

INTERPRETING VATICAN II

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Event vs. Texts?

At least since Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's famous interview with Vittorio Messori, the relationship between the letter and the spirit of the Second Vatican Council has been a major focus of the debate about interpreting the Council. In opposition to those who were appealing to a vaguely defined "spirit of the Council," Ratzinger urged a "return to the authentic texts of the authentic Vatican II." "The reading of the *letter* of the documents," he said a little later, "will enable us to discover their true *spirit*. If thus rediscovered in their truth, those great texts will make it possible for us to understand just what happened and to react with a new vigor."¹

This was not the view of Giuseppe Alberigo as he gathered a team of scholars to write a history of Vatican II. At an early meeting of the project's international editorial board, the Bologna historian made it clear that the redactional history of the final texts of the Council would not be the primary interest of the history he had in mind. Attention would be given rather to "the spirit and dialectic that inspired and characterized the assembly," to "the development of the self-awareness of the assembly and its various components," to the event rather than to the Council's decisions, or texts.² The event of the Council would disclose its spirit.

From his earliest essays on the subject to his last, Alberigo insisted on the priority of the conciliar event over the conciliar texts. A hermeneutics of Vatican II would have to differ from the one used to interpret earlier councils because of "the variations in historical context, the differences in the way the assembly unfolded, and, above, all the singular character of a 'pastoral' Council." Even less adequate were the traditional criteria for interpreting magisterial documents since they ignore the complex historical event. "In fact," Alberigo remarked, "the question that is guiding the 'history' being prepared was not, 'How was agreement reached on approval of the *corpus* of Vatican II's decisions?', but instead, 'How did Vatican II in fact unfold and what was its significance?'"³

Alberigo then set out five elements that he thought justified characterizing the "event" of Vatican II: 1) the very fact that it was called when many thought the definitions of papal infallibility and sovereignty had rendered councils superfluous; 2) the absence of a set agenda or particular purpose, such as settling controversies; 3) the almost total rejection of the perspectives and formulae set out in the prepared texts; 4) the elaboration of general orientations and of the final texts in a unique multi-cultural and dynamic context; 5) the Catholic public's perception of the Council as a

¹ *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Report on the State of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985) 31, 40.

² See his preface to *History of Vatican II. Vol. I: Announcing and Preparing Vatican Council II. Toward a New Era in Catholicism*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Orbis: Maryknoll, 1995), xii.

³ Giuseppe Alberigo, "Criteri ermeneutici per una storia del Vaticano II," in *Transizione epocale: Studi sul Concilio Vaticano II* (Bologna: Mulino, 2009) 32-33. For the moment, I note that these are all features *internal* to the Council. While this early essay does say that viewing the Council as an event "requires special attention to the historical-cultural context (Cold War, decolonialization, opposition to adversaries)," the point is not developed here; other rapid descriptions of such factors are offered mainly in order to show their effect upon Church-internal developments; see, for example, "Il Concilio Vaticano II e le trasformazioni culturali in Europa," in *Transizione epocale*, 601-27.

crucial event which they followed with extraordinary and intense interest”⁴

For Alberigo, however, to focus on the conciliar dynamics—what the Council was--need not mean ignoring the texts or decisions—what the Council did, which “was the very object of the assembly’s engagement. Indeed I believe that a hermeneutics alert to the Council-event is indispensable for a rigorous and critical interpretation of the conciliar *corpus*.”⁵ But the influence here seems to go in only one direction: the event will illumine the texts, but there is no indication that the interpretation of the texts might contribute to the identification and interpretation of the event, as Cardinal Ratzinger maintained.

Alberigo had little interest in particular texts of the Council, so far, as he believed, did they fall short of what the Council was as an event, a reality “richer, more complex, and contradictory than what can be known by close analysis of its final decisions and of their formation and even of the whole *corpus* of such decisions? Is the ‘fact’ of the Council exhaustively expressed in the decisions it produced?” His own answer was clear:

It is not hard to recognize that even the most subtle and satisfactory reconstruction of the formation of the conciliar decisions results only in a partial and blurred knowledge of what happened at the Council. For that reason it is inadequate for the hermeneutics of those conclusions. In a word, the history of the Council does not coincide with the reconstruction of the formation of its decisions. The *gap* that separates these two approaches is not only quantitative but is, above all, qualitative.

Methodologically, it is by beginning from the conciliar event in all its complexity that its definitive conclusions can be understood either in their formation or in their content and significance. It is false that it is possible to “ascend” from the final conclusions to the Council, as if it had been only a “machine” for the production of its decisions. To do this would be implicitly to assume that the conciliar decisions are the hermeneutical criterion for a knowledge of the Council, and what would result would be a distorted and impoverished knowledge of the Council itself. Compared to the multi-dimensional complexity of the conciliar event, its decisions are disconcertingly arid... A knowledge of the conciliar event in its richness, in its contradictions, in its constant dynamics can make an important contribution, just as an insufficient awareness of it entails an impoverished understanding of the decisions.⁶

It is consistent with this view that in one of his last essays on the subject, when discussing areas needing further research, Alberigo did not include study of the texts of the Council: “I am convinced that no significant results are to be expected from a new period of commentaries on the

⁴ Alberigo, “Criteri ermeneutici,” 36-37. In another essay the “qualitative priority of the conciliar event over its decisions” is illustrated by its effort at renewal, its research, its openness to the Gospel, its fraternal interest in all human beings. “This is the nucleus of the conciliar event, and a sound and correct hermeneutics of its decisions must make reference to it. This is its most precious and lasting heritage”; Alberigo, “Il Vaticano II e la sua eredità,” in *Transizione epocale*, 576.

⁵ Alberigo, “Criteri ermeneutici,” 37.

