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Style is Substance: Origins of John W. O'Malley's Contribution to the Interpretation of Vatican II

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Abstract
This article explores three aspects of John W. O'Malley's contribution to the critical study of the Second Vatican Council: his contention that Vatican II reflects a new "style" or philosophy of history; that the distinctive rhetorical style of the conciliar texts is itself an expression of their substantive teaching; and finally, that the council is a decisive response to the crisis of modernity. A full appreciation of these insights requires that we consider his study of Vatican II against the horizon of his works on renaissance and early modern church history.

Keywords
Catholicism, church history, hermeneutics, modernity, John W. O'Malley, Second Vatican Council

The work of John W. O'Malley is perhaps best known in theological circles for its contribution to our understanding of the Second Vatican Council, in particular for drawing our attention to the unique literary form of the conciliar documents and to the reforms they envisage which must be factored in to any effort to interpret and receive its message.[1] To take the full measure of his contribution to our

1. This article is an expanded version of a paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Vatican II Studies Group in the American Academy of Religion, Boston, November 20, 2017, in a session honoring the contributions of John W. O'Malley to the study of the Second Vatican Council.

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understanding of Vatican II, we must fathom the roots of his methodology in the insights distilled through the trajectory of a lifetime of historical scholarship reaching back to his studies of the Renaissance and the early modern period. The insight and skill of careful historical study provide the theologian with a set of vital tools for an accurate reading of the council's fundamental orientations and the interpretation of its texts.

In 2005, O'Malley's reading of Vatican II cut through the unfortunate pretensions of a hermeneutic of continuity juxtaposed with a so-called hermeneutic of discontinuity—a reading of competing visions inaccurately attributed to Pope Benedict XVI.[2] Noting that an inordinate emphasis on the council's continuity with previous expressions of the Catholic tradition minimized those aspects of the conciliar event and its teaching that were discontinuous with that of previous councils, he asked pointedly whether anything of moment happened at Vatican II.[3] From his earliest writings on the Second Vatican Council, John O'Malley has maintained that if there was something new and distinctive in Vatican II's effort to adapt to a changed historical and cultural context, its reforms were not conceived as a break with the tradition of the past. In 1971 he wrote:

> The fact that the Council fathers spoke of their experience in terms of a new Pentecost suggests some awareness among them that the Council had radical implications. What the Council documents insist upon, however, is that the accommodations which the Council wanted to effect did not change the venerable patrimony of the Christian past, nor did they break the stream of faithful continuity with the apostolic age.[4]

In December of 2005, when Pope Benedict XVI spoke to the debate concerning the appropriate hermeneutic of the council, O'Malley welcomed his affirmation of the need for a "hermeneutic of reform," one grounded in an understanding that "true reform" consists precisely in a "blending, at different levels, of continuity and discontinuity."[5] "Historians," he wrote, "surely must welcome the new category. They

2. I have attempted to summarize the context of this dispute in *Decoding Vatican II: Interpretation and Ongoing Reception*, Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 2014), especially 1–32. See also: Gilles Routhier, "L'herméneutique de Vatican II: Réflexions sur la face cachée d'un débat," *Recherches de sciences religieuses* 100 (2012): 45–63; "The Hermeneutic of Reform as a Task for Theology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 77 (2012): 219–43. See also: Pope Benedict's "Christmas Address to the Roman Curia," (December 22, 2005), at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html; and Joseph A. Komonchak, "Benedict XVI and the Interpretation of Vatican II," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 28 (2007): 323–37.
3. John W. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 3–33; also in *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* ed. David G. Schultenover (New York: Continuum, 2007), 52–91. Citations are taken from the latter edition.
4. John W. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," *Theological Studies* 32 (1971): 573–601 at 589.
5. Benedict XVI, "Christmas Address to the Roman Curia (2005)." Here Pope Benedict reflects at length on how changes in the historical context required rethinking important points of doctrine and church practice, citing as examples the council's teaching on modern scientific knowledge, the relationship between church and state, and the principle of religious liberty.

know the sharp dichotomy of rupture/continuity is never verified in historical events, which are always a mix of the old and the new."[6]

O'Malley's highly readable *What Happened at Vatican II*, published in 2008, draws from a broad scope of historical sources to give us a lively account of a council of reform.[7] He captures the profound sense of historical change that imbues both the conciliar event and its teaching under the triple rubric of "*aggiornamento* (Italian for updating or modernizing), development (an unfolding—in context, sometimes almost the equivalent of progress or evolution), and *ressourcement* (French for, literally, return to the sources)."[8] His approach reflects a keen awareness that in every conciliar event the church is concerned to meet present challenges, and of how its decisions, while orienting the future direction and shape of ecclesial life, remain deeply rooted in tradition.

