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History of the Second Vatican Council

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Dries Bosschaert

This article provides a historical-theological picture of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II). By examining the main phases leading up to the council, the actual proceedings of Vatican II, and its reception, the article will highlight the main actors and debates that shaped the council's theology. In light of the centrally defined axes that make up the four conciliar constitutions – *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Dei Verbum*, *Lumen Gentium*, and *Gaudium et Spes* – the development around the sacramental understanding of the church, revelation, ecclesiology, and the relationship between the church and the modern world will form a common thread in this contribution. At the same time, however, particular attention will be paid to the other theological themes debated at the council, which are reflected in the sixteen conciliar documents. In particular, the development of thinking on ecumenism, religious freedom, and the relationship to non-Christian religions will be highlighted, since these themes were not only particular points of debate at the council but would also define discussions around the post-conciliar reception – a reception that took place worldwide and was shaped by the particularities of each context, but was equally determined by the historical/theological debate surrounding the hermeneutics of Vatican II.

Keywords: Second Vatican Council, Vatican II, Roman Catholic Church, Church councils, Conciliar studies, Post-conciliar reception, Church and modernity

Table of contents

1 Historical context

1.1 Long term

1.2 Medium term

1.3 Short term

2 The announcement and preparation

3 The actors

4 The history of Vatican II

4.1 First conciliar period and intersession

4.2 Second period and intersession

4.3 Third period and intersession

4.4 Fourth period

5 Doctrinal results

5.1 Key theological orientations

5.2 The constitutions: the dogmatic axis of the council

5.3 The nine conciliar decrees: initiating practical implementation

5.4 The three declarations: concise position statements

6 Receptions of Vatican II

7 List of Second Vatican Council documents

1 Historical context

1.1 Long term

The historical background of the theology of Vatican II can be situated in a long-, medium- and short-term history. The long-term history behind Vatican II begins, for some, with the French Revolution in 1789 and the way in which it heightened the tensions between the Church and its doctrine with modern political states and Enlightenment ideals. This interaction, however, played out significantly in the long nineteenth century. Indeed, under the influence of the Restoration, traditionalism gained a foothold in Catholicism, thus paving the way for the rise of ultramontanism (strong emphasis on papal centralized authority) and an emerging neo-scholastic theology. Despite Catholicism's political struggles with liberalism, Enlightenment ideals, and rationalism, nineteenth-century Catholicism was equally marked by a broad religious revival (particularly in the mid-nineteenth century) that meant exponential growth for religious orders and congregations, and spurred on the laity and their popular beliefs and devotions. All this came to a head during the pontificate of Pius IX who, strongly influenced by the revolutions of 1848, made the fight against modernity (including liberalism) central to his pontificate, as shown in the *Syllabus Errorum* – the appendix to the *Quanta Cura* encyclical issued on 8 December 1864. This also strongly marked, after years of Tridentine Catholicism, the convocation of the First Vatican Council (Vatican I, 1869–1870). On the theological level, as expressed in *Dei Filius*, this council was keeping the middle ground between rationalism and traditionalism in understanding revelation, and on the ecclesiological level, *Pastor Aeternus* defined papal primacy and infallibility. The premature conclusion of this council due to the capture of Rome by the Risorgimento troops and the subsequent unresolved 'Roman question' determined the relations with the modern states for the decades to come. Equally decisive was the pontificate of Leo XIII. His various encyclicals showed a broader policy of '*ralliement*', that is, the rapprochement between church and state, during this pontificate. Indeed, *Aeterni Patris* (1879) gave impetus to neo-scholasticism and the development of neo-Thomism via the return to the texts of Thomas Aquinas; *Rerum novarum* (1891) inaugurated a tradition of Catholic social teaching that aimed to deal with the 'social question' spurred by the second industrial revolution, and *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) promoted the study of the Bible with the inclusion of critical methods. With the pontificate of Pius X, tying in with the policies of his namesake predecessor, and its defining fight against 'modernism' the theological matrix for understanding theological development in the twentieth century (cf. Étienne Fouilloux) was set.

1.2 Medium term

In the medium term, the theology of Vatican II was determined by the developments of church and theology during the interwar period, the aftermath of the Second World War,

and the context of the Cold War; a period that was encompassed by the long pontificate of Pius XII. Within the Church – but in close contact with sociocultural developments and interactions with other Christian churches and other religions – developments often played out around different movements; in particular, the liturgical movement, the lay apostolate movement, the ecumenical movement, and the biblical movement. Theologically, this was all held together by movements of *ressourcement* and renewal. Underlying the various movements, one can see a renewed study of biblical, liturgical, and Thomistic/Patristic sources enabling a more historically-subject oriented theology in line with current times. The '*nouvelle théologie*' is often used to showcase this development. The current emerged in the French-speaking theological context and stood for a revived theology that sparked a new contact with faith and life. It is mainly associated with the renewal that took place at the Dominican study house Le Saulchoir under the rectorship of Marie-Dominique Chenu in collaboration with Yves Congar and Henri-Marie Féret. Here, the historical study of Thomas Aquinas and a renewed dialogue with modern philosophy were central components. Secondly, a similar project was pursued at the Jesuit study house La Fourvière by Henri De Lubac, Henri Bouillard, and Jean Daniélou based mainly on a renewed patristic study. However, it should not be overlooked that there never was an organized theological movement – hence also the label *nouvelle théologie* used mainly by its then opponents to easily condemn certain innovative tendencies – but it was rather part of a broader anthropological turn in mid-twentieth-century theology in which the acceptance of historicity was a key element. The magisterium's acceptance of these developments was mixed. Relying on the centralized church image of Vatican I in particular, the Roman neo-scholastic theology and its representatives, especially at the Gregorian University, such as Réginald Garrigou-Lagrance, regarded these developments with suspicion; the aforementioned even calling the '*nouvelle théologie*' a return to 'modernism'.

Several of these movements gained significant momentum after World War II. Neo-Thomism itself, in particular through the work of the French philosophers Jacques Maritain (especially his *L'Humanisme Intégral*, 1936) and Raïssa Maritain had found its way to the general public and also led to new artistic expressions. Incorporated by the representatives of *L'Art Sacré*, this led to a new Catholic self-expression in post-war church architecture. With the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), Pius XII had given leeway to the historical-critical method in exegesis. Likewise, the encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947) reinforced the liturgical movement's call for a spiritual *ressourcement* of the liturgy and active participation of the laity, as advocated by Romano Guardini and Dom Lambert Beauduin. The pivotal moment seemed to be, however, the year 1950, proclaimed a Holy Year by Pope Pius XII. For the first time, a dogma was defined with papal infallibility, the dogma of the Assumption of Mary. At the same time, also the encyclical *Humani Generis* was promulgated, warning against various deviations in academic disciplines, including

an expression of views on evolution within biology and a repeated condemnation of 'new' developments. With the various international congresses and gatherings organized in Rome on the occasion of the Holy Year, it was also a pivotal moment in the further stirring up of Catholic internationalism.

This played out in particular through the World Congresses for the Lay Apostolate (1951, 1957), but equally through the transnational activities of Catholic organizations in which the Organisations Internationales Catholiques (OIC) played a central role. These developments helped to further diversify forms of Catholic Action with movements such as the Legion of Mary. But perhaps of even greater importance was the breakthrough of specialized Catholic Action, which did not work at the parish level, but was organized according to specific social groups, broken down, for example, by gender or social class. The Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne (Young Christian Workers), founded by the Belgian priest Joseph Cardijn, functioned as a role model. The movement swiftly spread internationally and managed to achieve the emancipation of lay people through the 'see-judge-act' method. It taught young workers to discern their social context and the problems they faced (see), evaluate them according to the gospel and the Church's teaching (judge), and then proceed to action (act); brought together in small study circles, it offered them an opportunity to discuss this with each other and thus shape a common apostolate.