⁶ Alberigo, “Luci e ombre nel rapporto tra dinamica assembleare e conclusioni conciliari,” in *Transizione epocale*, 700-701.

various decisions—constitutions, decrees, and declarations—nor from a minute study of particular formulations.”⁷

Some questions have been and may be raised about too sharp a disjunction between conciliar event and conciliar texts. For a theologian the teachings of the Council, embodied in its sixteen documents, have an authority which varies, of course, not only in terms of canonical distinctions among constitutions, decrees, and declarations (which, however, are largely ignored in most appeals to the Council) but also in terms of the degrees of the Council’s commitment to them. This, the Doctrinal Commission said, “becomes known either from the subject matter or from the language employed, according to the norms of theological interpretation.” Even if, unlike what happened in earlier Councils, the final texts do not define any dogmas or anathematize any heresies, they nonetheless express “the doctrine of the supreme teaching authority of the Church,” a trustworthy touchstone for the members of the Church.⁸

Second, the conciliar texts were written and intended to illuminate and guide the Church’s self-realization in the years and decades that would follow the close of the Council. In addition, they serve as reference-points in contemporary ecclesial debates, which often turn on what “fidelity to the Council” means. Some are using some of the texts in a way that other people believe betrays not only the Council’s intentions but what it actually said. Appeals simply to the “event” of the Council will not be an adequate reply to such claims. Close analysis of the texts will be necessary.⁹

After all, was not the drama of the Council in large part a conflict over what the Council should say and about how to say it? This question was crucial not only because an ecumenical council is one of the supreme organs of the Church’s teaching office, but also because for a community constituted by meaning what it says is self-defining, indeed self-constituting. It is abusive to imply that to appeal to the texts is to consider the Council simply a “machine” for producing documents; it certainly was a process for determining what the leaders of the Catholic Church wished to say to that Church and to the world as the twentieth century began to move towards its close. Not to attend to the texts is to focus on dynamics while ignoring what the dynamics produced. The struggles at the Council had some result, and what was it but the conciliar texts?

And is not attention to the texts one way (not the only one, of course) to grasp the event-character of the Council? The official texts prepared for the Council’s consideration proposed that it say certain things; the texts finally promulgated say some of those things, fail to say some of them, say many other things, and almost always say what they say differently than did the prepared texts. In some cases, on some issues, the difference between what some hoped the Council would say and what the Council ended by saying is so dramatic as to entitle the use of words like “break,”

⁷ Alberigo, “*L’Histoire du Concile Vatican II: Problèmes et perspectives*,” in *Vatican II sous le regard des historiens*, ed. Christophe Theobald (Paris: Médiasèvres. 2006) 26-48, at p. 43. In reply to the argument that historical and cultural changes since the Council have rendered it out of date, Alberigo replied that this would be truer of the conciliar texts than of the conciliar event; “a courageous discernment of what is alive and what is dead in Vatican II” is needed in order to assess its heritage; in *Transizione epocale*, 582-83.

⁸ Footnote needed.

⁹ This is a point well made by Hervé Legrand, “Relecture et évaluation de l’*Histoire du Concile Vatican II* d’un point de vue ecclésiologique,” in *Vatican II sous le regard des historiens*, 49-82.

“discontinuity.” In this respect, Ratzinger is correct that the final texts help one to understand the event of the Council.

It remains, however, that the final texts do not exhaustively reflect the conciliar experience, and the experience itself was of much more than what could be put in them. This was put very clearly by the young Joseph Ratzinger after the third session of the Council, in words that are rather difficult to reconcile with the comments he would make to Messori in 1984. Noting that in the course of the three sessions the bishops had become more open-minded, less timid and tentative, more frank and bold, he saw this as the main achievement of the Council:

This spiritual awakening, which the bishops accomplished in full view of the Church, or, rather, accomplished *as* the Church, was the great and irrevocable event of the Council. It was more important in many respects than the texts it passed, for these texts could only voice a part of the new life that had been awakened in this encounter of the Church with its inner self. Progress may at times have seemed difficult and slow, entangled as it often was in the political devices and disputes, both large and small, which to a considerable degree marked the public image of the Council and often enough its daily routine. But all of this seems trivial and transitory in comparison with the true event—the awakening of the Church.¹⁰

Here, as also generally in Alberigo’s essays, the “event” of the Council is identified with the experience of the Council, and this is true also in a great deal of the recent literature on the hermeneutics of the Council. Within the *experience* of the Council, that is, all that happened between January 25, 1959, the day Pope John XXII announced his intention to convoke an ecumenical council, and December 8, 1965, when Pope Paul VI presided over its solemn close, one looks for and finds the elements for a description of the conciliar *event*.

Experience and Event

That the event of Vatican II is usually collapsed into the experience of Vatican II reflects how differently the category “event” is understood by many theologians and by historians and sociologists.¹¹ For the latter, an “event” is an occurrence or a set of occurrences that has or have consequences. Almost all of the considerable historiographic literature identifies it with novelty, discontinuity, rupture, a break from routine, causing surprise, disturbance, and even trauma, and perhaps initiating a new routine, a new realm of the taken-for-granted. “An event,” says Paul Veyne, “is difference.... An event is anything that does not go without saying.”¹²

The return of the event in historiography has been accompanied by the development in the last two decades of what is called “historical sociology.” Within that movement William H. Sewell

¹⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 1966) 132; original text: *Ergebnisse und Probleme der dritten Konzilsperiode* (Köln: Bachem, 1965) 83.

¹¹ The paragraphs that follow draw upon my essay, “Riflessioni storiografiche sul Vaticano II come evento,” in *L’evento e le decisioni: Studi sulle dinamiche del concilio Vaticano II*, ed. Maria Teresa Fattori and Alberto Melloni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997), pp. 417-39; published in English as “Vatican II as an ‘Event,’” *Theology Digest* 46:4 (Winter 1999) 337-52; reprinted in *Vatican II Did Anything Happen?*, ed. David G. Schultenover (New York: Continuum, 2007) 24-51.

¹² Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l’histoire* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1978) 18.

has begun to work out a theory of events that has clear affinities with the developments in historiography.¹³ Sewell conceives of events as “sequences of occurrences that result in transformations of structures.” Such a sequence begins with “a rupture of some kind,” which “produces reinforcing ruptures in other locations,” these ruptures “spiral into transformative historical events when a sequence of interrelated ruptures disarticulates the previous structural network, makes repair difficult, and makes a novel rearticulation possible.” Sewell illustrates his theory by a consideration of how the event at the Bastille on July 14, 1799, was transformed into that permanent change known as the French Revolution. On Sewell’s theory and this illustration Andrew Greeley drew to argue that Vatican II represents another example of an “event.”¹⁴

On this view, it is not enough to reconstruct the experience of the participants in the Council and to think that one has thereby fulfilled the historian’s role. The historian’s Vatican II is not that of the protagonists of Vatican II. One might recall Paul Veyne’s general remark that “the lived reality as it comes from the hands of the historian is not that of the actors,”¹⁵ and then apply to Vatican II his comments about the Battle of Waterloo: As a historian tells the latter story, it is not simply the sum-total of the experiences of Napoleon, Marshal Ney, ordinary soldiers, or canteen-workers: “it is a choice, and a critical choice, of what witnesses saw.... From the testimonies and documents the historian cuts out the event he has chosen to produce; that is why an event never coincides with the *cogito* of its actors and witnesses.”¹⁶

Furthermore, one can only identify an event by placing it within a series, defined by a plot. Applied to our subject, this raises the question: Into what series should we place the Second Vatican Council? How far back does the series of events that make it intelligible stretch? And, must not that series also include the more than fifty years that have by now passed since the Council was first announced? Is it useful, or even possible, to abstract out the years of the conciliar experience and think that one can discover in them the “event” of the Council?