For almost a half century O'Malley has been urging us to attend more carefully to the "style" of the Second Vatican Council's teaching. "Style," he contends, is not inconsequential, but reflects who one is, one's way of being.[9] The style of Vatican II's documents, he argues, is both the medium and the reflection of its substantive message concerning the nature of the church and its mission. In what follows, I will highlight three principal contributions of O'Malley's scholarship to our understanding of Vatican II, each of which is related to the council's style. First, his earliest reflections on the council point to a new paradigm of reform, one that "treats religious truth in its historical dimension."[10] He contends that this new "style of historical thinking" reflects a paradigm of reform conditioned not only by a regard for what is permanent and continuous with the past, but also by an experience of profound "transformation or even revolution," one that implies "at least a partial rejection of the past in the hope of creating something new."[11] Second, O'Malley draws our attention to the distinctive style of discourse that frames the doctrinal teaching of Vatican II. As we shall see, his insight into the literary form of the council documents is

6. John W. O'Malley, "The Hermeneutic of Reform: A Historical Analysis," *Theological Studies* 73 (2012): 517–46, at 542. See also, Christoph Theolbald, "L'herméneutique de réforme," in *Le concile Vatican II: Quel avenir?* Unam Sanctam. Nouvelle Série 6 (Paris: Cerf, 2015), 129–58.
7. John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). As an indication of its significance, this work has now been translated into no fewer than six languages.
8. John W. O'Malley, "What Happened and Did Not Happen at Vatican II," in *Catholic History for Today's Church: How Our Past Illuminates Our Present* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 115–32 at 119; originally published in *Theology Digest* 53 (2006): 331–44. These categories are explored in greater detail in *What Happened at Vatican II*, 36–43.
9. This insight has been explored further in Joseph Famarée, ed. *Vatican II Comme Style: L'herméneutique théologique du concile*, Unam Sanctam. Nouvelle Série 4 (Paris: Cerf, 2012).
10. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," 584.
11. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," 595.

informed by a careful study of Renaissance and early modern sources. The epideictic style of rhetoric deployed in the documents of Vatican II is meant to call forth and invite an active response on the part of the receivers. Their dialogic style, reflective of Pope John XXIII's "pastoral" intention for the council, is intended to orient the dialogical engagement of the Catholic Church with other Christians, with believers of non-Christian religious traditions and non-believers, with the worlds of the arts and sciences, with the wider culture and with society.[12] Third, O'Malley invites us to consider how the Second Vatican Council stands as a decisive and intentional turn to a constructive engagement with modernity. Through his examination of the Council of Trent[13] as well as the First[14] and Second Vatican Councils,[15] O'Malley offers us significant new insights into the arc of conciliar history in the modern era. A pivotal moment in the history of Catholicism, Vatican II takes up John XXIII's prophetic invitation to place our trust in Christ, the author and center of history.[16] Its ongoing reception requires that we continue to heed this call.

A New Style of Historical Thinking

In a 1971 essay on "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," in the context of what he saw as the "almost despairing confusion" that had ensued in the immediate aftermath of the council, O'Malley observes, "The turbulence into which Vatican II threw the Catholic Church was due not only to the abruptness with which its reform was thrust upon us. It was due as well to the fact that in our consciousness no paradigms of reform were operative which were appropriate to the reality we had begun to experience."[17] There was, he notes, no "consistent theological foundation" for John XXIII's *aggiornamento.* Where the medieval councils of the Western church saw reform as an effort of the church to change the world, the reform

12. In his opening address to the council fathers, John XXIII insisted that the "salient feature" of the council's teaching be in its effort to present the truths of faith "in accord with a magisterium which is primarily pastoral in character." "Opening Address [*Gaudete Mater Ecclesia*]," in *Council Daybook: Vatican II*, 3 vols., ed. Floyd Anderson (Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1966), I: 25–29.
13. John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2013); *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
14. John W. O'Malley, *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
15. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II.*
16. John XXIII, "*Gaudete Mater Ecclesia*," *Council Daybook*, I: 27.
17. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, *Aggiornamento*," 573. O'Malley notes his indebtedness to the work of Bernard J. F. Lonergan in "Existenz and *Aggiornamento*," *Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan, S.J.*, ed. Frederick F. Crowe (New York: Paulist, 1967), 240–51. See also, Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical Mindedness," in *A Second Collection* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 1–10.

of Vatican II was occasioned by change in the world and aimed a resituating the church "into a more effective relationship with the world."[18] The Apostolic Constitution *Humanae Salutis*, published December 25, 1961,[19] the solemn convocation of the council, reflects a "new awareness of the world." Pope John remarked that humanity was "at the threshold of a new era," a theme that would be taken up by the council itself, in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (especially *GS* 4, 54). O'Malley refers to this new consciousness as "the psychological matrix capable of producing the idea of *aggiornamento*." In contrast to previous councils of reform, which focused most often on revisions to the discipline and inner life of the church, Vatican II aimed at renewing the practice and inner life of the Catholic church in view of its engagement with the world. It embraced a more positive evaluation of the world, acknowledged that the church learns and receives from the world in a mutually enriching relationship (*GS* 54–55), and envisioned its mission in terms of service, *presenting* itself as a "help" to a world moving towards its eschatological fulfilment.[20]