1.3 Short term

In the short term, Vatican II can be situated within the long 1960s, a period defined by scholars such as Hugh McLeod (2007) as a time of rapid developments in the social and ecclesiastical spheres – especially in Western Europe, with major implications for Christendom. It was a period marked by major contradictions: increased economic prosperity but equally a greater awareness of world poverty; a great belief in scientific progress yet under the shadow of nuclear war; the belief in a unified humanity under the shadow of the struggle for decolonization. The latter increased in importance exponentially with seventeen African countries gaining independence in 1960. On the world stage, the Berlin crisis (1961) and the Cuban missile crisis (1962) brought Cold War tensions between John F. Kennedy, the first Catholic president of the United States, and Nikita Khrushchev, Chairman of the Soviet Union, to an unprecedented height. Increased affluence and urbanization that had started in the 1950s disrupted the classical socialization of people into Catholicism that so often characterized rural communities.

Moreover, the first signs of secularization were noted in the years before among the working class in works such as Yvan Daniel and Henri Godin's *La France, Pays de Mission?* (1943) now continued rapidly at all levels of society. Christianity in general, and Catholicism in particular, were pushed back from the public sphere into the private sphere. The second sexual revolution, in which the commercialization of the contraceptive pill in

1960 played a particular role, also put increasing pressure on the Catholic view of family and sexuality morality. Most importantly, however, was that on 9 October 1958 the long pontificate of Pope Pius XII came to an end and Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was elected as new pope on 28 October, taking the papal name John XXIII.

2 The announcement and preparation

On 25 January 1959, during a meeting at the end of the International Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Pope John XXIII announced a threefold plan for his pontificate: to organize a synod for the diocese of Rome, to issue a new code of canon law, and to convene an ecumenical council. Despite the never realized plans to convoke a council under the pontificates of Pius XI and Pius XII and the long shadow of the unfinished First Vatican Council, the plan was met with surprise amongst the cardinals, but would soon invigorate Catholics worldwide. At an organizational level, an Ante-Preparatory Commission was established on 17 May 1959. Together with the secretaries of the Roman Congregations, its president, Secretary of State Domenico Tardini, and its secretary, auditor of the Roman Rota and Professor of Canon Law at the *Lateranum*, Pericle Felici, would hold the responsibility over the preparation of the council. Their major act was sending the letter (18 June 1959) to the global episcopate to submit their expectations and wishes for this upcoming council in 'absolute freedom'. In the following months, the Commission received ten *vota* from the different departments of the Roman Curia, fifty-one *vota* of the Catholic Universities and Faculties of Theology, 1,998 *vota* from the resident and titular bishops, and finally 101 *vota* from the Generals of Religious Orders and Congregations. All these *vota* were brought together in an *Analyticus conspectus consiliorum et votorum quae ab Episcopis et Praelatis data sunt* (An Analytical View of the Councils and Vows given by Bishops and Prelates), which formed a rather heterogenous basis for the work of the preparatory commissions. Coming from around the world and mostly expressing intra-ecclesial matters, the *vota* were for a long time considered an expression of the situation of the Catholic Church on the eve of the council; but because of conformity and the power balances at stake in the communication with the Roman Curia, this view has been strongly nuanced in contemporary research, as well as the view that this could provide a truthful glimpse into the ecclesiastical, cultural, and social situation of the different regions.

On 5 June 1960, with the motu proprio *Superno Dei Nutu*, the actual preparation took off. In addition to the Central Preparatory Commission to oversee the work, ten Preparatory Commissions were installed, their presidents being the heads of the Roman Curia. The Theological Commission was chaired by Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani. Among these commissions, the biggest novelty, without counterpart in the Roman Curia, was the Preparatory Commission on the Apostolate of the Laity. This development was clearly the result of the growing importance of lay apostolate in Catholicism in the preceding decades. In addition, three secretariats were set up: the Secretariat for Economic and Technical

Questions, the Secretariat for the Supervision of Publications and Entertainment, and the Secretariat for the Unity of Christians. The latter met the ecumenical aspirations for this council of John XXIII. Until the start of the council – which was actually convened officially in December 1961 with the Apostolic Constitution *Humanae salutis* – these preparatory commissions and secretariats were respectively responsible for drafting what would eventually become seventy-two schemata based on the *vota* and the practical preparation. Beyond the organization in Rome, the anticipation of the council, shaped the minds of Catholics globally and raised expectations of a new era for the Church. The *vota* had been an opportunity for some bishops to organize surveys in their dioceses; for theologians and other academics, an incentive to redirect their theological reflections. Equally, bottom-up expectations were created, driven by pastoral letters addressed to the faithful by their bishops or by the appeals for prayer for the success of the coming council, as launched by John XXIII on 27 April 1959.

3 The actors

The theology and unfolding of the Second Vatican Council was the result of many actors. As those who held the authority to participate in an ecumenical council, the Council Fathers played the most significant role. Among those who participated as Council Fathers, this council was unique. More than 2,000 Council Fathers took part in each of the council's four periods: 2,449 in period I; 2,488 in period II; 2,466 in period III; and 2,636 in period IV. This number, however, was only a fraction of the cardinals, patriarchs, residential and titular bishops, abbots, and superior generals of the religious orders that could participate (cf. Code of Canon Law and *Ordo Conciliarum*). Among the bishops, the Eastern rite bishops – including the six Catholic patriarchs of the Armenian, Chaldean, Maronite, Melkite, Syrian, and Coptic Church – were a notable group.

In the way that the conciliar dynamics played out, it is clear that sociability played a major role in the collaboration of the Council Fathers. This collaboration was, in the first place, based on shared nationality or language, foreshadowing the intensified importance of national bishops' conferences after Vatican II. Among the bishops' conferences that raised their profile most were those that were greater in number and already had a long tradition of working as conferences, such as the French, German, Italian, and Spanish bishops. However, the '*squadra belga*' – the efficient and successful cooperation of Belgian bishops and theologians within the assembly – also made it clear that smaller national groups could play a significant role as well. Despite the global nature of Vatican II, with Council Fathers from the world Church present, and a notable contribution from some episcopates such as the Chilean and Indian bishops, this council still remained dominated by the Western European church. Indeed, many of the Council Fathers had received their theological training in Western Europe or had been influenced by this theology, they were often themselves descended from the West as missionary bishops and relied strongly on

the large presence of Western European theologians in Rome and the financial means of the *Propaganda Fidei*.

Some Council Fathers formed collaborative groups based on common interests. Thus, the Coetus Internationalis Patrum came to the fore as bringing together the strongest and most consistent voices of the conciliar minority, such as Archbishops Geraldo de Proença Sigaud, Marcel Lefebvre, and Luigi Maria Carli. Equally, groups like the 'Church of the Poor' can be noted. Inspired by Paul Gauthier, this group gathered Council Fathers who pursued a poor church that serves the poor, a position they took up as a kind of manifesto in the Pact of the Catacombs (16 November 1965). Their aspirations were expressed symbolically when Paul VI renounced the papal tiara and donated the proceeds from its sale to the poor.

In addition to the Council Fathers were the theological experts, the *periti*, who assisted in their work. They were divided into two categories: those appointed as *periti* of the council and those appointed as *periti* of particular Council Fathers. Only with this official appointment were they allowed to attend debates in the conciliar *aula* (council chamber) and be present at meetings of the commissions, where, after being designated by the commissions members, they could also take the floor. Particularly linked to these commissions and thus the redaction of certain schemata, they performed much of the drafting and revision work. Within these commissions, they could also take up the role of secretary. As the example of German Jesuit Sebastian Tromp, secretary of the Doctrinal Commission, makes clear, this allowed them not only to play a central role in the committees but also in cultivating the relationships between them. Finally, there were those theologians who assisted bishops in a personal capacity, provided advice, and were active in Rome (for example, giving evening lectures, among other things). This category included Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, who never received an official appointment despite repeated attempts to gain one, and the Swiss theologian Hans Küng, who never sought such an appointment because he believed it would jeopardize his theological independence and freedom to act. The *periti's* influence on this council was extensive, with the question sometimes asked whether this was not more the council of the theologians than the bishops.