For the historian and sociologist, whether something constitutes an “event” is not settled by simple examination, description, of a particular set of occurrences; it can only be settled in the long run. So, for example, whether Vatican II represents a genuine break or does not (Émile Poulat) remains to be seen. In other words, the *Wirkungsgeschichte* enters into the very meaning of the event. Mao Tse Tung, when asked what he thought of the French Revolution, is said to have replied: “It’s

¹³ William H. Sewell, Jr., “A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Social Transformation,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 98 (1992) 1-29; “Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology,” in *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, ed. Terrence McDonald (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996) 245-80; “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille,” *Theory and Society*, 25 (1996) 841-81.

¹⁴ Andrew Greeley, “The Revolutionary Event of Vatican II: How Everything Changed,” *Commonweal*, 125 (September 11, 1998) 14-20.

¹⁵ Veyne, *Comment on écrit l’histoire*, 18.

¹⁶ Veyne, *Comment on écrit l’histoire*, 61-62. See the similar remarks of Bernard Lonergan: “history is concerned to determine what, in most cases, contemporaries do not know” (*Method in Theology*, 179), and also H.-I. Marrou, *De la connaissance historique* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1962) 47, commenting on the incomplete knowledge possessed by contemporaries: “The historian cannot be content with such a view, so fragmentary and superficial; he wants and seeks to know about it much more than any contemporaries of the time knew about it or could have known about it.”

too soon to say.”

The “event” of the theologians

It is perfectly legitimate for theologians to give the term “event” a specifically religious meaning that may or may not have anything to do with the meaning it has in historical or sociological circles. But the possible, or even likely, difference between the two usages is not always kept in mind, as, for example, when a theological criticism is offered of a historian’s claim that Vatican II was an “event” in the sense of a “break.” Thus it is no pertinent answer to a historian who distinguishes between the pre-conciliar and post-conciliar Church to state that the Church is a “single subject... that grows in time and develops, while always remaining the same single subject, the People of God on its journey.” This statement of Pope Benedict XVI in his talk to the Roman Curia on 22 December 2005, was anticipated in the following remarks in his 1984 interview with Vittorio Messori:

There is no “pre-“ or “post-” conciliar Church; there is but one, unique Church that walks the path toward the Lord, ever deepening and ever better understanding the treasure of faith that he himself has entrusted to her. There are no leaps in this history, there are no fractures, and there is no break in continuity.¹⁷

A historian will be rightly puzzled by this claim, but so will many a theologian. First, it is difficult to understand the claim that the Church is a single historical subject. The one Church exists only in and as the many Churches, and each of them exists and functions as an engagement in the light of the Gospel with the distinctive challenges of its own particular historical moments and circumstances. A concrete ecclesiology recognizes that the Church always constitutes itself within and in some reference, even if a negative one, to the world and time in which it is living. As Ratzinger himself once put it, “Christianity has never existed in a purely world-less state. Because it exists in men, whose behavior is 'the world,' it never appears concretely except in a relationship to the world.”¹⁸ That these relationships differ, often dramatically, even contradictorily, from age to age and from place to place, is a commonplace for historians and sociologists and a problem only for those whose ecclesiology abstracts the Church from the Churches.

Second, if local Churches, despite varying relationships to their worlds, can recognize one another as Churches within the universal communion, and if the Church today can recognize itself in the Churches of past generations and centuries, which may have had quite different relationships to their worlds, then a distinction can be made between the universal generative principles of the Church and their particular realizations in local Churches, and perhaps it is the former that are intended in the appeal to the Church as a “single subject.” There is one Church, of course, but it exists only in and out of the many Churches, and only in them does this one, unique Church walk the path toward the Lord, ever deepening and ever better understanding the treasure of faith that he has entrusted to her. To attribute such ever progressive activity to a single historical subject,

¹⁷ *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Report on the State of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985) 35.

¹⁸ See Joseph Ratzinger, “Der Christ und die Welt von heute,” in *Dogma und Verkündigung*, p. 187.

moreover, is also to idealize the Church. In his commentary on the second chapter of *Dei verbum*, Ratzinger once praised a speech at the Council in which Albert Cardinal Meyer of Chicago “asked that the text state not only that *in statu viatorum* tradition proceeds in a spirit of progress and ever deeper insight into faith, but that there is also the possibility of failure [*deficere*], and, in fact, this possibility is constantly being realized.”¹⁹

Discussions about possible breaks or discontinuities in the history of the Church, then, may concern (1) the inner life and structure of the Church, (2) the Church’s relationship to the world, or (3) both of these together, with only the third of these yielding a fully concrete analysis with which both theologians and historians might be content.

With these preliminary ideas and questions in mind, let me now review some of the recent efforts to identify and describe the conciliar event/experience. In a preface to a collection of Yves Congar’s essays on the Council, René Rémond provided a historian’s elementary description: “The Council is an historic event...because it did not leave the Church as it found it.”²⁰ Congar himself offered a similar description, which, somewhat oddly, he called “philosophical”: an event is “something other than the regular recurrence of natural phenomena or the expected manifestations of an institution. It is a fact that, having occurred, changes something in the present or in the future.”²¹ But Congar was most interested in describing this event theologically: “The force of the conciliar fact is that it represents a moment in which the Church’s self-awareness is concentrated in an act of living its fidelity to the Lord Jesus and to his Holy Spirit, in the confession and celebration of the faith.”²² It is this theological sense of the term that he develops in the following pages. There is a rapid reference to the sociological reality: “In an assembly a communication of ideas, of convictions takes place; each is raised by others beyond what he is by himself”; but a contrast is then drawn: “A council is not a conference.... It is a Church-reality, a celebration, a moment in which God conducts his people; the Holy Spirit is at work in it and of that sociological communication it makes a communion, a unanimity, that derives from the City of God.” In these pages Congar does not succeed in integrating the two ways of looking at a council as an event.²³ Elsewhere, however, Congar offered other analyses, to be studied below.