This new awareness of the world coincides with the emergence of a new historical consciousness. O'Malley contends that the central problem of Vatican II and of "any Christian reform" is that of change: the relationship of past and present. "How are we to deal with the past, and what legitimate hold does it have on the present? What is historical authenticity and what bearing does it have on the present?"[21] A "classicist" or "substantialist" style of history values permanence and the endurance of some reality, as if untouched by history. O'Malley sees a reflection of such thinking, combined with the idea of divine providence, in early Christian thought. In this view, the purpose of any doctrinal or moral reform is not change, but protection of the enduring substance of dogma, moral teaching, or structure of ecclesiastical government. A medieval form of providentialism regarded God as "the principal agent in history." In this context, reform "consisted in removing threats to the sacred."[22] Later, a "primitivist" style of history characteristic of the Renaissance regarded change as a form of decline, and considered reform or renewal as the return to a pristine form of an earlier golden age.[23] In the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman introduced a theory influenced by "ideas of evolution and organic growth" giving rise to the notion of doctrinal reform "by way of growth or accretion, [yet] never by way of rejecting what has gone before."[24]

While each of these various philosophies of history can be found in aspects of Vatican II's teaching, O'Malley argues that the historical consciousness and self-awareness of the church as an agent in history distinguish it from all previous conciliar events.

18. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," 574.
19. John XXIII, "Pope John Convokes the Second Vatican Council [*Humanae Salutis*]," *Council Daybook*, I: 6–9, at 6.
20. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," 574–75.
21. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," 576–77.
22. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," 591.
23. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," 592–93.
24. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," 594.

Influenced by contemporary philosophies, it considers history as both guided by the Spirit and as a human reality shaped by contingent and sinful human beings. Thus, the past is "desacralized," "deprovidentialized,"[25] and now removed from the "superplan" of some "sacred metahistory."[26] Being so "relativized," the authentic interpretation of history can now proceed with greater humility.

This new critical style of historical thinking introduces the possibility of three shifts which constitute the "revolutionary" character of Vatican II. First, we can now contemplate the possibility of rejecting elements of the past, of changing direction, or of doing otherwise. Second, we admit that no one interpretation of the data of revelation or expression of faith is exhaustive. "Any authenticity … is at least somewhat partial and incomplete."[27] The limitations of human language and of historicity imply a certain provisionality in the expression of doctrine. At the same time, it suggests that we might find a more accurate or adequate expression as we deepen our understanding of revelation. Third, a realistic awareness of our historical condition and the drive for authenticity bring with it a deeper consciousness of ourselves as agents who bring imagination and creativity to the project of reform. The aim is not reform for its own sake. The reforming project is rather driven by a desire to communicate the gospel message more effectively, taking into account the world of the hearers. O'Malley observes that "creativity, which is radically opposed to slavish imitation, implies both utilization of the past and rejection of the past." Its outcome is always "something new."[28] This new style of historical mindedness brings with it the burden of responsibility. He writes, "To a degree inconceivable to previous generations of Catholics, we realize that such a decision and creativity, with its heavy responsibilities, is required. We have a new understanding of what we are, beings of radical historicity. This new understanding of ourselves imposes upon us a new way of thinking and acting about 'reform'."[29]

Rhetorical Style and Substance

In a recent intellectual autobiography O'Malley describes how, while studying a series of sermons preached before the Renaissance popes in the Sistine Chapel, he came across "a treatise on epistolography" in the Vatican Library describing the rhetorical style that had shaped them. He relates how reading this explication led to a kind of a

25. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," 596.
26. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," 592.
27. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," 597. O'Malley notes that a contemporary philosophy of history sees history as a "*human* phenomenon" and the product of "contingencies" (596). This understanding involves a measure of "relativization." It means "that we are free from the past. We are free to appropriate what we find helpful and to reject what we find harmful. We realize, perhaps to our dismay, that we simply cannot repeat the answers of the past, for the whole situation is different. The question is different. We are different" (597).
28. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," 600.
29. O'Malley, "Reform, Historical Consciousness, and Vatican II's *Aggiornamento*," 601.