Based on Pope John XXIII's ecumenical focus, an invitation had been extended to other Christian churches to attend the conciliar proceedings. The representatives they sent, as a result, participated as 'non-Catholic observers'. They fell under the responsibility of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, under the guidance of its president Augustine Bea. Among them there were two groups: the delegate observers who functioned as representatives of their respective churches, and the guests who took part *ad personam*. For example, Lukas Vischer attended the Ecumenical Council of Churches; the Lutheran Oscar Cullmann and Russian Orthodox theologians Nicholas Arseniev and Alexander Schmemmann

attended as guests. By the final period of the council, their number had increased to 106, with a majority coming from Protestant churches and a minority from Orthodox and Eastern Churches. This situation was primarily caused by the initial hesitation of the Patriarchate of Constantinople to send a representative. This was rectified from the third period onwards, when André Scrima started to attend as a personal representative of Athenagoras. Although being invited as passive spectators initially, through the mediation of the Secretariat that provided practical, linguistic, and theological support, they emerged as a key group guarding the ecumenical principles of this council.

The last group allowed to attend the session in *aula* were the 'lay auditors'. Although the French philosopher Jean Guitton had been present during the first session on special invitation by John XXIII, it was only in the second session that thirteen lay men were officially appointed to attend the council. Many of them came from international Catholic organizations or had been active in Catholic lay apostolate movements. Symbolic in that sense was the position of Vittorino Veronese, former director of UNESCO and president of the first two World Congresses of Lay Apostolate. It should be pointed out that they took part in the council *ad personam* (on an individual basis) and not as representatives of their respective organizations. In the case of August Vanistendael, General Secretary of the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions, this even led to discussions with the organization itself. From the third session onwards, after calls by several Council Fathers, women were also included when the number of lay auditors was expanded. These included both lay women and women in religious orders: for example, Rosemary Goldie; Pilar Bellosillo, president of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations; the economist Barbara Ward Jackson; and Chair of the US Conference of Major Superiors of Women, Sister Mary Luke Tobin. At the end of the council, fifty-two lay auditors had been appointed.

In addition to these officially appointed participants, two additional groups present in Rome need to be mentioned. First of all, the global press that had come to Rome to report on the council contributed strongly to its global outreach. In contrast to the previous council, news of the Second Vatican Council reached living rooms simultaneously through radio and television. In addition to the official press office, the press also organized itself internationally, on the basis of previous years of collaboration, with a clear role for editors of the journals connected to the *Rencontres Internationales d'Informateurs Religieux*. Nor can we ignore the many people behind the scenes who made the conciliar work possible. In particular, think of the practical organization that involved converting the nave of St. Peter's Basilica into a conciliar *aula*, the simultaneous translators and *minutanti* (administrators) and those – men and women – who supported the conciliar process in positions as secretaries or assistants. Not to be forgotten are also those who took care of

the attendees' stay in the city of Rome, providing accommodation in the different colleges, institutions, religious houses, and hotels.

Finally, often remaining invisible, is the wider 'community of Catholic faithful'. Through private and public letters, requests, and petitions, they sometimes directly sought to contribute to the process of the council. Similarly, through prayer actions or individual requests, their support was sought by Council Fathers. However, most importantly, they would become the main recipients of the conciliar decisions. This interconnection between the council and the community of faithful at grassroots level in different contexts worldwide has only recently received increased attention from researchers.

4 The history of Vatican II

The council was opened on 11 October 1962 by Pope John XXIII. The Pope immediately set the tone with his opening speech *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, in which he called for the *aggiornamento* (bringing up to date) of the Church. His speech further clarified that this council would aim to find ways to express doctrinal substance in a pastoral way – a call he repeated that evening, in a more improvised manner, in what has become known as the Sermon of the Moon. Whereas the opening speech marked the mentalities of the Council Fathers gathered in Rome, the sermon would – through the live broadcasting – have a similar effect on the global community. The mediatization of this speech, but equally of the procession of the Council Fathers and the opening liturgy that same day, ensured that the council penetrated the collective memory of Catholics worldwide. As such, the council was accomplishing the goal that John XXIII had set a month before the council began in his radio message to the world through Eurovision (11 September 1962) in which he had emphasized the global character of this council and the necessary attention for the Church of the Poor.

The council unfolded over four years, adhering to the regulations outlined in the *Ordo Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II Celebrandi*. These regulations had been the work of a subcommittee of the Central Preparatory Commission, headed by Cardinal Francesco Roberti, who presented their work on 6 August 1962 to John XXIII with the motu proprio *Appropinquante Concilio*. Every year in the fall, the Council Fathers would gather in Rome, where they would assemble in St Peter's Basilica to discuss the prepared schemata in plenary; and, if possible, to vote upon and approve them. The schemata were prepared by the conciliar commissions and once accepted as ready for discussion, they would be sent to the Council Fathers, and in session be presented to the General Congregation by a *relator* appointed by the commission; next, the floor was opened for the interventions of the Council Fathers, who were given equal time for their interventions in an order defined by rank. After discussing the schemata generally, the discussion would continue chapter by chapter with a vote at the end to decide whether they would be accepted (*placet*),

rejected (*non-placet*), or accepted on the condition that specific changes were still made (*placet juxta modum*). This, then, allowed the commissions to further revise the schemata in the intersessions. As such, much of the actual work was carried out in the conciliar commissions during the intersessions.

Supported by the General Secretariat, chaired by Felici, the work was divided over ten commissions: the Doctrinal Commission (Alfredo Ottaviani); the Commission for Bishops and the Governance of Dioceses (Paolo Marella); the Commission on Oriental Churches (Amleto Cicognani); the Commission for the Discipline of the Sacraments (Benedetto Masella); the Commission for the Discipline of the Clergy and the Christian People (Pietro Ciriaci); the Commission for Religious (Valerio Valeri); the Commission for Missions (Grégoire-Pierre XV Agagianian); the Liturgical Commission (Arcadio Larraona Saralegui); the Commission for Seminaries, Studies, and Catholic Schools (Giuseppe Pizzardo); the Commission for the Apostolate of the Laity, for the Press, and Entertainment (Fernando Cento); and – elevated as an equivalent to the commissions at the beginning of the first period – the Secretariat for Christian Unity (Augustin Bea).

The election of the members for the commissions proved to be a moment of self-awareness for the Council Fathers when, on 13 October, presidents of the day Cardinals Achilles Liénart and Josef Frings received great acclaim from the Council Fathers in their demand for a postponement of the vote. This allowed several bishops' conferences to produce their own lists with possible members. The subsequent election on 16 October proved its success and led to more diverse commissions in terms of theological and geographical composition compared to the preparatory commissions.

4.1 First conciliar period and intersession

The council's first period (11 October–8 December 1962) was marked by the Council Fathers' growing awareness of co-responsibility over the accomplishment of the council and its schemata. In preparation of the first period of the council, the Council Fathers had been sent seven preparatory schemata, between July and November 1962. The first batch of documents were *De Fontibus Revelationis* on the sources of revelation, *De Deposito Fidei* on revelation, *De Ordine Morali Christiano* on the Christian moral order, *De Castitate, Matrimonio, Familia et Verginitate* on chastity, marriage, family, and virginity, *De Sacra Liturgia* on sacred liturgy, *De Instrumentis Communicationis Socialis* on the means of social communication, and *De Ecclesiae Unitate* on ecumenism. In the lead-up to the council and over the first few days of the proceedings, it was evident there was a certain dissatisfaction with these drafts.

The first session started with a discussion on the *De Sacra Liturgia*, as it clearly reflected the developments of the liturgical movement and was not expected to result in too much debate (22 October–13 November 1962). In general, the schema received a lot of support

and the debate mainly focused on the use of vernacular languages in liturgy and the role of the conferences of local bishops. Both were in line with general tendencies that emphasized the responsibility of the local church and the bishop as the main liturgist.

As easy as the discussion on the *De Sacra Liturgia* had been, the *De Fontibus Revelationis* debate (14–21 November 1962) proved to be much more challenging. The preparatory schema, a product of the Theological Commission, was marked by its critical stance – almost condemnation – of the historical-critical method and an emphasis on Scripture and Tradition as the two main sources of revelation and, thus, ignored the advancements made in the Biblical Movement and the Ecumenical Movement respectively. This resulted in the first public clash between Cardinal Ottaviani and Cardinals Alfrink, Bea, Frings, König, Liénart, Léger, Suenens, and Ritter. The split in the council hall also became clear in the vote on the interruption of the debate on the schema, and what *de facto* would mean the rejection of this schema. Despite the 1,368 *placet* to 822 *non-placet* vote, it did not achieve the two-third majority needed to come to a decision, causing John XXIII to intervene in favour of those asking to interrupt the debate and to transfer the schema to a mixed commission of the Doctrinal Commission and the Secretariat for Christian Unity (SCUF).