Perhaps the best known attempt to offer a basic theological interpretation of the Second

¹⁹ *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, vol. III (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 185, where Ratzinger also expressed his regret that Meyer’s suggestion was not taken up in the final text. Meyer’s speech is in *Acta Synodalia*, III/III, 150-51.

²⁰ René Rémond, “Préface,” in Y. Congar, *Le Concile Vatican II: Son Église, Peuple de Dieu et Corps du Christ* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984) ii.

²¹ Congar, *Le Concile Vatican II*, p. 53; see also pp. 68, 80, 105.

²² Yves Congar, *Le Concile de Vatican II* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984) 53.

²³ The same two dimensions of a conciliar event are developed at much greater length in Congar’s article, “The Council as an Assembly and the Church as Essentially Conciliar,” in *One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic: Studies in the Nature and Role of the Church in the Modern World*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968) 44-88, but here, too, the two dimensions are not very well integrated.

Vatican Council is that of Karl Rahner.²⁴ Built upon the assumption that despite the historical contingencies involved in the event, the Council “was not merely an arbitrary accumulation of individual events and decisions, but an internal essential coherence of incidents which was not produced merely by its formal juridical character.” His thesis is that “the Second Vatican Council is the beginning of a tentative approach by the Church to the discovery and official realization of itself as *world-Church*” [*Weltkirche*]. This characteristic was evident both in the greater number of bishops from all over the world and in several of the Council’s final texts. To appreciate its significance, Rahner attempts what he calls “a theologically appropriate division of church history.” All of church history is divided into three great epochs: Judaeo-Christianity, Hellenistic/European Christianity, and the epoch now opening, the age of the global Church. St. Paul, the initiator and the great defender of the shift from the first to the second age, provided a vigorous theological argument for the caesura that the bringing of the Gospel to non-Jewish nations entailed. Rahner thinks there is a similarity between that great shift and the one on which the Church embarked at Vatican II, a shift from a Euro-centric Church to one that knows that it must adapt itself to other great cultures. The shift, Rahner proposes, “does not mean merely a quantitative augmentation of the earlier Church, but contains a theological caesura in church history... which can be compared perhaps only with the transition from Judaeo-Christianity to Gentile Christianity.” Rahner raises the question of the theological and not merely “cultural-historical singularity” of the first great shift, but his answer is tentative and not convincingly applied to the second shift. One key seems to be that the first shift entailed a caesura, a break, with the concrete practices of traditional Judaism. Rahner wonders whether the Church has the right, and if so, the courage to make a similar break with attitudes and practices of traditional Euro-centric Christianity.

Rahner insisted from beginning to end that his essay was tentative and his considerations preliminary, rudimentary, vague, unsystematic, and unclear. This has not prevented it from gaining a great deal of attention and approval. Among the things left unclear is precisely what Rahner meant by a *theological* interpretation of the Council and the related notion of “a *theologically* appropriate division of church history.” It remains unclear why the great openness the Council displayed to other cultures should not be considered an implication of the first epochal shift and without any independent theological significance. That a historian might regard the Council’s membership and work as portending a new multicultural age for the Church is quite possible, but he would also take note of many earlier developments, a few of them mentioned by Rahner himself, that made it at once possible and somewhat unremarkable for the Council to adopt its open position. The recognition of the nearly infinite variety of cultures and contexts to which the Church must address the Gospel, is certainly an important achievement of the Council. That it suffices for a basic theological interpretation is another matter.

In another theological approach to the Council, Michel Fédou starts from Alberigo’s view that Vatican II was “an ‘event’ more important and richer than the corpus of its decisions. Refraining from particular studies of the Council’s work, Fédou offers a theological interpretation of the event

²⁴ Karl Rahner, “Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council,” *Concern for the Church: Theological Investigations XX* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 77-89.

itself, a reflection on “the founding experience of Vatican II,” which will reveal its meaning and its future fruitfulness. What is fundamentally at stake in a correct understanding of the Council is not only “literal fidelity to its statements” but also “the ability to enter ourselves into the experience of God that permitted such statements.”

For Fédou “event” means the exceptional: Vatican II was “*un événement exceptionnel*.” It was exceptional, first, simply because it was held and succeeded; the fathers of the Council experienced “an uncommon freedom and creativity,” and it is these that made possible the innovations expressed in the texts. Two basic options made by Pope John XXIII and accepted by the majority of the bishops underlie these innovations. The first is the emphasis placed upon the Church’s historicity, its insertion into time, which validated Pope John’s call for an *aggiornamento* and was in turn legitimized by his distinction between the substance of the faith and its expression. The second option was the determination that the Council would be an exercise of the magisterium that would be “primarily pastoral in character.” This would not only depart from the anathematizing practice of previous councils; it would require reading the signs of the times and being attentive to the questions of its audiences both within and outside the Church. These two dimensions of the Council’s work not only illumine its work but also provide the criteria of its interpretation. “An experience of freedom and creativity; a new awareness of the Church’s historicity; a new understanding of the link between pastoral activity and theology: these are the major dimensions of Vatican II, whatever were the difficulties and trials which it knew in the process.”

Behind or underlying these dimensions lay “a genuine experience of God” that came to expression in certain of its texts. If the Council was an exceptional event, it was so because of “the experience then had of the self-communication of God and of his presence to human history”; it was coming to “the awareness of ... the proximity of God in today’s world”; it was “the unexpected rediscovery that God not only has revealed himself in his Son but makes himself present to anyone who is willing to welcome him in the present of our history.” Not only is this what made the conciliar event exceptional; it is also the key for understanding its texts and also an invitation to later generations to the same experience of God.²⁵ Fédou then offers a description of this experience in trinitarian terms, which he usefully summarizes (I have supplied the conciliar texts on which he bases his description):

Thus, through the recognition of Christ as he was given to us at one moment in time [*Dei verbum* 2], through the evocation of God as Father of all human beings [*Lumen gentium* 16], through the insistence on the nearness of God in the today of the world, in the Church [*Lumen gentium*, ch. 2; *Dei verbum*, ch. 6] and outside the Church [*Lumen gentium*, 8, 15; *Unitatis redintegratio* 6, 11; *Gaudium et spes* 16, 22]—is revealed the theological experience that carried the best of the conciliar experience: the experience of God, one and three, envisaged not abstractly or coldly but rather with the dynamism of an event that reaches into the inner depths of human beings and mysteriously enters into the flesh of our history.”

In the concluding pages of his article, Fédou returns to the position on the relationship between texts and event with which he began. He disagrees with an interpretation that would focus

²⁵ Michel Fédou, “Le Concile Vatican II: Un enjeu d’interprétation,” in *Vatican II sous le regard des historiens*, 137-57.

on the principal texts of the Council from which might be drawn a set of statements about God, Christ, the Spirit, but without entering into the theological event into which they invite us.