"Eureka" moment. "All at once I saw how the sermons were put together and why in their aims, their tone, their vocabulary, and their uplifting spiritual message they were so different from medieval sermons. It was the rhetorical form that did it. The form framed and affected everything in them."[30] This discovery is explored in O'Malley's 1979 work, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome*.[31] Its seminal insight would be deepened and later brought to bear in his reflections on the Second Vatican Council. He writes, "Working on [*Praise and Blame*] got me to realize in a new way that in understanding texts, discourses, and people, as much attention must be paid to form and to style as to anything else. Style, I realized, more deeply and experimentally, is not a mere ornament of thought but an expression of meaning. It both manifests deep value systems and helps form them."[32]

In *Praise and Blame* O'Malley uncovers how, in the context of a "crisis of preaching," where the logical procedures of academic reasoning were no longer effective in addressing their audience, the preachers of the papal court turned to a new style of oratory, inciting their listeners to embrace a new worldview and to renew their fidelity to the gospel. Setting aside the literary forms of scholasticism—the reasoned *disputatio*—they opted for the genre of the *genus demonstrativum* found in classical rhetoric. Their sermons were "imbued with the principles of the revived rhetoric of classical antiquity, a rhetoric integral to Renaissance humanism."[33] This new form of oratory was intended to foster a "distinctive religious vision," one that was more positive and centered in the dignity of the human person.[34]

> As the orators indulged in their panegyrics of God, they persuaded their listeners that they were saying something fresh and exciting, no matter how traditional the truths they propounded may have been. They presumably evoked in at least some of those listeners the joy, wonder, and sense of their own dignity that they wanted to evoke, and thus moved them to the practice of good and holy living.[35]

This reform in the style of preaching, a way of "putting old truths into a new and more attractive dress,"[36] was aimed at bringing about a change in the receivers of the message. A "revival of *humanitas*" aimed at rendering the practice of Christianity "more human."[37]

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30. John W. O'Malley, "Conclusion: My Life of Learning," in *Catholic History for Today's Church: How Our Past Illuminates Our Present* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2015), 219. This essay was delivered as an address to the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference in 2006 and was first published in *Catholic Historical Review* 93 (2007): 576–88.
31. John W. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450–1521* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979).
32. O'Malley, "My Life of Learning," 219.
33. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 38.
34. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 238–39.
35. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 240.
36. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 241.
37. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 239.

Similar reflections are brought to bear when O'Malley turns his attention to the history of the Society of Jesus in the 1990s. The sixteenth century was marked by a deep suspicion of the project of Renaissance humanism, often blamed for the decline that gave rise to the conflict of the Reformation. Yet the first Jesuits, he argues, were deeply imbued with habits of early modern thinking. If they eschewed the classical forms of rhetoric, they nonetheless embraced the fundamental impulse to adapt to the world of their hearers. He writes,

> Although the first Jesuits do not seem explicitly to have made the connection, the practice of rhetoric, i.e. oratory, coincided with their "way of proceeding" on another profound and pervasive level. Essential to the orator's success was his ability to be in touch with the feelings and needs of his audience and to adapt himself and his speech accordingly. Beginning with the *Exercises* themselves, the Jesuits were constantly advised by Ignatius to adapt in all their ministries what they said and did to time, circumstances and persons.[38]

John O'Malley's most expansive consideration of the Society of Jesus was published in his 1993 volume, *The First Jesuits*, where his careful study challenges the long-held view of the early Jesuits as the papal shock troops of the Catholic Reform or Counter-Reformation. Instead, he distills a complex image of a group of sixteenth-century men quite unlike any other religious congregation of the period. Theologically, they were skeptical of speculation and abstract medieval categories. Culturally, they were at home in the world, ready to live in solidarity with others rather than in monasteries or convents. In mission they showed themselves ready to adapt to local cultures and languages. In their apostolate of education, they espoused many ideals of the humanist movement, including the disciplines of grammar and rhetoric, and instruction in the classical languages of Greek and Latin. Of their theological culture O'Malley observes:

> Although the Jesuits never worked out a theoretical solution to the problem of making scholastic speculation pastorally meaningful, their practical solution was to translate its teachings into a humanistic rhetoric, which meant its transformation. They probably thought they were doing nothing more than putting old truths into new dress, but any new way of talking means a new way of thinking, a new *forma mentis*.[39]

Among the first principles of this new frame of mind, or new "way of proceeding," was the "imperative for accommodation."[40] The "way" that the first Jesuits understood and carried out their calling, "was the *style*—not a set of mannerisms and not superficial affectation. It was the manifestation of the character and the deepest values and

38. John W. O'Malley, "Renaissance Humanism and the Religious Culture of the First Jesuits," *Heythrop Journal* 31 (1990): 471–87 at 479. See also, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1993), 256.
39. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 255.
40. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 255.

sensibilities of the organization. *Le style est l'homme même.*"[41] O'Malley contends that the style of the early Society of Jesus was much less that of the baroque Counter-Reform than it was a product of early modernity. He paints the first Jesuits as protagonists of Early Modern Catholicism, a period characterized by much greater variety and creative vitality than had been reflected in previous histories.