The period continued with two short debates: the debate on the schema on social communication means (23–26 November 1962) resulted in the acceptance of the schema. The debate on *Ut unum sint* (23–26 November 1962) resulted in the proposal to integrate this schema on Christian unity that dealt mostly with the relation between Catholics and the Orthodox through a reunification and reconciliation lens into a schema that dealt with ecumenism in a broader sense. However, these debates mainly turned out to be a kind of interlude before the debate on the schema *De Ecclesia* (1–7 December 1962). The debate was short and brought to light the criticisms of the schema, summarized by Monsignor De Smedt on behalf of the SCUF as subject to ‘triumphalism, legalism, and clericalism’. The schema was met with pleas for it to take into account the ecclesiological developments of the past century, including the increased christocentrism and attention to the college of bishops.

The end of this first period was, however, mostly marked by an adjustment of the council’s organization in order to make it more efficient. The Belgian Cardinal Suenens played a decisive role in this through introducing the *ad intra* and *ad extra* division of the schemata in his speech in December. Joined by Cardinals Montini and Lercaro, among others, this established a new programme for the council at the beginning of the second session, consisting of seventeen drafts divided according to these two lines of intra-ecclesial and extra-ecclesial focal points. Particularly the seventeenth schema on the list, *De Ecclesiae principiis et actione ad bonum societatis promovendum*, would draw the attention of the Council Fathers in the years to come. Given its novelty in the conciliar tradition, it would

be mainly referred to as its position on the list of schemas, that is, Schema XVII and later Schema XIII. Its rather late presence on the agenda, however, did not mean that no attention had been paid to the modern world and its challenges: the preparatory schemata had made this clear already, but equally so did the Message of the Council Fathers – following initiatives of Marie-Dominique Chenu and Jacques Lebreton, among others – which was sent out to the world on 20 October 1962 and made clear the commitment of the Council Fathers to enter into dialogue with the modern world.

The ‘first intersession’ showed how these periods could have a decisive influence on the conciliar process. In the first place, the newly created Coordination Commission (presided by Amleto Cicognani) would oversee the work on the different schemata. However, it would mainly be extra-conciliar events that would set the agenda during this period, such as the promulgation of *Pacem in Terris* on 11 April 1963. This encyclical dealt with the questions of war and peace in the middle of the Cold War and would, like *Mater et Magistra* (15 May 1961), become a point of reference for the Council Fathers in the later discussions on Schema XVII/XIII. In particular, its address to ‘all people of good will’ in the opening lines set the tone for a more dialogical approach. At around the same time, the death of Pope John XXIII occurred on 3 June, followed by the subsequent conclave. The continuation or otherwise of the council was prevalent in the minds of the papal electors. The election of the Archbishop of Milan, Giovanni Battista Montini on 21 June, evidenced a clear choice in favour of continuation. A week later, on 27 June, he announced he would do as such and would reconvene the Council Fathers to Rome on 29 September. Yet, while John XXIII had been the pope who had given the council to the Council Fathers, the pontificate of Paul VI clearly planned the council to lead it – hopefully without too much friction between majority and minority – to a close. In addition, he also appointed four moderators, Cardinals Grégoire-Pierre XV Agagianian (Patriarch of the Armenian Catholic Church), Julius Döpfner (Archbishop of Munich and Freising), Giacomo Lercaro (Archbishop of Bologna), and Léon-Joseph Suenens (Archbishop of Malines-Brussels) who would form the bridge between the Pope and the Council Fathers.

4.2 Second period and intersession

The council’s second period (29 September–4 December 1963) would be marked most strongly by the continued debates on the *De Ecclesia*. In his opening speech on 29 September, Paul VI introduced four guiding principles for the upcoming period, namely the presentation of the theology of the Church, the inner renewal of the Church, the promotion of Christian unity, and dialogue with the modern world. In particular this last aspect of ‘dialogue’ as the new guiding principle, one to which he would later return more extensively in the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (6 August 1964), would become his imprint on the council. The discussions took off the next day on the new schema *De Ecclesia*, which went back to a draft prepared by Gerard Philips during the intersession. The shifts

were remarkable; the juridical focus on the ecclesial hierarchy had been shifted to a sacramental understanding, placing the mystery of the Church centrally. At the same time, the college of bishops started to receive more attention from the council as discussions recalled its biblical roots. Of symbolic importance was the acceptance of the request to give the chapter on the People of God precedence over the chapter on the hierarchy. The general positive tone in the discussions was reflected in the strong majority vote to continue with the present schema.

Next followed the discussion on the bishops and the governance of the dioceses (5–18 November 1963). Despite strong critiques of the preparatory schema – among others for not respecting the idea of collegiality and respecting the conciliar style – and Council Fathers taking the opportunity to call for reforms of the Roman Curia in this context, the schema was accepted for discussion. During the proceedings, it became clear how this discussion was influenced by the long shadow of Vatican I, and it became a learning process in collegiality for many of the Council Fathers.

The final discussion was reserved for the discussion on the schema on ecumenism (18 November–2 December). The discussion focused on the first three chapters, during which it became clear that despite the advocacy by some Council Fathers in favour of a return to ecumenism, the majority valued the ecumenical rapprochement. The debate on the last two chapters of the schema – on the relation to Judaism and religious liberty – was postponed to the next period, which responded both to their controversial nature and to the question of whether these texts actually belonged in a schema on ecumenism. This second period had been marked by many tensions that could finally be laid to rest, at least temporarily, due to the voting on the constitution on liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* and the decree on social communication means (*Inter Mirifica*), both of which were accepted by the Council Fathers on 4 December. Both schemas were promulgated by Pope Paul VI, adding to the formulation that it was done ‘*una cum Venerabilibus Patribus*’ (together with the Venerable Fathers).

In his concluding speech, Paul VI had already indicated that during ‘second intersession’ he would pay a visit to Jerusalem (4–6 January 1964). The pilgrimage of Paul VI should certainly be understood in the context of the ongoing conciliar debates on ecumenism and on the relation to Judaism – in particular, his successful meeting with Patriarch Athenagoras during which they prayed together and expressed that their hope to restore Christian communion would hold symbolic importance for the conciliar proceedings. Secondly, it had become clear in the meantime that many topics were still open for discussion, and an early end of the council was not yet in sight. Based on a plan that Döpfner had already worked out the previous year, the Coordinating Commission decided to propose that only the schemata on the Church, on bishops, on revelation, on the apostolate of the laity, on ecumenism, and on the Church in the modern world

be continued; the other texts would be transferred to post-conciliar committees, so that the council could end after its third period. However, the changes to the regulation for a more efficient use of time, which had been equally part of this Döpfner plan, were met with opposition during the third session and made a conclusive end to the council in one more period unlikely.

4.3 Third period and intersession

The third period of the council (14 September–21 November 1964) was strongly marked by the hope of making as much progress as possible, including on hot topics such as religious liberty. In his opening speech Paul VI emphasized the importance of collegiality, a topic that would return at the end of this period in all strength. A rapid succession of debates followed on the schemata on the Church (16–23 September), on the bishops (18–22 September), and on religious liberty (23–28 September), in which a text that had been given now the status of decree drew much criticism for creating the risk for indifferentism, but also got the strong support of the American bishops, and a debate on the schema on the non-Christians and Jews (28–29 September). The debate on the schema on revelation (30 September–6 October) prompted a minority and majority report that argued respectively for the equal importance of tradition and the singularity of Scripture as the sole source of revelation; this issue was clearly not yet settled. The debate on the schema on lay apostolate (6–13 October) made clear that, probably due to its novelty, the schema was not considered mature enough and reflected the advancements in lay apostolate of the past decades. Nevertheless, this debate provided the context for the historic moment when Patrick Keegan, as a layman, took the floor on 13 October to address the Council Fathers.