The problem with these inadequate readings is not that they are objectively false, since they really are authorized by major texts of Vatican II. But it could be said that, paradoxically, it is perhaps the very quality of the corpus of Vatican II that is the place or object of the greatest temptation. Perhaps this is in fact the threat that most endangers the posterity of the Council: that this corpus is treated in itself, by being detached from the conciliar event and the theological experience that makes it possible.

Fédou's essay is consciously and deliberately theological in character. Although aware of the difficulties and tensions that Vatican II's journey encountered, he abstracts from them in considering the event-character of the Council. The two great determinations of the event—the historical consciousness it displayed and the pastoral character of its teaching—are said to derive from an experience of God whose description is drawn exclusively from certain major texts. It is somewhat paradoxical that one who criticizes one-sided reference to the conciliar texts should have derived his own description of the conciliar experience of God solely from the final texts. It is hard to disagree with Fédou's trinitarian summary of the Council's teaching about God, but that it came out of an experience to which the word "event" might apply is more assumed than argued.

In addition, the analysis remains curiously abstract. Reference is made to the experience of God's presence and power in human history, but the character of this experience at Vatican II is left quite vague. Fédou offers no analysis or even description of the precise moment in human history that confronted the fathers of Vatican II. The Council's own historicity, its own exercise in reading and responding to the signs of the times, is left unexplored and neither illumines nor is illumined by the claimed experience of God. A concrete description or analysis of this encounter with its historical moment might have helped bridge the gap between a theological and a historical approach to the Council as an event.

Christophe Theobald has undertaken a very ambitious and massive interpretation of the conciliar event, the first volume of which has appeared.²⁶ As outlined in earlier essays, Theobald's thesis is that the Council was an instance of the hearing, communication, and reception of the Word of God that is described in the preface to *Dei verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. This theological event, lived by the Council, and not a focus on the Church, should provide the hermeneutical key that unlocks the *corpus* of conciliar documents, for these bear "the traces of a gigantic process of individual and collective apprenticeship, of a sort of self-appropriation of ecclesial consciousness as it confronts modernity and other spiritual and religious forces, of a true 'reform' or 'conversion,' not complete, of course, but grounded in the very Gospel of God." The event of the Council was this "collective process of apprenticeship and conversion."²⁷ The event-experience of the Council, what the Council *was*, what was lived in and as the Council, becomes

²⁶ Christophe Theobald, *La réception du concile Vatican II: I. Accéder à la source* (Paris: Cerf, 2009). A second volume is to follow with the subtitle: "L'Église dans l'histoire et société."

²⁷ Christophe Theobald, "Enjeux herméneutiques des débats sur l'histoire du concile Vatican II," *Cristianesimo nella Storia*, 28 (2007) 359-380

paradigmatic and has heuristic value for the future.

Both in his article and in his book, Theobald refers to some sociologists' views about Western modernity as enshrined in the de-institutionalization of the religious sphere, individualism, relativism, and pluralism. They see what has been happening in the Catholic Church is a process of "internal secularization," that is, "the process by which the reduction of the religious system's control over the whole of the society is progressively 'internalized and judged legitimate by the religious group itself,' a process that affects even the representations that this group, i.e., the Church, has of itself and of its mission in the world."²⁸ Somewhat nervously, Theobald is quick to offer theological justifications for this process which he thinks has "evangelical and theological motivations, which imply a genuine decentering of the Church-group." The first volume of his work on the reception of Vatican II repeatedly refers to the difference between the historical and cultural moment in which the Council met and the present cultural situation. Vatican II can be considered paradigmatic for the Church's engagement with contemporary cultural challenges, but if they are met on the model of the Council, the concrete responses will inevitably be different than those offered by Vatican II itself. The second volume of his study, as planned, will take up the Church's engagement with society and history, and perhaps there Theobald will offer more precise descriptions and analyses of the historical challenge the Council engaged. He echoes Rahner's famous claim that "we are living a change analogous to that of the first 'passage' of the Gospel into the Hellenistic world," but what the modern "passage" might be remains unexplored. There is a paragraph on the rootedness in history of the conciliar texts, and here are mentioned: modern stress on conscience and freedom, the Church's spiritual links with the Jewish people, and its contacts with other religions and with "the human condition in today's world."

What was the "before"?

If one takes "event" in the historian's or sociologist's sense of an occurrence or sequence of occurrences that constitutes or brings about difference, perhaps even breaks and discontinuity, one has to be able to say what was the former state disrupted by the event. In other words, one has to be able to identify a "before" and an "after."

Setting aside the grander claims that Vatican II represented the end of the Constantinian era or of the counter-reformation, we may perhaps begin with Hervé Legrand's comment that historians, in describing the event-character of Vatican II, quite often refer to breaks or discontinuities within "Catholicism," a term to which theologians prefer the term "catholicity" or simply "the Catholic Church." The word "Catholicism" appears to have been coined, in French and English anyway, in the early seventeenth century. In the sense intended, it appears to refer to an early-modern and modern construction. Thus Jean Delumeau makes it a post-Reformation construction,²⁹ which Yves Congar, following Giuseppe Alberigo, calls "Tridentinism" and describes as "a system that embraced

²⁸ Theobald, *La réception du concile Vatican II*, I, 657, with references to François-André Isambert, "La sécularisation interne du christianisme," *Revue française de sociologie*, 17 (1976) 573-89, and to D. Hervieu-Léger, *Catholicisme, la fin d'un monde*.

