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Vatican II as an "event"

The lived "experience" of Vatican II was in part a dramatic struggle over varying ideas about what the Council ought to be, to do, and to say. Also, this struggle did not end with the Council—it continues today.

The fourth annual Henri de Lubac Lecture in Historical Theology, delivered at Saint Louis University on February 11, 1999

Thirty years ago, on May 29, 1969, only three and a half years after the close of the Second Vatican Council, Henri de Lubac gave a lecture here as part of the closing ceremonies in celebration of the 150th anniversary of Saint Louis University.[1] The title of his speech as published in *Theology Digest* was "The Crisis in the Church"—a topic, he explained in the expanded French version, "suggested to him by the academic authorities" who had invited him. I refer to this lecture not only because Henri de Lubac's name honors the series in which you have kindly invited me to speak, but because it was the fullest statement of the great French theologian's concern about what was happening in the Catholic Church in the years after the Council,[2] at which, of course, he had played an important role. That something dramatic was happening in the Catholic Church was certainly clear enough by then. Two other heroes of the French theological revival also published books around the same time with significant titles: *The Decomposition of Catholicism* (Louis Bouyer) and *Au milieu des orages* (["Amid the Storms"] Yves Congar).

When published both in the *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* and then in expanded book form, de Lubac's title was changed to *L'Église dans la crise actuelle* ("The Church in the Present Crisis"). The change clarifies one of his intentions, which was to present the troubles of the post-conciliar era in light of the general crisis of the late 1960s. De Lubac was speaking only a year after the May 1968 disturbances, which had thrown the university life of France into disarray and had come close to bringing down the de Gaulle government. Americans will remember the chaos on our own campuses, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, and the drama of the two political conventions that same year. "We are witnessing," de Lubac wrote, "a crisis of civilization." Relying on Erik Weil and Paul Ricoeur, he saw it as a reaction to the reduction of reason to a means-focused calculation that ignores questions about meaningful ends and so has provoked, "as an alternative to the unpleasant reality of *dehumanization* and *reification*, the abstract dream of pure unregulated existence" (Weil), "the radical protest of the beatnik or the absurdity of a purposeless crime" (Ricoeur), a "universal confrontation" (de Lubac).

It was not surprising, de Lubac argued, that this crisis had evoked sympathy among some Christians, who could be expected to react against so dehumanizing a system. What was surprising was that "this same crisis has resounded with such great force even within the Church and against the Church"; the oddity was that even

while fascinated by the world that was being so strongly contested, Christians were turning that same spirit of confrontation against the community of faith. "A bitter and vindictive disposition," sparing nothing, was being directed against the church's past and present, indiscriminately attacking its structures of authority, neglecting all the positive things it had accomplished over the centuries, odiously misrepresenting its history, turning its tradition from "a living actualizing force" into "the waste-products of a dead past," regarding its authority as alien and tyrannical, the statements of its magisterium as abusive, the subjects of bitter debate, rejection, even public opposition. "I am amazed," he concluded his description,

> at the good conscience of so many of the church's children who, without ever having done anything great themselves, without having thought or suffered, without taking the time to reflect, each day make themselves, to the applause of the crowds outside, the accusers of their Mother and their brethren.

"The whole future of the Church," de Lubac insisted,

> all the fruitfulness of its mission, all that it can and should bring to the world, depend today on an energetic revival of the faith. To liberate the Christian consciousness from a morbid negativism, from a depression that is corroding it, from an inferiority complex that is paralyzing it, from a web of ambiguities that is stifling it, is the first condition for the renewal the Church desires.

Such a renewal, of course, had been the intention of the Second Vatican Council, and everyone appeals to it, de Lubac said, but in different ways. "In fact," he wrote,

> it is little known, little followed. Many who claim to be the only ones to take it seriously sneer at it today. From the very beginning, a distorting interpretation of it began to spread. Those who participated closely in it know this.

He then illustrated the point by reference in particular to the Constitutions on Divine Revelation, on the Church, and on the Church in the Modern World.

De Lubac knew that by such remarks he risked being called "a 'conservative' or 'reactionary' or 'integrist' or simply 'out of date'"; and indeed, "fearful" and "reactionary" are words recently used to describe his view of the post-conciliar period.[3] This characterization shows that the debate within the church about the meaning and validity of the Second Vatican Council continues, carried on today both in publications and in various websites on the Internet. I wish to speak today about some of the issues involved in interpreting and evaluating the Council, particularly with respect to the role that critical history might play. My intention is less that of offering my own assessment than of suggesting some of the methodological issues involved.

What do we mean by "Vatican II"?

I will begin with the three terms that defined the program of a symposium on the Council that was held in Bologna in December 1996: event, experience, and final documents.[4] The last two are the easiest to understand. "Experience" refers to contemporary intentions, motives, encounters, decisions, and actions during the Council; the "final documents" are the product of that experience. The two terms differ, of course, in that while the final documents survive in the black marks on white paper,

the experience is now part of the past and has to be reconstructed by the patient critical work of historians. As important as this reconstruction may be for the interpretation of the final documents, the latter have an objectivity and continued existence that is not contained in the experience, which no longer exists except in the threatened form of ever fewer and ever fainter personal memories.