Among the schemata still discussed – on the priests (14–15 October), on the Eastern Churches (15–22 October), on the missions (6–8 November), on religious life (10–12 November), on Christian education (17–19 November), and on the training of priests (13–18 November) – it would be the discussion on the schema on the Church in the world (20 October–10 November) that would be most intense. This document, having gone through a variety of different drafts, was still marked by ambiguity over the diversity of topics to be included and the style – either doctrinal or pastoral – to be used. The debate finally addressed the relationship between the Church and the world, the assessment of culture, modern atheism, and developments in thinking around marriage and family among others. What became clear is that pre-conciliar tensions over incarnational or eschatological theological visions of history, the need for inductive or deductive theology, or the engagement of theology with other academic disciplines clearly surfaced in the context of these debates. It also became clear that a fourth session was really necessary to bring this schema to a successful conclusion.

The last week of the council was marked by a series of incidents that rocked the council's fate, and would be dubbed 'the Black Week'. Firstly, before the vote on the third chapter *De Ecclesia*, Felici announced 'by mandate of higher authority' that a *Nota Explicativa Praevia* (preliminary explanatory note) would be included in the text that proposed an 'introductory and restrictive interpretation of the text on collegiality'. Secondly, the vote on the schema on religious freedom was cancelled. Thirdly, being distributed last minute before the final vote, it became clear that the Pope had made minor changes to the Decree on Ecumenism – for which the Council Fathers had already approved every chapter. While this period closed with the successful promulgation on 21 November of *Lumen Gentium*, *Unitatis Redintegration*, and *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, these interventions gave the impression that Paul VI was succumbing to the pressure coming from the conciliar minority and caused frustration among the Council Fathers. Moreover, especially in the context of the debates around schedule XVII/XIII, fractures in the conciliar majority began to become clear.

The third intersession was a period of tremendous activity to accomplish the successful voting of the remaining documents in the last period. This included Paul VI's participation in the International Eucharistic Congress in Bombay; the huge working meeting of the Mixed Commission on Schema XIII in Ariccia (31 January–6 February 1965); and intensive diplomatic works for the success of some of the more controversial documents, like *Nostra Aetate*, including conversations with the Catholic actors in the Middle East and the (Muslim) political leaders of the Middle Eastern countries.

4.4 Fourth period

The fourth period (14 September 14–8 December 1965) was mainly dominated by the Church's dialogue with the modern world. This was made clear in Paul VI's opening speech, during which he also surprisingly announced the creation of a body of bishops that would regularly meet with him. The next day, the Synod of Bishops was created with the *motu proprio Apostolica Sollicitudo*. He also announced his visit to the United States on 4 October, where he would address the United Nations assembly. Upon his arrival back in Rome – and being brought straight to the conciliar *aula* where all Council Fathers were assembled – they requested the speech to be included in the conciliar acts as a symbol of the Church's engagement with the modern world. Debates started with the revised schema on religious freedom (15–21 September), and the final vote on the schema on revelation (22 September), but would focus substantially on Schema XIII (21 September–8 October). The text – the only original written in a modern language, French – was still criticized for being too optimistic, failing to make clear the relationship between nature and the supernatural, and at times lacking conceptual clarity such as on the concepts of 'world', 'creation', and 'culture'. Nonetheless, it received an overall positive vote for the

discussion chapter by chapter, during which interventions on the council's approach to atheism, to marriage and family, and to nuclear arms were especially notable.

This was followed by final debates and votes on the schema on the Church's missionary activity (8–13 October), on Christian education (13–14 October), and on the non-Christian religions (14–15 October). Before the debate on priesthood (13–16 and 25–27 October) began, Paul VI had made it clear via a letter on 11 October that he would withdraw the hot topic of celibacy from the council, so the debate mainly focused on the tension in the priestly image between the sacramental minister and the presbyter in the service of the world.

After the debates, the final votes and approval (mostly with overwhelming majority) of *Christus Dominus*, *Perfectae Caritatis*, *Optatam Totius*, and *Gravissimum Educationis*, *Nostra Aetate* on 28 October and *Dei Verbum* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* on 18 November brought to light the achievements of the council. It was also the achievement of the many redactors who had succeeded during the intersession and in this period to still integrate the many amendments requested by the Council Fathers. However, the final votes on the schedule in the modern world (15–17 November) and Paul V's four *modi* (amendments) for the chapter on marriage – including the demand for a ban on artificial contraception – made it clear that tensions were still alive in the conciliar assembly. Emphasizing the freedom of conscience and personal responsibility of couples in this particular case, but showing a great sense of nuance, diplomacy, and compromise in general by the redactors, *Gaudium et Spes* was overwhelmingly approved on 7 December, along with *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, *Ad Gentes*, and *Dignitatis Humanae*. The same day Cardinal Johannes Willebrands was also given the honour of reading, during the public ceremony, the declaration lifting the mutual excommunication between the Catholic and the Orthodox Church.

The council closed on December 8 with a public session. A celebration occurred during which Pope Paul VI presented messages to specific groups in society. The messages were to the 'men' of thought and science, to the heads of state, to the artists, to women, to the youth, to the workers, to the Council Fathers, and finally, to the poor, the sick, and the suffering. With the apostolic brief *In Spiritu Sancto*, the council was officially closed.

5 Doctrinal results

Presenting the theological content of Vatican II is a difficult task, and it cannot be understood in isolation from its redaction history and the wider events of the council. The documents themselves, being the result of lengthy drafting, redacting, amending, and seeking the '*unimitatis*' (unanimity), are often reflected in a language marked by compromise, creating sometimes ambivalence over its interpretation. Nevertheless, in what follows an attempt will be made to point out some of the key principles contained in

the different documents, paying attention to both the main components and some aspects that have later gained more attention due to their role in post-conciliar debates.

A collection of the documents is available at the Vatican online [archive](#).

5.1 Key theological orientations

Strongly based on the theological renewal in the years prior to the council, the key theological orientations of the council are also strongly defined by the visions of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI. In calling for a new council, the former had clearly set the goal for it to be an ecumenical council, understood in its broadest sense as entering into dialogue with non-Catholics, other Christians, and Judaism in particular. John XXIII further complemented this at the start of the council with the principles of *aggiornamento* and the need to express doctrine in a pastoral way. Paul VI added to these orientations with the principles of collegiality and dialogue, further setting the stage for later processes of synodality and engagement with the modern world.

The council's orientation was fundamentally determined by its dogmatic axis formed by the four constitutions. Scripture and liturgy are the foundation on which the Church's self-understanding (*Ecclesia ad intra*) and its relationship to the outside world (*Ecclesia ad extra*) is based. Revelation, found primarily in Scripture, emerges as historical and dialogical. Moving away from the classical hierarchical understanding of the structures of the Church, the Biblical-Sacramental ecclesiology of the council moves towards a Christocentric-Trinitarian theology that prioritizes the People of God's common dignity and calling, on the basis of the common baptism as participation in the Paschal Mystery. Thus, the Church is understood eschatologically; its functioning and its tradition are always in need of renewal, as is expressed concisely in the principle of *Ecclesia semper reformanda* (the Church must always be reformed, LG 8). The attitude towards the modern world is marked by an (incipient) desire for dialogue. The principle of 'reading the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel' represents a key point in the further interpretation and application of the council.

The decrees and declarations build on this foundation by elaborating further on aspects of the People of God, on the formation, and on the mission of the church. In this way, Vatican I's emphasis on the papacy and a vertical hierarchical view of the Church is balanced with a theology of the episcopate in which sharing in the threefold office (*tria munera*) of Christ and collegiality also set the tone for the priesthood, with some interest in collaboration with the laity. Moreover, the sacerdotal and cultic imagination of ordained ministry is complemented by a more pastoral one. The increased importance of the lay apostolate and the inner renewal of religious life throughout the twentieth century recall what the council says about active participation in the Church's life and apostolate, and about renewing the religious life by revisiting the founder's charism. Secondly, the conciliar

renewal wishes to permeate all domains of the Church through a rethinking of priestly formation and Catholic education in general.