²⁹ Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

absolutely everything: theology, ethics, Christian behavior, religious practice, liturgy, organization, Roman centralization, the constant intervention of Roman congregations in the life of the Church.” The great blessing Vatican II brought the Catholic Church, Congar said, was its “departure from Tridentinism.”³⁰ Louis Bouyer says that the Catholicism whose “decomposition” he was witnessing right after the Council was the “artificial system” that was “forged by the Counter-Reformation” and “hardened by the brutal repression of modernism.”³¹ Franz-Xaver Kaufmann defines it as “a modern phenomenon,” “those social forms of Roman Catholic Christendom that were constructed after Napoleon’s liquidation of the feudal ecclesiastical system.”³² Legrand has a more expansive description: already separated from the Orthodox East and reduced by the Reformation to Mediterranean countries, the Catholic Church “redefined its identity, intellectually by privileging scholasticism and ecclesiology by its insistence on the universality of the Church”; associated with this was a tight centralization of pastoral and doctrinal decision-making, all of it consecrated in the first Code of Canon Law.³³

Within the post-Tridentine era, I have proposed that a distinctively modern Roman Catholicism was constructed in the nineteenth century in opposition to new and even revolutionary economic, social, political, and cultural developments.³⁴ The result was what Ratzinger once criticized as the little Catholic *Sonderwelt*. Seeing deformations of Christianity already in the Constantinian turn, medieval Christendom, and the narrowness of the counter-reformation, he was particularly critical of the further constriction expressed in the Syllabi of Pius IX and Pius X. Ratzinger said that Harnack was not entirely wrong when he said that these statements condemned modern culture and science, and he himself added that with them the Church “deprived itself of the possibility of living Christianity as something of today, because it was all too attached to yesterday.”³⁵ In another work, Ratzinger spoke of the Church before the Council as being “in the late phases of a culture that looks no longer forwards but backwards.... Theology seemed to have thought its way through everything, piety to have practiced and crystallized everything that could possibly be done and formulated; every space had been filled up with the data of tradition, just like a church-building that is packed with altars, pictures, and testimonies to the piety of former

³⁰ Yves-Marie Congar, *Entretiens d’automne* (Paris: Cerf, 1987) 9-12; see Giuseppe Alberigo, “From the Council of Trent to ‘Tridentinism,’” in *From Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 19-37.

³¹ Louis Bouyer, *The Decomposition of Catholicism* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1969) 110.

³² “Das zweite Vatikanische Konzil als Moment einer Modernisierung des Katholizismus,” in *Der Betrag der deutschsprachigen und osteuropäischen Länder zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, ed. K. Wittstadt and W. Verschooten (Leuven: Bibliotheek van de Faculteit Godgeleerdheid, 1996) 3-24, at p. 12.

³³ Legrand, “Relecture et évaluation,” 58-60. As a theologian, Legrand has no difficulty with such an historical notion of Catholicism; in fact, it can be quite useful to an ecclesologist who wants to distance himself from it, in part by insisting, instead, on the properly theological notion of “catholicity” or by reading Vatican II as “*la sortie du catholicisme*.”

³⁴ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism,” *Cristianesimo nella Storia*, 18 (1997): 353-85.

³⁵ “Was heisst Erneuerung der Kirche?” in *Das neue Volk Gottes: Entwürfe zur Ekklesiologie* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1969), pp. 267-81.

generations."³⁶ This description corresponds very closely to what Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac described as the suffocating “system” apparently in control of the pre-Vatican II Church.

The great achievement of Vatican II, Congar argued, was its departure from that Tridentine “system.” Fine historian that he was, he complemented his theological analysis of the Council with important historical insights. That a council was held at all was itself a break from the everyday routine of the Church’s life; ecumenical councils are rare. Vatican II demonstrated the value of councils as gatherings of bishops, with all the human qualities of conversation, of the exchange of convictions and ideas, a dimension impossible to realize by a so-called “council in writing” that had been proposed by some. The freedom of the debates at Vatican II were noted by all participants and observers, but it was what was revealed in them that Congar found most decisive:

By the frankness of the debates, by openness to contributions long ignored, excluded, condemned, by a healthy internal critique pursued in the light of the demands of both the mission and the Gospel, the unconditional character of the system inherited from the Counter-Reformation and from the anti-revolutionary restoration of the nineteenth century was dissolved... Currents of ideas, attitudes too long kept at a distance, have penetrated by doors and windows at last opened. The [post-conciliar] crisis also came from this.³⁷

But Congar also placed the Council and its aftermath in a larger historical context. He noted how many of the problems obvious during the immediate post-conciliar period were already apparent in the 1950's: “accelerated urbanization, the end of a stable framework of life..., criticisms of the parish, of the clergy, of the hierarchy; questions about marriage; ... the influence of existentialism, ‘situation ethics,’ the so-called ‘new theology’, the orientation of young people toward the world’s problems, Christian ‘progressivism’, questions raised by the diversity and divisions among Catholics; the vocation-crisis; the liturgy; altars facing the people...”³⁸ Great challenges were already being met and addressed before the Council was convoked and began to meet.

The decisive shift

Even more decisive, Congar argued, were developments occurring in the world at large. The Council met in a world that no longer understood itself in terms of a “metaphysics of fixed and hierarchically ordered natures.” The world had been historicized; it was now what human beings have made, are making, and will make of themselves: “humanity,” he wrote, “has taken charge of itself.” The old hardened distinction between a sacred sphere for which the Church is responsible and a secular or temporal sphere for which the state is responsible was no longer adequate. The world is now history, and “man is the subject of the process by which he constructs himself.”³⁹

The Council met, Congar said, at the beginning of “a socio-cultural change whose breadth, radicalness, rapidity, and cosmic character have no equivalent in any other age of history.”⁴⁰ Congar

³⁶ Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971), pp. 78-79.

³⁷ Congar, *Le Concile de Vatican II*, p. 70.

³⁸ Yves Congar, *Église catholique et France moderne* (Paris: Hachette, 1978) 55-56.

³⁹ Congar, *Église catholique et France moderne*, pp. 57, 230.

⁴⁰ Congar, *Le Concile de Vatican II*, p. 106.

listed some of the elements of this transformation as it unfolded in the first decade after the Council: “the foundering of metaphysics; fevered interest in hermeneutics; the triumph of critical methods; the invasion of the ‘human sciences’; possibilities of manipulating human beings; the revolt of young people now constituting a semi-autonomous world; the rise of women in social and professional life; a radical secularization; galloping urbanization; a break with the classic expressions of doctrine, a crisis of the ‘magisterium’; a lack of interest, even among the clergy, in churchy things and fascination with earthly things; invasion of the political and of Marxist categories.”⁴¹

Congar summarized the result of all these developments:

The substructure, not of the faith itself, but its classical cultural expression, has collapsed. ‘The present crisis is not a crisis of faith, but a crisis of the metaphysics behind which the Church believed it could take refuge in order to confront modern culture—a metaphysics also linked to social systems that the Church agreed to sacralize.’ Even if one can debate so massive a statement, the diagnosis, in general, is accurate.⁴²

Even before the Council had ended, Bernard Lonergan was offering a nearly identical analysis. The crisis, he said, “is a crisis not of faith but of culture.”⁴³ What he called “the massive breakthrough” effected at Vatican II was part of “a disengagement from the forms of classicist culture and a transposition into the forms of modern culture.”⁴⁴ By classicist culture Lonergan meant an ideal that developed in the early modern era but remained dominant in Catholic circles well into the twentieth century. It was a normative notion of culture, content with the universal and the abstract in its notions of individual and collective human life. But the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, the rise of historical consciousness, the development of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), and the economic, social, political, and cultural revolutions of the last two centuries elaborated and made dominant a modern notion of culture that is impatient with the abstract and the universal, glories in the particular and concrete, and makes few if any normative claims.⁴⁵ Most distinctively, it is historically conscious, that is, self-aware:

Modern culture is the culture that knows about itself and other cultures. It is aware

⁴¹ Congar, *Le Concile de Vatican II*, p. 106-107.