"Event" I take to represent a different category. I mean it not in the sense of a simple occurrence but in the sense of a "noteworthy" occurrence, one that has consequences. After a period in which *l'histoire événementielle* (event-centered history) appeared to have been banished in favor of the study of *la longue durée* (the longer cycle), there is now visible among the works of historians a "return of the event," "a revival of narrative," to cite the titles of two famous essays.[5] These have been accompanied by an impressive body of historiographical literature, as reflected in two recent symposia on the meaning of the term "event."[6] The topics under discussion are varied: the relationship between continuity (structures, *mentalités*) and discontinuity (*ruptures*), the age-old question of the relations among "data," "facts," and "events"; the criteria by which to discern among historical occurrences those that qualify as "events"; the possibility of constructing a typology of "events"; the relation between contemporaries' experience, interpretation, and evaluation of historical moments and the historian's judgments about their character as "events," which raises in a different form the question of the "objectivity" of historical reconstruction; and the issue raised by Pierre Nora and others: the ability of the media to shape or even to "create" events.

In almost all of the literature, the asumption is that an "event" represents novelty, discontinuity, a "rupture," a break from routine, causing surprise, disturbance, even trauma, and perhaps initiating a new routine, a new realm of the taken-for-granted. In Pierre Grégoire's words, an event is

> a dynamic phenomenon or situation which varies enough in space and time to be perceived or undergone by the individuals involved. Consequently, for an event to be identified as such, it has to be detached in one way or another from the whole set of repetitions and regularities that constitute the course of daily life.[7]

"An event," says Paul Veyne, "is difference. . . . An event is anything that does not go without saying."[8]

As sociology once accompanied and was used to legitimate the near-abandonment of events for the sake of studying structures, mentalities, and the longer cycle, so 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 has begun to work out a theory of "events" that has clear affinities with the developments in historiography just summarized.[9] 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 then

> 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, 1789, was transformed into that

permanent change known as the French Revolution.[10]

That Vatican II constituted an "event" in this sense would seem clear and hardly in need of demonstration. Even independently of what Pope John XXIII intended the Council to be, the very calling of it was a surprise, a break with the normal life of the church. The announcement was met by both hope and fear. As the Council began to unfold, the same character revealed itself, particularly in the several dramatic moments of the first session: the pope 's opening speech; the postponement of the election of conciliar commissions; the vote on the liturgy schema; the severe criticism of the *De fontibus* text and its removal from the conciliar agenda; the appointment of the coordinating committee to review all the preparatory material and to prepare a coherent agenda. As is clear from their accounts and journals and in essays on the Council during its course, contemporaries sensed that something new and unusual was happening. People spoke of a historical turning point: the end of the Counter-Reformation or of the Tridentine era, the end of the Middle Ages, the end even of the Constantinian era. (I pass over the historiographical implications of the prayer for a "new Pentecost"!) Needless to say, the media made this novelty the main part of their story; Vatican II was front-page "news."

This is also true of the post-conciliar period for which, within five years, articles and books began to be written, some of which enthusiastically spoke of the "new Church," "the Church of the future," "a new Christendom," while others noted with displeasure what they variously called decomposition, crisis, disaster, apostasy, etc. It is now a commonplace of histories, biographies, and autobiographies to speak of the Council as a watershed; 20th-century church history is now divided into two periods: pre-conciliar and post-conciliar. The multi-volume *History of Vatican II* now being published gives as the subtitle of its first volume: *Toward a New Era in Catholicism*.[11] At the 1996 Bologna conference and elsewhere, important papers have been given on Vatican II as an "event."[12]

But, as it turns out, opinions are not unanimous. There are, roughly speaking, three types of interpretations of the Council,[13] only two of which refer to the Council as an "event," a break with earlier routine. Progressives interpret it as a good thing, the long-overdue accommodation of Catholicism to the modern world; traditionalists see it as a bad thing, the capitulation of Catholicism to principles and movements it had rightly resisted for 150 years. For both, the Council was a watershed event. A third interpretation, which I have called "reformist," plays down the eventful character of the Council as a break or rupture with tradition. According to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, whose opinion is somewhat similar to de Lubac's, the elements of discontinuity have been exaggerated by people who insist on some vague thing called the "spirit of the Council" while ignoring "the authentic texts of the authentic Vatican II."

> This schematism of a *before* and *after* in the history of the Church, wholly unjustified by the documents of Vatican II, which do nothing but reaffirm the continuity of Catholicism, must be decidedly opposed. 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. In no wise did the Council intend to introduce a temporal dichotomy in the Church.[14]

The Cardinal's perspective is largely theo-

logical and focused on the fidelity of the Council's texts to the ancient and normative faith. From a different perspective, focused on the church's attitude to the modern world but still referring principally to the conciliar texts, the French historian Émile Poulat maintains that at most, Vatican II departed from one particular tradition; what is more obvious to him, some years after the Council, is the persistence of the intransigent model characteristic of modern anti-liberal Catholicism.[15] It would seem, then, that whether Vatican II really constituted an "event" is open to debate.

Differences here in no small part depend on what is meant by "Vatican II" and particularly on whether what defines it is to be found primarily in its final texts or in the experience of both the Council and its aftermath. The progressives and traditionalists focus mainly on the conciliar and post-conciliar experience, which the former see as liberation and the latter as capitulation. The extreme traditionalists find capitulation even in the conciliar texts themselves, which some of the progressives also criticize for falling short of the "spirit" of Vatican II because of the many compromises made in order to placate a resistant conciliar minority. The reformists, such as Cardinal Ratzinger and the later de Lubac, certainly are not unaware of the dramatic changes that have taken place in the everyday life of Catholicism, but they tend to blame them on the highjacking of the Council by extreme progressives, which in turn gave and gives traditionalists reasons for rejecting the Council itself; and they wish to restore some equilibrium by invoking the conciliar texts as the principal criterion for defining and understanding the Council. The purpose here, of course, is not primarily historical but normative.