The same fundamental insights into rhetoric, style, and ways of proceeding form the "premise" of O'Malley's *Four Cultures of the West*, published in 2004, where they are pursued with even greater ease.[42] Here he explores how four distinctive modes of discourse and action have functioned to shape the history of Western Christianity and society. The four cultures include: the prophetic, which is concerned with the need for radical change in social structures; the academic, which strives to understand them; the humanistic, which seeks to mobilize persons to work for the common good; and the culture of art and performance, which celebrates the human condition in an aesthetic mode. Each of these cultures represents a mode of being, a way of being human or Christian. O'Malley comments, by "cultures ... I mean especially configurations of patterns of discourse and thus expressions of *style* in the profoundest sense of the word. *Le style, c'est l'homme.*"[43]

The method honed through these studies of Renaissance and early modern history, and which O'Malley calls a "rudimentary Formgeschichte,"[44] is applied to his reading of Vatican II's unique style of discourse and its connection to the project of reform. Already in 1987, he had expressed his "surprise at how little study has been directed to the rhetoric of the council, when we have learned over and over again that content cannot be divorced from style."[45] He noted that while the teaching of previous councils had been written in the "terse form of the canon," Vatican II

> forged almost overnight a new language for conciliar, even theological discourse. That discourse attempted to appeal to affect, to reconcile opposing viewpoints rather than vindicate one of them, and was notably exhortatory, almost homiletic in its style. That style was calculated not so much to judge and legislate as to prepare individuals for a new mindset with which to approach all aspects of their religious lives. The traditional function of a council thus in effect underwent a notable reformulation.[46]

41. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 370. The expression, "Le style c'est l'homme," often repeated by O'Malley, is commonly attributed to the "Discours sur style," delivered by the French naturalist George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, on August 25, 1753, as he took his seat in the Académie Française.
42. John W. O'Malley, *Four Cultures of the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
43. O'Malley, *Four Cultures*, 5.
44. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame*, 38.
45. John W. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Historical Perspectives on its Uniqueness and Interpretation," in *Vatican II, the Unfinished Agenda: A Look to the Future*, Lucien Richard, Daniel T. Harrington, John W. O'Malley, eds. (New York: Paulist, 1987), 22–32 at 27. See also: "Vatican II," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* XVII (1979), 687–90; "Developments, Reforms, and Two Great Reformations: Toward a Historical Assessment of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 32 (1983): 373–406.
46. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Historical Perspectives," 27.

Interpreters of the council's teaching, he argued, could not do justice to the content of the documents if they neglected its style. Harking back to his previous insight, he asked, "If the style is the man [*sic*], can we not assume, at least for the sake of discussion, that to some extent the style is the council—and then, by extension, that the style is the church?"[47]

O'Malley reflects on the complex of continuities and discontinuities that characterize the Second Vatican Council, in his celebrated 2005 essay, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" returning to the question of interpretation. Here he notes the significant changes reflected in the council's invitation to all the baptized faithful to study the Word of God, and in its embrace of ecumenism and of the principle of religious liberty. These teachings were vigorously debated and reflect a reversal of previous positions in official Catholic teaching. He observes, "These can be called changes in content. I am asking, however, that we shift the focus from content to form. Even though message and medium are one reality, I am asking in so far as it is possible [that] we shift the focus from *what* the council said to *how* it said it. This means engaging in form analysis."[48]

More than any other author, John O'Malley has drawn our attention to the unique literary form, the genre of Vatican II's documents, for which there is no parallel in conciliar history. Where previous ecumenical councils spoke in "legal-ese" and addressed themselves primarily to clerics—defining, declaring, and condemning—Vatican II opted for a prophetic, invitatory style, spoke to the laity and to all people of good will, and chose the language of mercy over that of condemnation. Following the orientation set down by John XXIII for an exercise of the teaching office that was "pastoral" in style,[49] the council texts adopted a "panegyric" or "epideictic form"

47. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Historical Perspectives," 27.
48. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" 68.
49. For a more systematic reflection on the "pastorality" or pastoral character of the council and its teaching, see: Giuseppe Alberigo, "Critères herméneutiques pour une histoire de Vatican II," *A la veille du Concile Vatican II. Vota et réactions en Europe dans le catholicisme oriental*, M. Lamberigts and C. Soetens, eds. (Leuven: Bibliotheek van de Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid, 1992), 12–23; Christoph Theobald defines it in the following terms: "il n'y a pas d'annonce de l'Évangile de Dieu sans prise en compte du destinataire . . . 'cela' dont il est question dans l'annonce est déjà à l'œuvre en lui, de sorte qu'il peut y répondre en toute liberté" ("there is no proclamation of the gospel of God without taking the receiver into account," adding, "that which is announced is already at work in the receiver, such that he or she might respond in all freedom" [my free translation]). See: "C'est aujourd'hui le 'moment favorable'. Pour un diagnostic théologique du temps présent," in *Une nouvelle chance pour l'Évangile. Vers une pastorale d'engendrement* (Bruxelles: Lumen Vitae, 2004), 55; "Le concile et la 'forme pastorale' de la doctrine," in *La parole du Salut*, B. Sesboüé and C. Theobald, eds. (Paris: Desclee, 1996), 470–510; *La reception de Vatican II. I. Accéder à la source*, Unam Sanctam, Nouvelle Série 1 (Paris: Cerf, 2009), 233–58. Gilles Routhier shows that concern for the receivers of the council's message was amply present in the minds of the pope, bishops, and theologians in the period leading up to the opening of the council: "A l'origine de la pastoralité à Vatican II," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 67 (2011): 443–59.