⁴² Congar, *Église catholique et France moderne*, p. 50. Congar quotes from J. Natanson, in *Esprit*, November 1971, p. 600.

⁴³ Bernard Lonergan, “Dimensions of Meaning,” in *Collection, Collected Works*, IV (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988) 244. This is the text of a talk given May 12, 1965.

⁴⁴ Bernard Lonergan, “The Future of Christianity,” in *Second Collection* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 149-63.

⁴⁵ Fuller descriptions of the impact on theology of these cultural transformations can be found in lectures delivered in the early 1970's and published in *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965-1980 (Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 17), ed. Robert C. Croken and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 221- 98. The significance of the scientific revolution goes largely unnoticed in most discussions of the cultural challenges the Church began to face at Vatican II. Lonergan often quoted Herbert Butterfield's statement that the rise of modern science “outshines everything since the rise of Christianity and reduces the Renaissance and the Reformation to the rank of mere episodes, mere internal displacements, within the system of medieval Christendom”; Lonergan, “Theology in its New Context,” in *Second Collection*, 56, quoting from Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science, 1300-1800* (New York, 1966), 7.

that they are man-made. It is aware that the cultural may sustain or destroy or refashion the social. So it is that modern man not only individually is responsible for the life he leads but also collectively is responsible for the world in which he leads it.⁴⁶

This is the characteristic of modernity that Lonergan stresses most: the awareness of the humanly constructed character of economies, societies, polities, even religions, and the accompanying sense of responsibility for what we are making or will make of all these. (This is the equivalent of the existential moment when an individual discovers that it is up to himself to decide for himself what to make of himself.) To describe the historical and cultural moment Lonergan adopted and adapted Georg Simmel's notion of *die Wendung zur Idee*, which Lonergan took to refer to "the tendency and even the necessity of every large social, cultural, or religious movement, to reflect on itself, to define its goals, to scrutinize the means it employs or might employ, to keep in mind its origins, its past achievements, its failures." Such an "axial shift" he goes on, will vary from one cultural or historical setting to another, and as these change so will the idea of the movement if it is to be in harmony with the mentality or horizon of the new context. Earlier examples were provided by the Apologists, the Fathers of the Church, Byzantine scholasticism, medieval theology and canon law, Christian humanism, and the counter-Reformation.

Shortly after the Council, Lonergan wrote that Catholics were undergoing a serious crisis "because up to Vatican II they were sheltered against the modern world and since Vatican II they have been exposed more and more to the chill winds of modernity."⁴⁷ Their classicist culture involved Catholics "in a very limited view that totally underestimated the possibilities of cultural change and so precluded advertence to the need for adaptation and zeal to effect it." On the other hand, the anti-religious ideologies that often accompanied the new culture as well as the suffering and crimes of the twentieth century made Catholics slow and reluctant to acknowledge the merits of modernity. Genuine *aggiornamento* would not mean deserting the past but "a discerning and discriminating disengagement from its limitations," and it would also mean acknowledging the evils as well as the goods of the modern culture.⁴⁸ *Aggiornamento* recognizes that "the Church, if it is to operate in the world, has to operate on the basis of the social order and cultural achievements of each time and place, that consequently its operation has to change with changes in its social and cultural context, that at present we have the task of a disengagement from classicist thought-forms and viewpoints, and, simultaneously, of a new involvement in modern culture."⁴⁹

In an essay first delivered at a symposium on the theological implications of the Council, Lonergan spoke of revelation as "God's entry into man's making of man."⁵⁰ The latter phrase Lonergan explained in terms of "the constitutive role of meaning in human living":

It is the fact that acts of meaning inform human living, that such acts proceed from a free and responsible subject incarnate, that meanings differ from nation to nation, from

⁴⁶ Lonergan, "The Absence of God in Modern Culture," in *Second Collection*, 115.

⁴⁷ Lonergan, "Belief: Today's Issue," in *Second Collection*, 93.

⁴⁸ Lonergan, "The Absence of God in Modern Culture," in *Second Collection*, 113.

⁴⁹ Lonergan, "Belief Today," 98.

⁵⁰ Lonergan, "Theology in its New Context," *Second Collection*, 62.

culture to culture, and that, over time, they develop and go astray. Besides the meanings by which man apprehends nature and the meanings by which he transforms it, there are the meanings by which man thinks out the possibilities of his own living and makes his choice among them. In this realm of freedom and creativity, of solidarity and responsibility, of dazzling achievement and pitiable madness, there ever occurs man's making of man.⁵¹

This recognition of man's individual and collective self-responsibility is one of the most important constituents of the cultural context in which Vatican II met, but surprisingly it does not often appear in interpretations of the Council. Ever since the French Revolution, the Church had resisted this notion as when to the rights of man it regularly counterposed the rights of God, as if agreeing with Feuerbach's stark alternative: "To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must become nothing."⁵² The growing sense of human self-responsibility was even made equivalent to the NT description of "the son of perdition and adversary who exalts himself above every so-called god proposed for worship, he who seats himself in God's temple and even declares himself to be God" (2 Thess 2:4).⁵³ Among the "prophets of doom" from whom Pope John distanced himself in his opening speech to the Council a number of his predecessors on Peter's chair would have to be included. The Church had to travel a long and difficult journey before it could accept the validity of this defining aspect of modernity.

The Council did so, first, in the section of *Gaudium et spes* devoted to human activity in the world (nos. 33-39) which denies that human activity must be counterposed to divine sovereignty and vindicates a legitimate autonomy of earthly activities. In the next chapter (nos. 40-45) the Council explains not only what the Church can offer to individuals and societies today but also what it can learn from them. But perhaps clearest is the later chapter on "Culture" (nos. 53-62), particularly in the description of the factors that have produced the modern world and its distinctive culture (54) whose chief characteristic is described in no. 55:

In every group or nation, there is an ever-increasing number of men and women who are aware that they themselves are the artisans and originators of the culture of their community. Throughout the world a sense of both autonomy and responsibility is constantly growing that is of the greatest importance for the spiritual and moral maturity of the human race. This becomes clearer if we consider how the world is becoming more unified and how we have the duty to build a better world in truth and righteousness. In this way we are witnessing the birth of a new humanism, one in which man is defined first of all by his responsibility toward his brothers and toward history.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Lonergan, "Theology in its New Context," 61.