In these three views, the main focus tends to fall on the relationship between the texts the Council produced and the experience of the Council. Similarly, it was in part a conviction that "Vatican II" cannot be understood solely or perhaps even primarily by reference to its final texts but has to be understood also in terms of the often conflictual intentions, experiences, actions, and encounters of participants that led to the five-volume *History of Vatican II,* which is now in course of publication.[16] I will argue here, however, that the question of the meaning of Vatican II cannot be resolved simply on the basis of these two terms, texts and experience—or, if you prefer, "letter" and "spirit"—but requires critical attention to the third category—Vatican II as an event—which is not reducible to either of the other two terms. I will make my case primarily on historiographical grounds.

The final documents

It would seem that the final texts of the Council provide a straightforward and easily applied criterion: if you wish to know what the Council was and did, look to what it actually said. Cardinal Ratzinger was not wrong when he pleaded that appeals to a vague "spirit of the Council" be controlled by the "letter" of its texts. "The spirit of Vatican II" is sometimes taken to mean what certain people wanted the Council to say, what it would have said if not impeded by intransigent conservatives, or what it would say today about issues that have arisen since it closed.[17] The 16 texts of Vatican II represent what the participants in the Council, for good or for ill, did agree to say, and they are legitimately invoked as a now fixed expression of its intentions and authoritative decisions.

It has also to be admitted that there is an ancient principle in both canonical and civil law that a text is to be interpreted first in its most obvious and literal sense. This hermeneutic finds a parallel in recent theories of art and literature that propose ignoring or at least not favoring authorial inten-

tion; the text is what counts, and the author's intention, if not utterly irrelevant, does not exhaust its meaning. One could imagine an interpretation of the conciliar texts which would proceed in accordance with either of these two hermeneutical traditions; and perhaps something of this is what is intended when we are urged to return to the "letter" of Vatican II.

The old legal theory did maintain, however, that when a genuine question about the meaning of a text arises, recourse must be had to the intention of the legislator. In our case this would mean attending to the redactional history of the conciliar texts, which, after all, did not fall ready-made from heaven. They are the result of a history which runs at least from the antepreparatory consultation, through the official preparatory texts, through the revisions made during the Council, down to the final promulgation. Anyone who has worked on the final texts knows that their full meaning can often be found only when they are placed within this redactional history. What has been changed, added, eliminated in this process often provides helpful indications of what was intended in the final texts, for many of which we have also explicit testimonies from the revising bodies of what successive texts meant and of what various changes in them signified.[18] These are, it hardly needs to be said, enormously important for a hermeneutic of the texts, history now itself becoming an indispensable element in their interpretation. In many of these redactional histories, the differences between the texts officially prepared and the final texts are great enough for one to be able to speak at times of "break" or "discontinuity." This is true not only of what they said but also of the style and tone in which they said it, a point pertinently made by John O'Malley.[19]

But there is still another consideration. Many if not all of the more significant conciliar texts are part of a history larger than the one that began with the preparatory period or with the antepreparatory consultation, and they are larger also than a history that ends with their promulgation. Consider a historical hermeneutic of *Dei verbum*. One way to begin is with the text *De fontibus revelationis* that was prepared by the Preparatory Theological Commission. A whole set of questions will arise as soon as it is compared with the Council's Dogmatic Constitution, among them: how did it happen that the Council, which was expected to say what was said in *De fontibus*, said finally what is said in *Dei verbum*; where are the points of continuity, of discontinuity, etc.? But then there is the question about the *De fontibus* text itself: Why did it treat the questions it discussed? Why did it adopt the positions it took? Answers to these questions may lead us back to the antepreparatory consultation, which in turn will open upon larger questions about recent interpretations of the Bible, ecumenical relations, etc. And these open upon a still larger history, which will include the encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu*, the decrees of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Pascendi* and *Lamentabili*, the Modernist crisis, the rise of historical criticism, the relation between scripture and tradition in post-tridentine Catholicism, the crisis of the Reformation—behind which, of course, lies a still earlier history. But perhaps enough has been said to indicate how large the series can be made within which to make sense both of the text *De fontibus* and the conciliar text *Dei verbum*, and to warrant the conclusion that the latter text was certainly intended to do something other than simply "reaffirm the continuity of Catholicism."

The experience of the Council

If we turn now to the other term, "experience," things are even more complex. Often used in the singular, the term would

seem to refer to "what happened during Vatican II," now considered to be something larger than the simple preparation of the final documents. The term "experience," or terms like it, was used at the time of the Council, as, for example, in descriptions of what happened to many bishops who found themselves meeting for the first time in their lives in and as a Council.[20] Even then, however, this usage was deceptive because it reduced to a single experience, and a single experience of a certain type, what was in fact a plurality and a variety of individual experiences. It was the experience of the majority which was considered to count as "Vatican II." Most of the first accounts and histories of the Council were written by the "victors."

But what now, almost 35 years later, do we mean by Vatican II as an "experience"? If we initially restrict ourselves again to the interval from January 25, 1959, to December 8, 1965, the term may refer to all that happened *at* the Council as lived by its participants during that time frame. But two difficulties arise at this point. The first is the problem sometimes referred to by historiographers as that of "abstraction" in history. Many years ago the American historian Carl Becker pointed out that Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon, apparently a simple and certain "fact" of history, in fact is "a generalization of a thousand and one simpler facts."[21] Similarly, Paul Veyne notes that the "French Revolution" is a term used to cover "an aggregate of little facts."[22] Neither of these two observations renders the use of a single covering term illegitimate, but they do urge caution upon us when we use a term like "Vatican II" and perhaps particularly when we are tempted to speak of it as having been a single "experience."