Finally, the council offers impulses for the Church's internal and external mission. In this, the council considers the same concentric circles as Paul VI presented in his encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* to present the various dialogue partners of the Church. This, first and foremost, is renewal in the Church itself with a particular focus on unity in diversity, expressed especially where the Eastern Catholic churches are concerned. Next, it may be clear that the council was true to its ecumenical commitment, rediscovering other Christians as 'brothers and sisters'. Third, the Council opens up to dialogue with non-Catholics, setting the stage for later decades of interreligious dialogue. The recognition of what is 'true and holy in these religions', including Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, was an unforeseen outcome of the council's efforts to redefine its relationship to Judaism, distancing itself from supersessionist theologies and the belief in Jewish responsibility for 'deicide' (the killing of God). Nevertheless, the tension between dialogue and evangelization remains one of the council's central areas of tension. This is also felt in its attitude and presence in the modern world, characterized at the time as becoming increasingly secular. Here, equally, dialogue is paramount with upholding principles of inculturation, human dignity, and the right to religious freedom.

What stood out were not only specific theological convictions or orientations, but also the way they were prepared – the *modus procedendi* – and the way they were presented and the style of the conciliar texts. John XIII's desire to express doctrine in a pastoral way was embraced more and more in the course of the council. Unlike previous councils, Vatican II's style is less scholastic and more literary-humanistic in nature (panegyric, according to O'Malley); less deductive and more inductive; marked by an openness to the rise of sociology in theology during the pre-conciliar years and with a clear aim of presenting a comprehensible and conveying message to contemporary humanity. In terms of the moral theological options, a shift towards personalism and an emphasis on the personal conscience and the common good is apparent. In general, the council, as the 'end of the Constantinian era' (Chenu) and the 'beginning of the beginning' (Rahner), set the stage for an understanding of the Church as moving away from a Western-European focused Catholicism to becoming a global church.

5.2 The constitutions: the dogmatic axis of the council

Sacrosanctum Concilium, Constitution on the Divine Liturgy (SC, 4 December 1963; 2,147 *placet*, 4 *non-placet*) was the first approved document of the council. It emphasized the eucharistic nature of the Church, defining the Eucharist as the 'sacrament of unity'. After opening with the importance of liturgy for the life of the Church, the eight chapters of the constitution discuss the renewal and promotion of the liturgy, the mystery of the Eucharist,

the sacraments and sacramentals, the liturgy of the hours, the liturgical year, sacred music, and finally sacred art. Throughout these chapters, the idea of the liturgy as ‘the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows’ (SC 10) runs as a common thread, clearly reflecting the achievements of the Liturgical Movement. This is also reflected in its embrace of the active participation of the faithful in the liturgy and, consequently, the call for the increased use of the vernacular in the liturgy. At the same time, the importance of the Word of God also comes more strongly to the fore. While the schema was voted in with a large majority, its implementation through the *Consilium ad exsequendam Constitutionem de Sacra Liturgia* commission in the post-conciliar years proved – as one of the most visible results of the council at grassroots level – at times a stumbling block in the conciliar reception.

Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (LG, 21 November 1964; 2,151 *placet*, 5 *non-placet*) functioned as synthesis of Vatican II’s ecclesiology with a biblical-patristic orientation as a benchmark for all other documents. Divided into eight chapters, the document deals with the mystery of the church with an emphasis on its sacramental nature, the realization of this mystery through the People of God that share as a whole in the threefold office of Christ, and the hierarchical structure of the church (with special attention for the bishops in which it elevated the college of bishops). It goes on to develop how the laity in particular contributes to the mission of the Church through its apostolate that shared in the threefold office of Christ, the universal call for holiness that broadened the understanding of the paths to perfection, the religious as an essential expression of this striving to holiness, the eschatological character of the church, and a final chapter on Mary, the mother of God. The constitution integrated insights from all the pre-conciliar movements, particularly aspects of sacramental theology with its emphasis on the church as mystery and the importance of the laity – reflected in the decision to place the chapter on the People of God before the chapters dealing with the church hierarchy. The constitution remained a guiding document in the post-conciliar period where, in particular in the 1985 synod, the *communio*-ecclesiology contained in the constitution received even greater emphasis.

Dei Verbum, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (DV, 18 November 1965; 2,344 *placet*, 6 *non-placet*) places the Word of God at the centre of the life of the church, with its dynamic and dialogical view on revelation. After an introduction in which the listening and proclaiming character of the Church is emphasized, six chapters present revelation in a relational perspective, with God communicating himself, speaking to humans ‘as friends’ and inviting them to enter ‘voluntarily’ into communion with him; the transmission of revelation in which the tradition concept in particular is further developed; as well as the inspiration and interpretation of Scripture in which attention is given to the literary genres employed by the human authors, with further indications on the Old and New Testament (chapters IV and V respectively). The constitution closes by emphasizing the significance

of Scripture in the life of the church and its importance also for theology. This constitution reflected one of the greatest developments of the council in which the initial emphasis in the *De Fontibus Revelationis* and *De Deposito Fidei Pure Custodiendo* schemata on the two-source doctrine on revelation – both Scripture and Tradition – gave room for the integration of the historical-critical exegetical insights of the past century and, with its emphasis on the Word of God, also resonated with ecumenical sensibilities.

Gaudium et Spes, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (GS, 7 December 1965; 2,300 *placet*, 75 *non-placet*) redefines Catholicism's relation to modernity on a Christian anthropological and dialogical basis. In its extensive preface introduction dealing with the condition of humanity in today's world (GS 1–3; 4–10), the Pastoral Constitution expresses the Church's solidarity with the whole of humanity, condensed in its opening lines expressing the shared 'joys and hopes, and sorrow and anxieties' of the people of today and the disciplines of Christ; and the 'reading of the signs of the times in light of the Gospel' (GS 4). Its first rather dogmatic part focuses on the Church and the vocation of humanity by respectively focusing on the dignity of the human person, the human community, human activity in the world, and the church's task in today's world. This part elaborated lengthily on atheism, a topic to which also the then Archbishop of Krakow, Karol Wojtyła, had strongly contributed. The second part deals with some urgent problems of the time, being defined by the dignity of marriage and the family, the development of culture, socioeconomic life, life in the political community, and questions on war and peace.

In general, the document shows, in line with *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, a pastoral concern that is expressed in a balance between a theological and sociological style. More concretely, this led the Council Fathers, among others, to an emphasis on personalist/ situational ethics in its chapter on marriage and family – including a focus on conjugal love – and a realistic definition of culture as the human being's self-realization, and an equally strong dose of realism where it concerns the views on nuclear warfare. This second part had been an *adnexa* in the initial stages of the redaction process, but was eventually fully integrated into the schema – leading, as the first footnote makes clear, to a full integration of the dogmatic and pastoral character throughout the two parts of the constitution.

5.3 The nine conciliar decrees: initiating practical implementation

Inter Mirifica, Decree on Mass Communication (MI, 4 December 1963; 1,960 *placet*, 164 *non-placet*), gave pointers on dealing with media such as press, radio, and television. Despite the rise of popular media in the 1960s, and the great importance of the press for this particular council, the decree mainly reflected pre-conciliar moralizing positions on media. Consecutively it dealt with the rights of the Church when dealing with and the

duties of those consuming, providing, and controlling these means of communication (IM, chapter 1) and discussed the international collaboration between the Church and national organizations for the media (IM, chapter 2). The position of the decree was redirected in the 1971 pastoral instruction *Communio et Progressio*.

Unitatis Redintegratio, Decree on Ecumenism (UR, 21 November 1964; 2,137 *placet*, 11 *non-placet*), was clearly the result of the Ecumenical Movement, John XXIII's ecumenical intentions with the council, and the concrete work of the Secretariat for Christian Unity and its allies. Starting from the 'desire for the restoration of unity among all the followers of Christ' in the introduction, the three chapters deal with the Catholic principles on ecumenism, the practice of ecumenism, and the 'churches and ecclesial communities separated from the Roman Apostolic See', dealing first with the Eastern Churches and then the churches that resulted from the Reformation. The decree reflects the broader development of the council from an exclusivist to an inclusivist ecclesiology that recognized 'significant elements and endowments [...] outside of the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church' (UR 3), while also indicating that the unity of the Church of Christ 'subsists in the Catholic Church' (UR 4, emphasis added). In adopting a 'hierarchy of truths' (UR 11) within Catholic teaching, the council situated itself as part of a consistent tradition striving towards the pursuit of Christian unity and paved the way for post-conciliar engagement in the ecumenical dialogues.