steeped in the language of the Scriptures and the Church Fathers. O'Malley had seen this move before in his studies of Italian Renaissance preaching and of Erasmus' effort to bring the style of the Church Fathers into sixteenth-century theological discourse.[50] "The appropriation of the epideictic genre redefined what the sermon was to do: rather than proving points, it was now to touch hearts and move hearers to action for their fellow human beings."[51]

In like fashion, the documents of Vatican II "hold up ideals and then often draw conclusions from them and spell out consequences" or lay out "responsibilities." These are presented "not as a code of conduct to be enforced but as [an] ideal to be striven for."[52] This new genre is reflected in the absence of "words of alienation, exclusion, enmity, words of threat and intimidation, words of surveillance and punishment" that had been characteristic of previous teaching styles. "Top-down words" have been displaced by "horizontal words" (brothers and sisters; people of God); "reciprocity words" (dialogue; collegiality); "friendship words" (human family) and "humility words" (pilgrim, servant). A focus on external comportment has given way to a concern for "interiority" exemplified in the council's call to holiness and its insistence on the primacy of conscience.[53] He maintains that students of the council's history and interpreters of its teaching must take full account of its rhetorical and literary style:

> [S]tyle was a big issue at the council, an issue fought on the seemingly superficial battleground of the vocabulary and literary genre of the documents, with protagonists perhaps not always realizing the implications of what was at stake. The literary style, that is to say, was but the surface expression of something meant to sink into the very soul of the church and of every Catholic. It was much more than a tactic or strategy, more than simply the adoption of a more "pastoral language." It was a language event. The language indicated and induced a shift in values and priorities.[54]

O'Malley helps us to see that style is not accidental. It expresses a way of being, what one is in one's "truest and deepest self." By adopting this style, he contends, "Vatican II redefined what a council is." No longer taking "the Roman senate as its implicit model," its model "is much closer to guide, partner, friend, and inspired helpmate than it [is] to lawmaker, police-officer, or judge."[55] The council's language, writes O'Malley, "indicated and induced an inner conversion."[56] The style of Vatican

50. John W. O'Malley, "Grammar and Rhetoric in the Pietas of Erasmus," *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 18 (1988): 81–98; John W. O'Malley, ed., *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); "Erasmus and Vatican II: Interpreting the Council," in *Cristianesimo nella storia: saggi in onore di Giuseppe Alberigo*, ed. A. Melloni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), 195–211.
51. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" 74.
52. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" 76.
53. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" 78–80.
54. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 11–12.
55. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" 83.
56. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 12.

II is an expression of a new way of being in council, a new way of being church, and a new way of being in the world.

Catholicism and Modernity

The Second Vatican Council stands out in the arc of conciliar history in the modern era as the first to engage constructively with modernity, understood not simply as the purveyor of a dangerous liberalism that threatens the foundations of faith, but now seen positively and as bearing in potency an ethic of authenticity that resonates with the Christian message. In the year 2000, O'Malley published an extended argument for reframing the history of the Council of Trent, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era.* The four-volume work of Hubert Jedin, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient*,[57] had set the standard for the study of Trent for more than half a century. Jedin framed his interpretation of Trent as both a "self-reform" or spiritual renewal of the members of the Catholic Church, and a "self-defense" of Catholic doctrine and structure against the critique of Protestantism. He summed up the period under the dual categories of "Catholic Reform and Counter Reformation." Jedin further introduced the notion of a "Tridentine era" where the "supernatural mystery" of the council spilled over in such a way as to become the "defining element" of Catholicism in the post-conciliar period.[58]

O'Malley bristles at the manner in which Jedin's theological value judgment had led to a kind of sacralizing narrative, one that risked reducing all aspects of Catholic life to the disciplining of the hierarchy or to the conflict of the Reformation. Jedin's characterization had exceeded the bounds of dispassionate critical history. Without entirely setting aside Jedin's characterization of key movements in the sixteenth-century council and its subsequent reception, O'Malley argues convincingly that the term "Early Modern Catholicism" be added to the canon of categories for interpreting the Council of Trent. "Because it is not as susceptible to reductionism as [other categories]," he maintains, "it more easily allows that important influences on religious institutions and mentalities were at work in early modern culture that did not originate in religions and church but that nonetheless helped to refashion them."[59] The historian