Apart from the moments at which the participants took official and collective action, it is difficult to speak of a single "experience" of the Council. If this term is broken down into intentions, motives, encounters, decisions, actions, we will be struck by the diversity of experiences that may be imagined or reconstructed in the two popes, the 2,500 bishops, the thousands of experts, functionaries, observers, auditors, journalists, etc. and the hundreds or thousands of encounters that constituted the daily tissue of the Council. It is probable that the majority of participants have left no traces of their contemporary "experience" of the Council. Among those who did leave some trace, historical reconstruction will surely discover that what they lived and experienced varied considerably, not only because of personal backgrounds but also because of theological or ideological orientation and because of the degrees and manners of their participation. Some of them will have been major protagonists, others quite minor. Some will have been members of the "progressive" majority, others of the "conservative" minority, still others somewhere in the middle. There will have been not inconsiderable differences within these three camps. We are very far from having accomplished the very first, and merely preliminary, historical task of assembling and interpreting the materials that will give us access to their contemporary "experiences" of the Council. It will be tempting, whether now at this incomplete first stage or later when it is farther advanced, to select out of all these experiences certain ones that will be considered *the* experience of the Council.

On the other hand, one might anticipate that from the varied reconstructed experiences of the Council there will emerge a common experience of discontinuity, in whatever way it is to be interpreted or evaluated. For example, the experiences of Cardinals Bea and Ottaviani with regard to the fate of the *De fontibus* text one may expect to have been quite varied—the first joyful, the second disappointed. But these would be varied personal responses to a common

fact: that the text prepared by Ottaviani and opposed by Bea had been removed from the conciliar agenda and remanded to a mixed commission. Similarly, the *coup d'église* that was accomplished at the first session would have been experienced differently by the "victors" and the "vanquished"; but the fact would remain that those who had controlled the preparation of the Council had lost control of the Council itself to those who had been largely extraneous to its preparation. In both cases, then, the first session will have been experienced as an "event," a break with routine.

Experience and the historian's "event"

But should a critical history of the Council aim for a reconstruction of the "experience" of the Council? For that reconstruction will merely attain the (partial) information about the Council which was communicated in various ways by (some of) those who participated in it. This is not yet critical history, which aims at a rounded view of what was under way, a view of which few if any of the participants may have been fully aware. This is the critical point at which the historian's judgment cannot be limited to what even the chief and most influential protagonists intended or experienced. Thus, for example, to decide whether Vatican II was or was not an "event," that is, a rupture, it is not enough to establish that this was what Pope John XXIII and others intended or what still others resisted, nor even to establish that all or some of them experienced it as a "rupture." If their intentions in one direction or another are not irrelevant to the historian's judgment as to whether or not Vatican II was an "event," they are only a part, and perhaps not even the most important part, of what must enter into that judgment. For whether or not a rupture is taking place can be quite independent of the intentions and experiences of participants and contemporaries. Some who intend to bring about a rupture may find that no rupture has taken place; some who intend a particular type of rupture may find that quite another has taken place; some who had no intention at all of effecting a rupture may find that one has nevertheless taken place. Mikhail Gorbachev may have desired *Glasnost*, but he does not seem to have intended the dismemberment of the Communist empire.

All this is to say that a judgment about whether or not Vatican II is an event, a break, a rupture, a discontinuity, cannot rest solely on the experiences, intentions, motives, etc. of the participants in the Council. This is a historical judgment, which means that it is a historian's judgment. History is not simply the reproduction of contemporaries' experiences; it is a judgment about what contemporaries are quite often unaware of. One might recall Paul Veyne's general remark, "the lived reality as it comes from the hands of the historian is not that of the actors,"[23] and then apply to Vatican II his comments about the Battle of Waterloo. As a historian tells this story, it is not simply the sum total of the experiences of Napoleon, Marshal Ney, ordinary soldiers, or canteen workers. Rather,

> 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.[24]

The same is true of that "aggregate of little facts" called "Vatican II." What a historian calls that event does not simply coincide with the intentions of John XXIII, of Paul VI, of Cardinal Ottaviani, of Cardinal Bea, of Cardinal Suenens, of Cardinal Lercaro, of Archbishop Lefebvre, of

Bishop Wojtyla, or of any or all of the other protagonists who have left various documents that are the traces through which for now the Council is principally mediated and which soon will be the only means by which the historian has access to it. To investigate and publish their testimonies will provide an indispensable mine of information for the historian who wishes to describe the "event" of Vatican II; but his description, in the form of a narrative of the Council, will not coincide with any one of these testimonies and will be something other than the simple sum total of such testimonies, if such a thing can even be imagined. It is likely that the story that the historian will quite legitimately desire to tell is one of which none of them was aware. History often tells what contemporaries did not know or consciously "live."