Orientalium Ecclesiarum, Decree on the Catholic Eastern Churches (OE, 21 November 1964; 2,110 *placet*, 30 *non-placet*), focuses on the particular Catholic churches and *rites sui iuris* (in its own right), emphasizing the nature of the Catholic Church as a community of churches in which there is equal dignity among the particular churches of the East and the West. After a preamble, the decree discusses the particular churches and rites, the preservation of the spiritual heritage of the Eastern Churches, and the Eastern rite patriarchs – aligning with *Lumen Gentium* and *Unitatis Redintegratio* in stating the importance of their synods – as well as the discipline of the sacraments, divine worship, and the relations with the Eastern Churches. Although its redaction history and the content of the decree are sometimes in tension with ecumenism as expressed in UR, the decree was somewhat overlooked in the initial reception of the council. However, due to the increased migration of Eastern rite Catholics and the situation of the particular churches in the Middle East, the decree has regained attention in recent years.

Perfectae Caritatis, Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life (PC, 28 October 1965; 2,321 *placet*, 4 *non-placet*), aims to renew the theology and practice of religious life starting from the ecclesiological dimension of religious life as set out in *Lumen Gentium*. It builds further on the foundations of a 'constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time' (PC 2) on the basis of five guiding principles: following of Christ as set out in the

Gospels; the rediscovery of the original charism; participation in the life of the Church; discernment of the signs of the times; and the renewal of the spirit according to the evangelical counsels (chastity, poverty, and obedience). On the basis of these principles, the diverse forms of religious life (i.e. contemplative, apostolic active, monastic, and secular institutes) are discussed, wherein community is emphasized over individualism in the following of the evangelical counsels. The decree ends with a discussion on the concrete aspects of renewal and adaptation of religious life, among other instructions on clothing.

Christus Dominus, Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church (CD, 28 October 1965; 2,319 *placet*, 2 *non-placet*), builds upon LG's theology on the office of bishops and elaborates on how to shape this office pastorally. After a foreword, the decree discusses the role of the bishops in the universal church, in their particular churches or dioceses, and their cooperation within the church, for example in synods, councils, and bishops' conferences. The decree concludes with calls for a reform of the Code of Canon Law, directories for the care of the souls, and the pastoral care of special groups of faithful. The decree stresses how the office of the bishop can only be understood in unity within the episcopal college (CD 4).

Apostolicam Actuositatem, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (AA, 18 November 1965; 2,342 *placet*, 2 *non-placet*), had been drafted by the Commission for the Apostolate of the Laity under the presidency of Fernando Cento and secretary Achille Glorieux in collaboration with members of the laity. Building on decades of success of Catholic lay apostolate and further broadening since a unique focus on Catholic Action, the decree emphasizes the lay apostolate as an integral 'vocation' of the Church. It subsequently deals with the 'vocation' of the laity to the apostolate from a christological perspective; the aims of the apostolate in the temporal and spiritual realm with *caritas* (charity) as the central guiding principle; the different milieus of the apostolate; its individual and collective expressions (developed most extensively in a chapter wherein the Catholic Action functions as a role model, while a broader definition of lay apostolate is accepted); the position of lay apostolate in the Church; and the necessary formation to apostolate. In sum, the decree wanted to contribute to the ongoing rise of the importance of the laity in the Church 'so that they may show that they are co-workers in the various forms and modes of the one apostolate of the Church, which must be constantly adapted to the new needs of our times' (AA 33).

Ad Gentes, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (AG, 7 December 1965; 2,394 *placet*, 5 *non-placet*), contributed to a broader understanding of mission that, replacing the juridical understanding, more strongly emphasized evangelization as the fundamental mission of the Church. The document discusses the principles of mission, the actual mission work with a strong focus on witness, preaching, and community building,

mission in the particular churches, the profile of the missionaries, mission activity, and the cooperation of all on the basis of the whole Church being missionary (for more on these missiological themes, see Missio Dei and Missiology).

Optatam Totius, Decree on the Training of Priests (OT, 28 October 1965; 2,318 *placet*, 3 *non-placet*). Starting from the necessity of the priestly formation, the first decree focuses on the need for 'programmes of priestly training' in each country and rite; the fostering of vocations, including in minor seminaries, the role of major seminaries, and the spiritual, intellectual, and disciplinary training towards a pastoral end; the spiritual training and practices of piety in which pedagogical and psychological insights are integrated; the revision of the ecclesiastical studies with the alignment of philosophical and theological disciplines and discernment of the mystery of Christ; the pastoral training that includes gaining insights from other disciplines such as pedagogy, psychology, and sociology, and further training after the studies.

Presbyterorum Ordinis, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (PO, 7 December 1965; 2,390 *placet*, 4 *non-placet*), reflects the same pastoral concern as *Optatam Totius*. The ministry of the priest is presented primarily as Presbyter sharing in the threefold office of the bishops, whereby they built up the church 'into the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit' (PO 1). With a christological-ecclesiological focus, the decree elaborates in three chapters the ministry of the priesthood in the mission of the Church, the ministry of the office of priests, and the priestly life. The decree contributed to a broadened priest image, moving away from a sole focus on being the sacramental minister to emphasizing their teaching, sanctifying, and governing roles.

5.4 The three declarations: concise position statements

Nostra Aetate, Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to the Non-Christian Religions (NA, 28 October 1965; 2,221 *placet*, 88 *non-placet*), is the result of centuries of tensions between the Catholic Church and Judaism, with the Shoah as the most recent breaking point present in the minds of the Council Fathers, and intra-conciliar developments leading to a broader document including attention to other non-Christian religions. Indeed, plans to elaborate a schema on Judaism alone, after an initiative by the Jewish historian Jules Isaac, and subsequently its inclusion in the schema on ecumenism as presented by Bea during the second period, were abandoned in favour of this schema being integrated in a more comprehensive text that discussed attitudes towards non-Christian religions. The declaration, five paragraphs long, eventually dealt with the existential questions of humanity (NA 1); the value of the Eastern traditions and spiritualities, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, stating that 'the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions' and they 'often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men' (NA 2); its esteem for Islam on the basis of shared beliefs,

calling for greater mutual understanding and collaboration (NA 3); and, in a very lengthy paragraph, developing the relation towards Judaism on the basis of their common roots with the prominent rejection of the Jewish deicide thesis (NA 4); concluding with the rejection of any form of discrimination, including religious discrimination (NA 5).

Gravissimum Educationis, Declaration on Christian Education (GE, 28 October 1965; 2,290 *placet*, 35 *non-placet*), deals in eleven paragraphs with Christian education in both Catholic and non-Catholic education on the basis of a broader emphasis on the importance of education in the life of humanity and social progress. It subsequently elaborates on the right to education; the specifics of Christian education; the educators in which parents are recognized as the 'primary and principal educators'; the various aids to education such as the media of communication; the importance of schools in Christian education; the duties and rights of parents; moral and religious education; Catholic schools; the different types of Catholic schools, Catholic colleges, and universities; faculties of theology; and the need for further diocesan, national, and international collaboration. Probably because of the wide diversity of Catholic schooling systems in different regions, the declaration necessarily focused on Catholic education and formation in generalizing terms, which might also explain its lack of reception.

Dignitatis Humanae, Declaration on Religious Freedom (DH, 7 December 1965; 2,308 *placet*, 70 *non-placet*), presents the 'right of the person and of communities to social and civil freedom in religious matters', including the freedom of conscience, thus taking distance from a pre-conciliar tradition that was strongly marked by Catholic intransigence. Its fifteen paragraphs can be divided into two parts, dealing respectively with the general principles of religious freedom and the doctrine of religious freedom in light of revelation. In particular, the recognition of the right to religious freedom as an individual and public right, on the basis of human dignity, made this statement highly debated during the council, but equally a benchmark in the Catholic Church's relationship with the modern states.