⁵² Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957) 26.

⁵³ Pius X's inaugural encyclical, *E supremi*, Oct. 4, 1903; *ASS* 36:131-32.

⁵⁴ Forty years later, Pope Benedict XVI echoed this definition of a "new humanism": "Promoting a new humanism, in fact, requires a clear understanding of what this 'newness' actually embodies. Far from being the fruit of a superficial desire for novelty, the quest for a new humanism must take serious account of the fact that Europe today is experiencing a massive cultural shift, one in which men and women are increasingly conscious of their call to be actively engaged in shaping their own history." There is, however, no reference to GS 55. (Speech to conference on the new humanism, June 2007).

But the Council's recognition of human self-responsibility did not end there. In fact, I think the Council can be seen as the particular moment in which the Catholic Church became more conscious of its responsibility *for its own self-realization* and eagerly accepted the challenge. Lonergan's description of the *Wendung zur Idee* reads almost like a description of what the Church in council undertook to do: "to reflect on itself, to define its goals, to scrutinize the means it employs or might employ, to keep in mind its origins, its past achievements, its failures." Perhaps this is what Theobald meant when he spoke of "*une sorte de retour sur soi de la conscience ecclésiale*" realized at the Council, a greater awareness of its responsibility for itself; it was an important moment in the process by which in an historically conscious age the Church too had to become "a fully conscious process of self-constitution."⁵⁵ Pope Paul VI spoke of it as the culmination of "a long internal labor, a progressive heightening of awareness, in harmony with the evolution of historical circumstances, that led the Church to concentrate on her mission." But the Pope anticipated an objection:

Does this mean that the Church is withdrawing to the desert and abandoning the world to its lot, happy or unhappy? Quite the contrary. She is disengaging herself from worldly interests only in order to be able to penetrate society, to place herself in service of the common good, to offer her help and means of salvation to all. But she does this today—and this is another characteristic of this Council that has often been noted—she does this today in a way that contrasts in part with the attitude that marked certain pages of her history.⁵⁶

In an essay on the Council, Karl Rahner also argued that "in all of its sixteen constitutions, decrees, and declarations it has been concerned with the *Church*." Vatican II was "a Council of the Church about the Church" at which "the Church was not only the author but the subject too of the conciliar statements."⁵⁷ Rahner himself asked why this ecclesiological focus defined the Council's work instead of more fundamental, more difficult, and more urgent questions about God and Christ. His reply essentially was that the posing of questions are often imposed upon people by conditions and factors not subject to their control, and that this is also true of the Church. That ecclesiology became the central conciliar focus almost inevitably, spontaneously, and without much conscious reflection reveals the pressure of factors not under the Church's control. Unfortunately, however, Rahner did not explore or even identify the external factors that moved the Church to engage in this consistent self-reflection at Vatican II.

After discussing the new elements in the ecclesiology of the Council—the presence of the one Church in the many local Churches; the Church as sacrament of salvation; and the collegial and synodal character of the Church—Rahner provides a better answer to his question. The Church is truly herself when she is the institution of salvation precisely because she is the fruit of salvation.

The Church understands her own nature best when she is actually fulfilling her

⁵⁵ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 364.

⁵⁶ Pope Paul VI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps, January 8, 1966. Even before he was elected pope, Cardinal Montini had offered this as a description of the Council's task: "The Church is reflecting on itself; it needs to define itself; it needs to know itself better, to identify in some way the inexpressible realities that it bears within itself."

⁵⁷ Karl Rahner, "The New Image of the Church," *Theological Investigations*, X (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973) 3-29, at pp. 3-4; originally published in *Geist und Leben*, 39 (January/February 1966.) 4-24.

function, and this means when she is actually speaking of God and his grace, of Jesus Christ, his Cross and Resurrection, and eternal life, and when, in the very act of uttering this message, she allows herself to be moved by the grace of God.....

Now if we can view the Church in this light, then certainly we have achieved something more than a one-sided view of the Church as an authoritative institution of salvation. Then the Church appears not primarily as the Church who acts upon us, but rather as the Church who we all *are* in virtue of the fact that the grace of God has moved and inspired us and bound us together into a unity.

The apparent ecclesio-centrism of the Council's body of teachings, then, is for the sake of the self-realization of a Church that knows itself and shows itself to depend utterly on the word and grace of God.

The Church's *prise de conscience* of its nature and its mission need not be considered a self-absorbed neglect of an obligatory theo-centrism or of the Church's engagement in the world, which often seem the concerns when the Council is accused of "ecclesiocentrism." Whether ecclesiocentrism is a good or bad thing depends, of course, on what one means by the Church. If the self-consciousness to which the Council invited the Church includes a greater awareness of its utter dependence upon God's word and grace and of its redemptive responsibility for the world, this is, as Christophe Theobald puts it, "a movement of self-reflection in the conciliar subject that is at the same time a de-centering, the Church not existing in the act of proclaiming except as de-centered toward Christ and toward people."⁵⁸ The always somewhat artificial distinction between the *Ecclesia ad intra* and the *Ecclesia ad extra* can be overcome with a recognition that the Church's nature is never realized except as mission, that is, that the genesis of the Church is already an engagement with the world in which any of the local Churches exists. A world in which a genuine Church exists is a world different on that account, and to have brought to more explicit awareness the Church's participation in man's making of man is one of the great achievements of the Second Vatican Council and perhaps the best way to approach it as an historic event and to interpret its texts as a decisive moment in the Church's modern self-realization.

I believe that the conciliar texts can be read as so many efforts by which the Church might take fuller and more conscious responsibility for its own self-realization. Some of these efforts were more successful than others; some of them were implemented more fully and consistently than others; some of them are more relevant to today's changed circumstances than others. The interpretation of Vatican II is now unavoidably linked with the interpretation of its aftermath. What began over fifty years ago with the announcement of Vatican II did not end with the solemn close of the Council, and the decades that followed the Council must enter as much as do the intentions and texts of the popes and bishops into a determination of whether and in what sense Vatican II may be considered an "event".

⁵⁸ C. Theobald, *La réception du concile Vatican II*, I, p. 472.