"Event" as episode in a plot

There is another consideration that must be taken into account if one believes that one can apply to Vatican II the general observation made by Paul Veyne: "An event has meaning only within a series," to which he immediately adds, "the number of series is indefinite...."[25] Carl Becker illustrates the point with Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon:

> It can't mean anything except as it is absorbed into the complex web of circumstances which brought it into being.... Apart from these great events and complicated relations, the crossing of the Rubicon means nothing, is not a historical fact properly speaking at all. In itself it is nothing for us; it becomes something for us, not in itself, but as a symbol of something else, a symbol standing for a long series of events which have to do with the most intangible and immaterial realities, viz: the relation between Caesar and the millions of people of the Roman world.[26]

This means, in turn, that an event makes sense only within a story. Here again Paul Veyne makes the point crisply: "Since it has a meaning, an event, whatever it is, implies a context; it refers to a plot of which it is an episode."[27] The story one wishes to tell and the plot one assigns it determine what will count as an "event" and what will not. Change the story and the plot line, and some incidents suddenly become important while others recede into insignificance. This I take to be simply another way of expressing the fact that the historian does not begin by establishing the brute "facts" and then looking for their interconnections. There are no brute "facts" in this sense; there are only "traces," "data," which do not "speak" on their own but are elevated to the status of "evidence" only when a historian approaches them with a question, a hypothesis, a potential story to tell.[28] This is the essential and valid point made long ago by Lucien Febvre when he spoke of the historian as one

> to whom Providence has supplied no brute facts, facts extraordinarily endowed with a perfectly defined, simple, irreducible existence. It is the historian who calls into existence even the humblest of historical facts.[29]

And elsewhere: "To work out a fact is to construct. If you will, it is to supply an answer to a question. And if there is no question, there is only nothing."[30] It is only the lingering legacy of positivism that still arouses fears that this introduces the Trojan horse of "subjectivity" into the pursuit of an "objective" history or that makes some people conclude that relativism is inescapable in history.[31] Neither position admits that authentic subjectivity might tran-

scend itself in objectivity.

What are some implications of these observations? A first is the crucial significance of the time line chosen for the history of any event, since any story, any narrative, must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the case of Vatican II, that the story line within which it is an episode begins before the Council is taken for granted by almost everyone from contemporary journalists to critical historians today. The disagreement arises over how far back to extend that time line, a judgment which may depend on the nature and content of the story one wishes to tell. Different time lines may be appropriate for different conciliar documents: how far back must one go, for example, to render intelligible the issuing of *Dignitatis humanae* or of *Dei verbum*?

But the perhaps more interesting question is whether the time line and so the story within which one tries to make sense of Vatican II should be considered to end on December 8, 1965. For surely in the plot of any story, the final scene is as important as the first, and perhaps even more important because in any drama it is the last act that makes plain the meaning of the earlier acts. Perhaps I may borrow from Hayden White and Keith Jenkins the following argument.[32] Imagine a series of chronologically sequential facts or incidents—a b c d e...n—about which one wishes to construct a narrative that will go beyond mere chronology. The incidents may be arranged in one of the following manners:

1. **A** b c d e...n
2. a **B** c d e...n
3. a b **C** d e...n
4. a b c **D** e...n
5. a b c d **E**...n

In each of the five possibilities, the letter capitalized in bold print indicates that a certain incident is being given privileged dramatic status. Stressing one of these incidents establishes relationships among them all; it elevates the incident chosen from its mere place in the chronological sequence and gives it some sort of explanatory role vis-à-vis the others: if "**A**" is chosen, the explanation is likely to be causal; if "**E**" is chosen, the explanation is likely to be teleological. More than that, this choice may also determine which of the other sequential incidents deserves notice at all, because some of them are "incidental" to the plot of the story being told and may reasonably and responsibly be left out.

When does the story end?

Apply this now to Vatican II. Does Vatican II appear at the end of one's story, or does the story continue? If one's story ends with Vatican II, one will certainly be tempted in the direction of a "Whig" interpretation, seeing the Council as the *telos* of one's plot. But even apart from that temptation, often indulged, there is the simple fact that the history of the church, the larger series within which Vatican II is an episode, did not end with the close of the Council. Is "Vatican II" the same "event," then, in 1999 as it was thought to be in 1965? (I have heard it claimed that "history" one day will regard the pontificate of John Paul II as more significant—more "eventful," than the Second Vatican Council.) It is not enough to say that one wishes to tell only this one part of the larger story, the one that includes only that "aggregate of little facts" that occurred between 1959 and 1965. Here is where the primary importance of one's story and its plot becomes clear. All those "simpler facts" are facts only within the story one chooses to tell, and the story, and where and how it ends, will determine which of them receive one's attention and find a place in the final narrative. Facts that are part of one story will not enter into another.

The fact is that it is only by abstraction

that the phenomenon studied as "Vatican II" can be considered to have ended with its final solemn session. The passion often displayed in competing interpretations of the Council today is very often a function of what happened after the Council, with the question of whether it happened *because of* the Council being a major point at issue. And in the case of both Ratzinger and Poulat, the judgment that Vatican II should not be considered an "event" in the sense of a "rupture" rests very much on their assessments of what happened after and even of what is happening today. Most historians today in fact approach the Council with an awareness of what happened after it closed.

Nor should this be considered inappropriate. Bernard Lonergan puts the point well:

> It is the occurrence of later events that place earlier events in a new perspective. The outcome of a battle fixes the perspective in which the successive stages of the battle are viewed; military victory in a war reveals the significance of the successive battles that were fought; the social and cultural consequences of the victory and the defeat are the measure of the effects of the war. So, in general, history is an ongoing process. As the process advances, the context within which events are to be understood keeps enlarging. As the context enlarges, perspectives shift.[33]

I wish to insist that this does not mean simply that one might decide also to write the history of the "reception" of Vatican II as a later project covering the time span of the decades since it closed. It also means that what happened *after* the Council legitimately influences one's study of what happened *during* the Council. What Lonergan calls the new "perspective" enabled by the "enlarged context" yields new questions for the sake of a different story. That new perspective enables one to notice things one might not have noticed before, to drop things an earlier perspective had highlighted, to assign different weight to the same things, to see interconnections not suspected before, etc. Febvre's comment remains pertinent: it is easy enough to describe what you see; seeing what ought to be described is the hard part. Without the questions enabled by a perspective, there is nothing.

