examining the reception of the most recent council. *Kerygmatic reception* refers to the official interpretation,

<sup>61</sup> On the need to read the conciliar texts intratextually and intertextually, see Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II* 40–48.

<sup>62</sup> Theobald, “Theological Options of Vatican II” 94.

<sup>63</sup> A full consideration of the relationship between these voices in the church, including particularly that of the laity, is a matter beyond this present article. For one proposal of that interrelation, see Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church’s Reception of Revelation* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2009).

<sup>64</sup> See Alois Grillmeier, “The Reception of Chalcedon in the Roman Catholic Church,” *Ecumenical Review* 22 (1970) 383–411; Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 2, *From the Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great (590–604)*, pt. 1, *Reception and Contradiction: The Development of the Discussion about Chalcedon from 451 to the Beginning of the Reign of Justinian* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987) 7–10.

promulgation, and implementation through church law by church leadership once the council ends. *Theological reception* refers to the work of academic theologians attempting to bring to synthesis the vision of the conciliar decisions and documents. *Spiritual reception* is the conversion of heart and mind by all the baptized to a greater fidelity to the gospel, no matter what particular aspects of the Christian life and church life a council might be wishing to address. Since this was John XXIII's pastoral intention for Vatican II—a more intense and meaningful proclamation and appropriation of the gospel—spiritual reception, therefore, is the ultimate goal of Vatican II's reception; it is here that the pastoral intention of the council is realized. Renewing the church for the sake of a greater facilitation of that spiritual reception, however, was never intended by the council to be focused only on personal renewal of individuals; it saw institutional reform as also key to its pastoral vision.

In terms of a theological epistemology, and from the perspective of what *Lumen gentium* called the “prophetic office” of the church, Grillmeier's three dimensions of conciliar reception can be seen to correspond to the three teaching authorities of the *sensus fidelium* (spiritual reception), theology (theological reception), and the magisterium (official reception). The reception—or nonreception—of Vatican II's vision occurs at all three levels—official, theological, and spiritual. It is here also, through the interaction of the *sensus fidelium*, theology, and the magisterium, that a proper assessment takes place regarding how faithfully the Catholic Church (“the whole body of the faithful”)<sup>65</sup> has de facto received and applied the vision of Vatican II in the five decades since its close. If spiritual reception is the pastoral goal of the council, and if it is through the *sensus fidelium* that such spiritual reception can be found to be best articulated, then attention to the *sensus fidelium* by theologians and the magisterium is vital for accessing the lived application of Vatican II's vision within new contexts, five decades later. However, the fundamental condition for such ecclesial listening has yet to be effectively implemented: provision of structures of participation for enabling genuine interaction between the *sensus fidelium*, theologians, and the magisterium.

## CONCLUSION

According to Alberigo, “Even from the viewpoint of its doctrinal accomplishments Vatican II seems to have been chiefly a point of departure rather than a point of arrival.”<sup>66</sup> Grillmeier has highlighted the importance of “theological reception” in the reception of any council. One particular task for theologians in their “theological reception” of Vatican II is to bring the elements of the conciliar vision into some form of comprehensive synthesis, keeping in mind the above hermeneutical

<sup>65</sup> LG no. 12.

<sup>66</sup> Alberigo, “Transition to a New Age” 604.

principles. Such a synthesis cannot be attempted here. However, I wish to conclude with one aspect that emerges from the above considerations and that such a synthesis would need to highlight: the increasing emphasis given by the council to the saving activity of the tripersonal God's presence and activity in the movements of human history, but with a new appreciation of "history."

Over the council's four sessions, as the bishops discussed a vast range of ecclesiological issues, and particularly toward the end of the council, as they drafted *Nostra aetate*, *Dignitatis humanae*, and *Gaudium et spes*, their attention would also return regularly to the document that in the very first days of the council had caused such controversy, *De fontibus revelationis*—one of the seven schemas presented to the Council Fathers before they arrived in 1962, and the second to be brought to the floor of the council early in the first session (November 14, 1962). This first schema on revelation was famously rejected; after failing to reach the required two-thirds majority to send the schema back for total redrafting, John XXIII intervened to that effect. Consideration of further versions of the document remained on the agenda for all four sessions.<sup>67</sup> It would finally be promulgated (as *Dei verbum*) three weeks before the close of the council (November 18, 1965). Like the layers of an archeological dig, there is a sense in which the stages in the history of *Dei verbum* over four sessions can be seen to trace the history of the council's development. It was a development through which the bishops' Christocentric vision became more and more pneumatologically balanced,<sup>68</sup> resulting in a trinitarian vision of God's activity in the economy of salvation that pervades the 16 documents taken as a whole. The council's desire to renew and reform the Catholic Church spiritually and institutionally was for the sake of making the church a more effective sacrament of *God's mission* in the world.