57. Hubert Jedin, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient*, 4 vols. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1949–1975). Only the first two volumes have been translated into English: *A History of the Council of Trent.* Translated by Ernest Graf (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1957–1961). See also Jedin's seminal essay, *Katholische Reformation oder Gegenreformation?* (Lucerne: Josef Stocker, 1946).
58. O'Malley, *Trent and All That*, 59.
59. O'Malley, *Trent and All That*, 142. He first reports his unease with Jedin's classification, noting its influence on the characterization of the Jesuits as Reformers and Counter-Reformers, in "Was Ignatius of Loyola a Church Reformer? How to Look at Early Modern Catholicism," *Saints or Devils Incarnate?* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 71–87; An earlier version of this paper appeared as "Was Ignatius of Loyola a Reformer? How to Look at Early Modern Catholicism," *Catholic Historical Review* 77 (1991): 177–93. See "Preface," *Early Modern Catholicism: Essays in Honour of John W. O'Malley*, Kathleen M. Comerford and Hilmar M. Pabel, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), x, n. 3.

ought not to ignore the ways that the evolutions of society and culture shape the life of the church and call for a response—however wittingly or unwittingly.

In O'Malley's account of Trent, one is hard-pressed to find an explicit or extended reflection on the council's relationship to early modernity. He notes, however, that the council fathers were so absorbed by the project of reforming the life of the clergy and restating the doctrine of justification and the sacraments that they paid scant attention to all that was new in the sixteenth-century Catholic Church—new forms of religious life, the significant role of confraternities of the laity, missionary expansion in the new world, and the specter of religious war. He further observes how the trauma of the Reformation conflict was met by a substantialist historiography. "In reaction to the Reformer's accusation that the church had early on so completely broken with the Gospel that its subsequent history was a distortion of it, Catholic apologists rushed to assert the church's unbroken continuity with the apostolic era . . . No previous council had ever so often and so explicitly insisted on its teaching's continuity with the authentic Christian past."[60] Seemingly oblivious to early modern movements in church and society, Trent seized uncritically upon the stable anchor of the apostolic age.

Conciliar resistance to modernity reached its apogee in the First Vatican Council. Shaken by the French Revolution and the subsequent political upheavals of the nineteenth century, the council bishops were unprepared to face the questions raised by the modern era. In his 2018 volume on Vatican I, O'Malley writes that Pope Pius IX and many other bishops "meant the council to be a solemn reaffirmation of the *Syllabus*, that comprehensive rejection of modernity."[61] Its Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*, failed to take the measure of questions concerning the contingency of the Scriptures, church doctrine, and practice raised by a new body of more historically minded theology. *Pastor Aeternus*' assertion of papal primacy was ultimately a response to the crisis of authority in the modern world, including the diminished presence and influence of the church in centers of geopolitical power.

Vatican I's lack of historical perspective and its failure to engage directly with new questions raised by the separation of church and state or by the scientific and industrial revolutions might be seen as contributing to the conditions that gave rise to the Modernist crisis in the early twentieth century. O'Malley remarks that the papal encyclical was enlisted in the "culture wars of the first order" as Catholicism sought to respond to the antagonistic ideology of "Liberalism."[62]

In his presentation of the councils of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II, O'Malley dedicates considerable space to the prehistory of each conciliar event, showing how context shapes the agenda. *What Happened at Vatican II* contains a substantial chapter on the "long nineteenth century," tracing the period from the French Revolution to Vatican II and including the First Vatican Council.[63] This helps the reader to see the

60. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened?* 273–74.
61. O'Malley, *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church*, 226–27.
62. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 55. On this period and its impact in the world of theology, see also Joseph A. Komonchak, "Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 18 (1997), 353–85.
63. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 53–92.

Second Vatican Council within the longer arc of Catholicism's struggle to respond adequately to the crisis of modernity. Few consider Vatican II as a response to a pressing crisis within the church. The reasons advanced for the convocation of the council did not suggest an immediate crisis. Nonetheless, O'Malley contends:

> The council met in a period of profound crisis not only for Catholicism but for all Christian Churches. It was a crisis all the more serious for not being clearly perceived as such at the time—or at least not clearly named. Yet, the crisis was real, pervasive, and far-reaching in its ramifications—perhaps the most serious and radical in the history of Christianity. We can call it a crisis of modernity.[64]

In its resistance to, and estrangement from the modern world, Catholicism had essentially rendered itself incapable of speaking in a meaningful or credible way to those it hoped to evangelize. This changed at Vatican II, O'Malley contends, when "a stance of reconciliation replaced a stance of alienation."[65]

The complex social and cultural reality of modernity constituted the immediate context of the Second Vatican Council. John XXIII suggested as much in his convocation of the council. He wrote, "Today the church is witnessing a crisis underway within society. While humanity is on the edge of a new era, tasks of immense gravity and amplitude await the church, as in the most tragic periods of history. It is a question in fact of bringing the modern world into contact with the vivifying and perennial energies of the gospel."[66] In the face of a world humbled by the devastation of two world wars and the annihilation of six million Jews, fraught with the tensions of the Cold War and the wane of colonialism, and stirred to new solidarities by the development of new means of travel and communication, Pope John maintained that the church itself had been "transformed and renewed," and was entering into the council "more conscious of its responsibilities."[67] Remarkably, he made this affirmation before a single bishop had arrived in Rome to participate in the deliberations of the council. It was with this profound sense of how the world had changed that Pope John XXIII would invite the council fathers to adopt a new way of exercising their pastoral teaching office, calling them to adopt a new language—the medicine of mercy and inclusion rather than the idiom of condemnation and exclusion—in sum, a new style.