These remarks are pertinent not only to a discussion of the "event" character of Vatican II on a grand scale but also to the other two elements in our discussion: the final documents and the experience. Take the example, already used, of *Dei verbum*. A critical history of this text will certainly place it within a series that began long before the Council was imagined. May it not also be affected by what happened after the Council closed? I mean here not only a discussion of its "reception," what influence it has had on Catholic attitudes and habits with regard to the scriptures, how it has affected an understanding of the magisterium, what impact it has had on ecumenical treatments of the relation between scripture and tradition, etc. I mean also, for example, the current status of biblical hermeneutics, which are in a rather different state than they were at the time of the Council. Different questions are being asked about the relation between historical-critical methods and the use of the Bible in the liturgy and catechesis, or about interpretations of the Bible that may presuppose historical-critical conclusions but, refusing to be limited to them, explore various other, more literary, theological, and spiritual readings—some of which are not unlike the way in which the fathers and monastic theologians approached and applied the scriptures.

The history of Catholic biblical interpretation, in other words, does not end with the promulgation of *Dei verbum*, and

when this further history is taken into account, one's understanding of what was under way in this regard at Vatican II is altered, precisely because the story continues. Now one might notice what is otherwise unnoticed: that the two camps into which the protagonists of the history of *Dei verbum* are often divided may have had more in common than appeared. Both of them placed primary emphasis on the literal sense: one may have understood it as a set of proof texts for theological arguments, the other as what emerges when one places them and their authors in historical context. Alien to both camps was a type of exegesis which sought to validate the spiritual and typological interpretations of scripture that prevailed in the patristic and early medieval eras and in the use of the Bible in the liturgy. Vatican II vindicated the historical-critical approach against the suspicions of the dogmatists—a fact most often pointed to as the real achievement of *Dei verbum*, particularly when its history is thought to end with its promulgation. But the recent developments in biblical hermeneutics remind one of another part of the history of 20th-century Catholic interpretations of the Bible, and this post-conciliar development raises questions about a dimension largely neglected in commentaries on *Dei verbum*, its last chapter, on the use of the Bible in the church. In this larger history, what "Vatican II" said or did not say has different dimensions; a different story and plot suggest attention to other incidents, positions, and protagonists both at and before the Council.

The example illustrates that even the apparently straightforward history of the redaction of conciliar texts is more complex than is often thought, and that the historian's determination of a time line for this history is of crucial significance. It is likely that similar remarks could be made about almost all of the Council's final documents, which are "final" only on one time line and within only one of many possible plots.

Similar remarks can be made about what is called the "experience" of the Council. Part of this was what I earlier called the *coup d'église,* whereby bishops and theologians who were at best marginal and at worst under active suspicion by Roman authority became the leaders of the conciliar event as it worked out. Toward the end of the Council, cracks began to appear within the phalanx of "progressive" theologians (as they were known at the time), and within five years or so of its close, these cracks had widened into open breaks, of which the two journals, *Concilium* and *Communio*, may be taken as symbolic. Differences in the interpretation of Vatican II played no small part in this breach, not to mention differences in the evaluation of what happened afterward and in judgments about its relation to the Council

The appearance of this division within the "progressive" ranks provides another new perspective on what was happening during Vatican II and yields new questions, new hypotheses, for the sake of a fuller story. For one thing, it calls into question the adequacy of the common division of the conciliar protagonists into "progressives" and "conservatives" and therefore complicates the plot of the conciliar drama itself. One becomes more alert to the differences between, say, a Congar or Chenu and a Daniélou or de Lubac, or between a Rahner and a Ratzinger; and attention to such differences may yield new questions about a Dossetti and a Küng. One begins to read the writings of these men more closely and carefully; one becomes more alert to differences in theological methodology and in conciliar tactics. Dimensions of the contemporary "experience" of the Council that might have escaped one's attention beforehand are now noticed and may be reconstructed.

Another example can be found in a re-

cent book on the women auditors at Vatican II.[34] The research behind the book was prompted by two post-conciliar phenomena: the influence of feminism on the church and what the author interprets as the present pope's efforts to subvert Vatican II. Though insufficiently critical and comprehensive, the book has the merit of drawing attention to the activities of those women, including their participation in drafting conciliar texts which have received less attention than they appear to deserve: a neglected dimension of the conciliar "experience." Other examples might be simply noted: since the Council, the flourishing of the theology of the local church directs attention and prompts new questions about the ecclesiological disputes at the Council; the rise of the churches of the southern hemisphere raises issues easily overlooked when the largely "North Atlantic" set of concerns is taken to define the conciliar "experience"; the dispute about whether the Council should be "doctrinal" or "pastoral" appears more complex when post-conciliar interest in "inculturation" is part of one's horizon; the spread of what is called "post-modernity" gives new dimensions to the familiar interpretation of the Council in terms of a new confrontation between Catholicism and "modernity."