During the third session, the Doctrinal Commission stated that the document on revelation was "in a way the first of all the constitutions of this council, so that its Preface introduces them all to a certain extent."<sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup> In the second session, the second draft was not actually debated on the floor of the council in any of the plenary meetings. However, many bishops were able to submit written interventions that eventually reshaped this second draft considerably. For a detailed history of the document's development, see Burigana, *La Bibbia nel concilio*. For a summary account, see Ronald D. Witherup, *Scripture: Dei Verbum* (New York: Paulist, 2006) 15–31.

<sup>68</sup> See, e.g., Jacques Dupuis, "Western Christocentrism and Eastern Pneumatology," in *Jesus Christ and His Spirit: Theological Approaches* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1977) 21–31.

<sup>69</sup> Vatican Council II, *Acta synodalia sacrosancti concilii oecumenici Vaticani II*, 5 vols. with multiple parts (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–1978) IV/1, 341, quoted in Theobald, "Theological Options of Vatican II" 91. On the centrality of



*Dei verbum* therefore has a central place among the four constitutions, as highlighted in the fourth session by the Relator, Cardinal Ermenegildo Florit from Florence, when introducing the near-final version of *Dei verbum* to the council assembly on October 29, 1965; the constitution, he stated, “formed the very bond among all the questions dealt with by this Council. It sets us at the very heart of the mystery of the Church and at the epicentre of ecumenical considerations.”<sup>70</sup>

However, it is also important to see the development of *Dei verbum* as taking place in parallel to all the other 15 documents that the council produced. An internal conversation was taking place, as it were, among all the documents as they developed—despite the fact that, even as a collection, they do not present consistent, systematic treatises on individual themes. Over these four sessions, the ecclesiological elements of the council’s emerging vision came to be presented in terms of a broader vista, that of the whole economy of salvation revealing the activity of the tripersonal God’s ways within human history, now understood with a much keener historical consciousness. In turn, over these four sessions, this new appreciation of how God works in the economy of salvation began to bring forth an emerging appreciation of how God works *within* the church *throughout* history. A comprehensive interpretation of the council, five decades on, in the light of the hermeneutical principles outlined in this essay, must therefore bring to the fore the significance of that developing preoccupation with the ways of God in history and its articulation across the texts. Ongoing interpretation of the ecclesiological reforms of Vatican II should be informed by this rejuvenated theology of God’s activity within history in the economy of salvation, to be discerned through carefully reading “the signs of the times” in the light of the gospel.<sup>71</sup> As Bruno Forte states, Vatican II was “the Council of history.”<sup>72</sup>

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*Dei verbum* in the conciliar vision and on the significance of this statement by the Doctrinal Commission, Jared Wicks writes: “Vatican II stated revelation’s evangelical content in [*Dei verbum*’s] opening six paragraphs. One can argue that in the overall logic of the council documents, this passage stands first, since the gospel that it states is the word by which the church is assembled as *congregatio fidelium* and priestly people for worship. This is the gospel that all church ministries and apostolates serve and promote. The same gospel creates the horizon of understanding within which Catholic Christians view the world and its structures for the unfolding of the human vocation. Because of this, Vatican II’s Doctrinal Commission once said that the constitution on revelation is in a certain way (*quodammodo*) the first of all the council’s constitutions” (Jared Wicks, “Vatican II on Revelation—From behind the Scenes,” *Theological Studies* 71 [2010] 637–50, at 640–41).

<sup>70</sup> *Acta synodalia* IV/5, 741, quoted in Theobald, “Theological Options” 91.

<sup>71</sup> *GS* no. 4; see *GS* no. 11.

<sup>72</sup> Forte, “Le prospettive della ricerca teologica” 420.