In contrast to the long nineteenth century where the Catholic Church mounted a concerted campaign of intransigent resistance to modernity, the Second Vatican Council opted for "the art of persuasion, the art of finding common ground,"[68] carrying forward

64. John W. O'Malley, "Vatican II Revisited as Reconciliation: The Francis Factor," in *The Legacy of Vatican II*, ed. Massimo Faggioli and Andrea Vicini (New York: Paulist, 2015), 3–25 at 7.
65. O'Malley, "Vatican II Revisited as Reconciliation," 7.
66. John XXIII, *Humanae Salutis*, I: 6. Historians of Vatican II increasingly acknowledge the decisive significance of the letters and speeches of John XXIII from this period in setting the course of the council.
67. John XXIII, *Humanae Salutis*, I: 6. I have attempted to explore this new ecclesial consciousness in greater detail in *Decoding Vatican II*, 77–92.
68. John W. O'Malley, "The Style of Vatican II: The 'How' of the Church Changed during the Council," *America* (24 February 2003), 12–15, at 14.

the radical message of the gospel by means of a mutual dialogue with society and contemporary culture, now understanding itself as deeply rooted in that same world. Once closed in upon itself and overly self-referential, the church now opted to turn toward the world in service to humanity.[69] A new missional consciousness is most apparent in Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World where the council, observing the scale of profound social cultural transformation in mid-twentieth century, affirms that the whole human community "finds itself today in a new stage of human history," one that has profound effect for the life of the church (*GS* 4). The awareness of living in a "new age" of human history, one where human persons are newly conscious of "being architects and authors" of culture, of shaping the world in which they live for good or for ill, the council envisions the mission of the Church in terms of solidarity: "We are witnesses that a new humanism is being born in which the human is defined above all in terms of our responsibility to our brothers and sisters in history" (*GS* 55).

Neil Ormerod rightly contends that Catholicism's long resistance to change and to the many forces that were reshaping the world amounted to "a missiological failure." At the same time, he affirms that the church's recognition of the missiological need for change at Vatican II was neither "a blanket endorsement of the modern world," nor an uncritical decision to conform with every aspect of modernity.[70] Indeed, such an engagement demands a practice of discernment capable of distinguishing the works of God's Spirit in all that is good and true from that which diminishes human dignity, divides human communities, and harms the integrity of God's creation. O'Malley characterizes Catholicism's new missional stance in the context of modernity as a movement of "reconciliation," one that is deeply rooted in a theology of incarnation. The rhetorical style of the council's teaching, he maintains, "implicitly inclined the council to favor . . . a theology more inclined to emphasize the goodness of creation and the incarnation than the fall and the atonement . . . more inclined to reconciliation with human culture than alienation from it. In that theology, grace is not alien to nature but perfects it. It is reconciled with nature."[71]

Conclusion

John W. O'Malley has consistently argued that "no other aspect of Vatican II set it off so from all previous councils" than its style. The council fathers' choice of rhetorical style and of language points to a concern with "*how* we want to be, how [the church] is supposed to be," a new way of proceeding, "a new ecclesiastical style"[72] that was to

69. This turn is evident in the "Message to Humanity" issued by the bishops in the early days of the council (October 20, 1962) which affirms that the church exists not to "dominate" but "to serve." In *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: America Press, 1966), 3–7 at 5.
70. Neil Ormerod, "The Times They Are A-Changin'," *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* 153–83, at 167–70.
71. O'Malley, "Vatican II Revisited as Reconciliation," 20.
72. O'Malley, "The Style of Vatican II," 14.

be reflected in the structures and practices of the church at every level. We have attempted to explore this insight through an examination of his writings on the historical style of the council, on the literary form of its teaching, and on the struggle of the Catholic Church to make peace with the social and cultural context of modernity. In so doing, we have suggested that any appreciation of O'Malley's work on Vatican II is enriched by a consideration of the wider horizon of his writings on various "philosophies of history," on the role of rhetoric in theology and preaching in the Renaissance and early modern periods, and on the categories of classification for the periods of church history. An exploration of O'Malley's sustained concern with the question of "style" across the broad trajectory of his historical scholarship beginning from his works on the Renaissance, to his study of the first Jesuits and the Councils of Trent and Vatican I, enables us to appreciate more fully the magnitude of his insight and the roots of his contribution to the hermeneutics of Vatican II. His reflections on the substantive implications of Vatican II's style offer an interpretative key to the radical character of the Second Vatican Council and its continuing significance for the church in our day.

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