I am not here proposing anachronistic impositions of post-conciliar problematics upon the Council itself. I am simply asking that historians of Vatican II be aware that to make the Council the last scene in one's story is to tell only one of many possible stories, even of what happened between 1959 and 1965, and that what was under way then will be told differently if one's plot does not make the Council the last scene in the drama.[35] This recognition is all the more important if, as is the case, all reflection on the Council, even the most rigorously critical, takes place today in an ecclesial and cultural context in which the interpretation and evaluation of what happened after, and surely in part and at least in some senses *because of* the Council, is a major and divisive factor. Not to recognize this and not to acknowledge it explicitly is to raise questions about the properly critical character of one's history.

This brings me to my last point. It is reasonably clear to everyone that the inner dynamics of the Council, the lived "experience," was in part that of a dramatic struggle between or among varying ideas about what Vatican II ought to be, to do, and to say. It is just as clear that this struggle did not end with the Council and that the question of how the church ought to be at once faithful to Christ and an effective sign and instrument of him in the world or worlds of today continues. It is only natural that disagreements about these matters will affect one's initial interest in the Council, the questions one asks, the elements one assembles in order to answer them, the story one decides to tell, and, above all, one's evaluation of the conciliar event. I do not believe that there is any way in which these larger issues can be wiped from a historian's mind, nor do I think that anything but a purely mythical ideal of "presuppositionless history" should require one to try to do so. But I do think that it might help if we were to acknowledge that the last thing to which I referred above—the *evaluation* of the Council—represents a different level of the historian's existential involvement in his project and that gross differences on this level will not be resolved by the same criteria by which he attempts to say "what really happened at Vatican II." It is too much to expect that mere history will suffice to overcome those differences, which have other causes and require other solutions.

[1]Henri de Lubac, "The Church in Crisis," *Theology Digest* 17 (1969): 312-25. The lecture was also published in *Nouvelle revue théologique* 91 (1969): 580-96 and then expanded into a 97-page booklet, *L'Église dans la crise actuelle* (Paris: Cerf, 1969). It might be noted that the English text misses some of the nuance of the French version published in the *NRTh*.

[2]The argument had been anticipated two years earlier in de Lubac's presentation at the Congress on the Theology of the Renewal of the Church, Toronto, August 1967; see "Teilhard de Chardin in the Context of Renewal," in *Theology of Renewal, vol. 1: Renewal of Religious Thought*, ed. L. K. Shook (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1968) 208-35, esp. 212-17.

[3]See *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, ed. Richard P. McBrien (San Francisco: Harper, 1995) 797.

[4]All three terms appeared in the official program of the meeting, but only two of them appear in the title of the volume in which the major papers delivered at this meeting have been published: *L'evento e le decisioni: Studi sulle dinamiche del concilio Vaticano II,* ed. Maria Teresa Fattori and Alberto Melloni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997). The omission of "experience" from the title of the published volume reflects the apparent failure of my presentation there (of which this paper is an altered version) to convince others that the "event" of the Council is not reducible to the "experience" of the Council.

[5]See Pierre Nora, "Le retour de l'événement" in *Faire de l'histoire* (Paris: Gaillimard, 1974), vol. 1: 210-28; Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past and Present* 85 (1979): 3-24. For the French debate, see Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The* Annales *School 1929-1989* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); Mauro Moretti, "Fragments d'une analyse historiographique: origines et premiers développments d'un 'discours sur l'événement' dans l'expérience des 'Annales,'" in *L'événement: Actes du Colloque organisé à Aix-en-Provence par le Centre Méridional d'Histoire Sociale, les 16, 17, et 18 septembre 1983* (Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1986), 182-202; and Jacques Revel, "Introduction," in *Histories: French Constructions of the Past* (New York: The New Press, 1995) 1-63. For the wider discussion, see Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: Norton, 1998).

[6]See *L'événement* (cited in the previous note) and *L'événement, identité et histoire: Actes d'un colloque tenu à l'Université Laval en 1990*, ed. C. Dolan (Sillery: Septentrion 1991).

[7]Pierre Grégoire, "L'événement-référence: notion d'événement et plans de références: l'individu, les systèmes d'information et l'histoire-mémoire," in *Événement, identité et histoire*, 171.

[8]Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1978) 18.

[9]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.

[10]On Sewell's theory and this illustration Andrew Greeley has recently drawn to argue that Vatican II represents another example of an "event"; see "The Revolutionary Event of Vatican II: How Everything Changed," *Commonweal* 125 (September 11, 1998): 14-20.

[11]See Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, *History of Vatican II: vol. 1: Announcing and Preparing Vatican Council II. Toward a New Era in Catholicism* (Maryknoll: Orbis / Leuven: Peeters, 1996). The second volume has appeared: *The Formation of the Council's Identity: First Period and Intersession: October 1962-September 1963* (1997); and the third volume, already out in Italian, is being edited for the English edition.

[12]See Étienne Fouilloux, "Histoire et événement: Vatican II," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 13 (1992): 515-38; idem, "La categoria di evento nella storiografia francese recente"; Peter Hünermann, "Il concilio Vaticano II come evento"; and Joseph A. Komonchak, "Riflessioni storiografiche sul Vaticano II come evento," all in *L'evento e le dicisioni*, respectively pp. 52-62, 63-92, and 417-39; Claude Soetens, "Le Concile comme événement: une prise de conscience

progressive" in *Vatican II et la Belgique*, ed Claude Soetens (Ottignies: Ed. Quorum, 1996) 83-113

[13]See Étienne Fouilloux, "Histoire et événement," whose typology roughly coincides with the one I offer in "Interpreting the Second Vatican Council," *Landas* 1 (1987): 81-90 and in "Interpreting the Council: Catholic Attitudes toward Vatican II" in *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver and R. Scott Appleby (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995) 17-36.