6 Receptions of Vatican II

The reception of Vatican II played out on four levels, although it was sometimes difficult to discern exactly which post-conciliar developments were caused by the council. Equally, some outcomes of the council were subject to non-reception, in the sense that documents and concepts were forgotten or only reevaluated much later.

The council led to a series of reforms and the establishment of new bodies in the Roman Curia reflecting the aims of the council. The first reforms already took place during the council itself, with the establishment of the Secretariat for the Non-Christians on 19 May 1964 and the Secretariat for the Non-Believers on 9 April 1965. The creation of the Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax* (Justice and Peace) on 6 January 1967,

with the aim of promoting social justice in an international sphere, and the Pontifical Council for the Laity on 6 January 1967 had been requested in *Gaudium et Spes* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* respectively. For the development of theology, the abolition of the Index for Prohibited Books on 14 June 1966 was of great symbolic value; so, too, was the establishment of the International Theological Commission in 1969, as the idea to establish this commission was raised at the 1967 first General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Equally of defining importance, often overlooked, was the revision of the Code of Canon Law, announced by John XXIII in 1959 and completed under Pope John Paul II in 1983. Its release can be considered – in line with the Universal Catechism of the Catholic Church in 1997 and the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church in 2004 – as attempts at further harmonization, centralization, and codification of Vatican II's theological principles.

The impetus that the council had given to episcopal collegiality, theological reflection, and a pastoral service to the world continued to permeate all parts of the church after the council. Bishops' conferences began to cooperate more closely and their collaboration on a transnational level intensified. There was the foundation of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar in 1968, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences in 1970, and the Council of Bishops' Conferences of Europe in 1971. The Latin American Bishops Conference *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* (CELAM) had already been created in 1955, and it gained support for the preferential treatment of the poor and the support it offered to basic ecclesial communities in Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979). It achieved international renown for the way they had integrated *Gaudium et Spes* 4's 'reading of the signs of the times'. It was indicative of a period of the development of contextual theologies and social engagement of bishops and theologians. The World Conference of Theologians organized by the board of *Concilium* (1970) gave voice to critical theologies; and using Latin American liberation theology as a starting point, the Detroit Conference Theology in the Americas (1975) gave expression to a wide variety of emerging contextual theologies, such as feminist theology and Black theology. In its development, interaction with Christians from other confessions played a major role. This was not only in theology; both locally and internationally, the post-conciliar years were marked by ecumenical enthusiasm with a special role for the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity and its non-member participation in the World Council of Churches through Joint Working Groups. Its most notable result is probably the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) document. Similarly, the council's opening up to interreligious dialogue was deepened further by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, leading among others to the 1986 Interfaith Prayer Service for World Peace in Assisi.

At the local level, among the community of Catholic faithful, the council was often received with great enthusiasm, but it was also viewed with great concern. Whereas the liturgical renewal of Vatican II and the 'novus ordo' (new order) (promulgated in the 1969 *Missale*

Romanum ex decreto Sacrosancti Oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum, The Roman Missal Restored by Decree of the Second Vatican Council) was broadly seized as an opportunity for inculturation, some of its Western expressions, often in university parishes, caused alarm by their experimental character. On the one hand, there was enthusiasm at the local level for the various ecumenical initiatives as well as for concrete practices, such as the mass pilgrimages of Catholic youth to ecumenical places like the monastery of Taizé. At the same time, Church life and the lifestyles of Catholic community members developed at a rapid pace that the council had certainly not anticipated. The development of social Catholicism found close connection with social and church-critical movements, and drew inspiration from emerging Latin American liberation theology and its base communities (see [Latin American Liberation Theology](#), section 4).

On the other hand, the council and especially its theoretical and practical reception gave cause for uncertainty. After first withdrawing the debate from the council, the ban eventually on artificial contraceptives proclaimed by Pope Paul VI in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 was a catalyst in sparking 'catholic dissent' – with many members of the laity appealing to the conciliar concept of freedom of conscience – and also exponentially increased church disaffiliation. At the other side of the spectrum, general discontent with the 'progressive' conciliar developments found a spokesman in the figure of Bishop Marcel Lefebvre, who critiqued the conciliar and post-conciliar developments and questioned the legitimacy of the council. Eventually, this led to the schism of the Society of Saint Pius X at the time of the Écône consecrations (1988).

Finally, the post-conciliar years were marked by debates on hermeneutics, or understanding and interpretation, of this council. In a first wave, theological commentaries appeared immediately following the council in which contributions were often written by former *periti*. Among the best known are those published in the *Unam Sanctam* (One and Holy) series and in the Herder's *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (Lexicon of Theology and the Church). Next, a first historicization of the council began to take shape. Of utmost importance here was the development of the first comprehensive history of Vatican II as it was developed eventually in the five-volume *History of Vatican II*; led by the Italian historian Giuseppe Alberigo, it was a project that historicized the council and also opened debates on its positioning within history. These five volumes laid the foundations for a historiographical tradition that makes grateful use of the available archives, especially specialized conciliar archives, like the one in the *Achivio Apostolico Vaticano*, and diocesan archives, and in which autobiographical documents such as diaries play a special role. Increasingly, debates on the hermeneutics emerged, often instigated by post-conciliar developments – either or non-receptions – and often influenced by theologians who themselves had taken part in the council as *periti*.

In the interpretation of these debates, often introduced by those involved in the debates, dichotomies played a key role. To mention just a few, reference can be made to the dichotomy Spirit and Letter of the council, i.e. emphasizing the conciliar experience and continuation of the intentions on which the council was founded versus emphasizing the texts as expressed in the sixteen conciliar documents; the dichotomy between a historic Thomism and a Neo-Augustinianism, often historically reduced to the tension between the French and German theologians and bishops with a more positive and negative view of humanity and human reason, respectively; the dichotomy between the journals *Concilium* (founded in 1965) and *Communio* (founded in 1972), which commentators say represent the previous dichotomies with, in particular, their views on the council and on modernity; and, finally, between the hermeneutics of discontinuity and continuity, i.e. the presentation of the council as either a rupture or a continuation of tradition. It should be mentioned that these dichotomies often entailed a simplification of the meaning and interpretation of the council that did not contribute to mutual understanding in the debates and, in popularized forms, in certain contexts contributed to a kind of Catholic ‘culture wars’. A first decisive step in the debate was the Second Extraordinary Synod of Bishops (22 November–8 December 1985) on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the council. Here, it was defined that the four constitutions formed the crux in the interpretation of the council, that an integral understanding of the documents was needed, and a clear choice was made for the *communio*-ecclesiology as a lens through which to understand the council. A second step was the Christmas speech given by then Pope Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia on 22 December 2005, in which he emphasized the ‘hermeneutics of reform’ as the rightful interpretation of the council. The pontificate of Pope Francis in 2013 and the fiftieth anniversary of the council in 2015 paved the way for increased attention towards international receptions and the hermeneutics of the council.

Attributions

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7 List of Second Vatican Council documents

The constitutions, declarations, and decrees of Vatican II are available in various languages on the Vatican online [archive](#).

Constitutions:

- [Dei Verbum](#) (Word of God), Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation
- [Lumen Gentium](#) (Light of the Nations), Dogmatic Constitution on the Church
- [Sacrosanctum Concilium](#) (The Sacred Council), Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy
- [Gaudium et Spes](#) (Joys and Hopes), Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World

Declarations:

- Gravissimum Educationis (Extremely Important Education), Declaration on Christian Education
- Nostra Aetate (In Our Time), Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions
- Dignitatis Humanae (Of the Dignity of the Human Person), Declaration on Religious Freedom

Decrees:

- Ad Gentes (To the Nations), Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church
- Presbyterorum Ordinis (Order of Priests), Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests
- Apostolicam Actuositatem (Apostolic Activity), Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity
- Optatam Totius (Desired Renewal of the Whole), Decree on Priestly Training
- Perfectae Caritatis (Of Perfect Charity), Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life
- Christus Dominus (Christ the Lord), Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church
- Unitatis Redintegratio (Restoration of Unity), Decree on Ecumenism
- Orientalium Ecclesiarum (Of the Eastern Churches), Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite
- Inter Mirifica (Among the Wonderful), Decree on the Media of Social Communications

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