[14]Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985) 27-44; citation from p. 35

[15]Emile Poulat, *Une Église ébranlée: changement, conflit et continuité de Pie XII à Jean-Paul II* (Tournai-Paris: Casterman, 1980) 288-99.

[16]See the essay by the project's director, Giuseppe Alberigo, "Luci e ombre nel rapporto tra dinamica assembleare e conclusioni conciliari" in *L'evento e le decisioni*, 501-22.

[17]I am reminded of Bernard Lonergan's quip about doctoral dissertations which judged much later thinkers by comparison with "the principles of the Angelic Doctor": "This is what St. Thomas Aquinas would have said to, say, John Dewey, if St. Thomas Aquinas were the author of the dissertation."

[18]An illustrative case is the meaning of the phrase "*subsistit in*" in LG 8. One may interpret it simply as it stands and add a dose of philosophy with a result such as that of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "The Council instead chose the word 'subsists' precisely in order to make clear that there exists only one 'subsistence' of the true Church, while outside its visible structure exist only 'elements of the Church,' which—being elements of the same Church—tend and lead toward the Catholic Church"; Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei, *Documenta inde a Concilio Vaticano Secundo Expleto Edita (1966-1985)* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1985) 288. But there is no indication that speculations about "subsistence" played any role whatever in the decision to replace the simple "*est*" of the previous version of this text with "*subsistit in*," and the Doctrinal Commission's explanation of the change is much simpler.

[19]See John W. O'Malley, *Tradition and Transition: Historical Perspectives on Vatican II* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989).

[20]Two examples may be cited from the young Joseph Ratzinger's *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), comments written after each of the Council's four sessions. Referring to the debate on the *De fontibus* text at the first session, he wrote, "But everything that had happened since the Council began had basically changed the situation. The bishops were no longer the same men they had been before the Council" (21). Commenting on the debates at the third session, he noted that "in the common struggle for truth, statements were boldly made which five years ago would have been virtually unthinkable .....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 which had been awakened in this encounter of the Church with its inner self" (132).

[21]*Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl L. Becker*, ed. Phil L. Snyder (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958) 43-45.

[22]Veyne 131n.

[23]Veyne 18.

[24]Veyne 61-62; see also p. 15: "Even if I am a contemporary and witness of Waterloo, even if I am the principal actor, or Napoleon himself, I will have only one perspective on what the historians will call the event of Waterloo; all I can do is leave posterity my testimony, which, if it survives, posterity will call a trace." See the similar remarks of Bernard Lonergan: "In military terms, history is concerned, not just with the opposing commanders' plans of the battle, not just with the experiences of the battle had by each soldier and officer, but with the actual course of the battle as the resultant of conflicting plans now successfully and now unsuccessfully executed. In brief, where exegesis is concerned to determine what a particular person meant, history is concerned to determine what, in most cases, contemporaries do not know," Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 179. See 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."

[25]Veyne 41.

[26]*Detachment and the Writing of History* 44-45.

[27]Veyne 53.

[28]"Historians' questions turn the material remains from the past into evidence, for evidence is only evidence in relation to a particular account;" Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1995) 261.

[29]Lucien Febvre, *Combats pour l'histoire* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1992) 23. This is not a problem confined to historians but occurs also in the physical sciences. Febvre several times refers to his own experience of looking through a scientist-friend's microscope and being unable to see anything: "to describe what one sees—that's easy; to see what ought to be described—that's what's difficult" (pp. 8, 22-23, 431).

[30]Febvre 8. See also p. 7, where he evokes the positivist's horror at the thought that history involves choice: "'The historian doesn't choose facts. Choose? By what right? On what principle? Choice is the denial of scientific work.....'" To which Febvre replies: "But all history is choice." It is not irreverent to point to the original conclusion of the Fourth Gospel, which in the main surely applies also to the synoptics: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (Jn 20:30-31)

[31]"Despite this generation's scorn for positivism, positivism has left as its principal legacy an enduring dichotomy between absolute objectivity and totally arbitrary interpretations of the world of objects"; Appleby et al., *Telling the Truth about History* 246. For those historiographers known in the anglophone world as "metahistorians," because the past was not lived consciously as the story that the historian tells, any correspondence-theory of truth is irrelevant, and one must conclude with Keith Jenkins that "all history is interpretive and never literally true (besides anything else, a 'true interpretation' is an oxymoron)"; Keith Jenkins, *On 'What is History?' From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 23. For the general question see also Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), especially Part IV, "Objectivity in Crisis," 415-629

[32]Jenkins (152), who refers to Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1978) 92-93.

[33]Lonergan 192. Compare H.-I. Marrou, *De la connaissance historique* 46: "But this interval that separates us from the past object is not an empty space; in the intervening time the events studied—whether they are actions, thoughts, feelings—have borne their fruit, entailed consequences, unfolded their potentialities, and we cannot separate our knowledge of those events from our knowledge of their sequels." Mao Tse-tung (or was it Chou En-lai?), asked what he thought of the French Revolution, is said to have replied: "It's too soon to tell."

[34]Carmel McEnroy, *Guests in their own House. The Women of Vatican II* (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

[35]See Marrou 46-47: "the very effort that led me to conclude that Jansenism is a bastard development of Augustinianism greatly helped me to a better understanding of the latter."