

Vatican II: Reception and Non-Reception?

By Michael Walsh

Reception is here used in the sense of whether the ideas of Vatican II have fully become the received wisdom of the Church.

It has been said¹: “Nothing alters quite like the unalterable.” The pre-conciliar fortress Catholicism had seemed, at least to the unhistorical eye, steadfastly unchangeable. This was particularly so under the pontificate of Pius XII, whose austere figure and penchant for oracular pronouncements had seemed to many Catholics to represent the ideal of what a pontificate should be. *Il ultimo Papa*, one Italian biographer called him: the last Pope. And then, in the conclave of 1958, the cardinals elected the roly-poly figure of Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli as Pope John XXIII. The election of a Pope who smiled at the camera, rather than staring into the middle distance as if enthralled by a vision of the Virgin Mary, was swiftly overshadowed by the summoning of the Second Vatican Council.



Michael Walsh

The historian and convert from Anglicanism, Edward Norman, is perhaps typically dismissive of the Council's long-term effects, believing that what happened subsequently to the Roman Catholic Church and other churches would have happened anyway, without the Council. There is, however, no denying the impact which the Council had at the time upon Catholicism and indeed upon much of the world-wide movement of Christianity – which is what we call “reception”. Yet whether the outcome of the Council was quite what John intended is in fact unclear.

Last year two remarkable exhibitions in Rome vied for attention, each demonstrating a different facet of Papal power. In the Capitoline Museum there was on display a formidable array of items from the Vatican archives including a 60 metre long parchment roll containing the records of the trials of the Templar knights, that uncomfortable example of Papal chicanery in the midst of the Ages of Faith. And the letter from the bishops and nobles of England begging Pope Clement VII to grant King Henry VIII his divorce.

Fewer people than climbed the Capitoline steps found their way to St Paul's Outside the Walls. As you may well know, it is some distance from Rome's historic centre. Accidentally destroyed by fire in the 19th century St Paul's has been majestically restored. It is especially worth visiting because interwoven with this permanent display of treasures are some particular mementos of the Vatican Council. Above all there is on exhibition the original text of a speech by Pope John XXIII in which he announced that the Council was to be summoned.

For such a momentous occasion the Pope's speech was on a disconcertingly scrappy bit of paper. He scribbled it down in a barely legible hand with much crossing-out. Surely had Papa Roncalli intended to announce the Vatican Council at such a time and place he would have had a speech typed out and more than a handful of Cardinals –

seventeen, in fact – with him to hear the message.

The preparations for the Council revealed the battle lines in the Vatican between the newly-created Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity under the Jesuit Cardinal Augustin Bayer and the Theological Commission presided over by Alfredo Ottaviani. The two committees clashed over the preparatory document for the Council on the sources of revelation. Bayer was a scriptural scholar and for many years had been Rector of the Jesuit-funded Biblical Institute. The Biblical Institute, and implicitly Bayer himself, was attacked in an article in the Journal of the Lateran University, *Divinitas*, by a professor at the Lateran. If this was an attempt to undermine Bayer it backfired. Pope John let it be known how much he disapproved of the article and the rector of the Biblical Institute was appointed to the Theological Commission alongside Ottaviani. The history of the Council, which opened on October 11th 1962, and closed on December 8th 1965, is complex. The pre-conciliar conflicts between the old Vatican, represented by Ottaviani, and the new, represented by Bayer, immediately resurfaced. Ottaviani's attempt to present lists of nominees to be elected to the pre-conciliar working parties was frustrated by Cardinal Achille Lie'Nart of Lille, one of the Council's presidents, when he proposed that the Council fathers put off their meeting for a whole week. It was an apparently small, but in the long term significant, victory for the Bishops of the Church over the Vatican Curia. Not only did it assert the authority of the Council Fathers over the Church bureaucracy but discussions about who to elect draw together bishops from different language groups and help them to get to know one another, which they didn't before the Council began. In 1962, it should be said – something that may come as a surprise – there were relatively few national conferences of bishops. That they now exist throughout the world is one of the most obvious examples of the reception of the Vatican Council's ecclesiology.

The Council as it proceeded undoubtedly raised great hopes, as well as sowing much confusion amongst Catholics. The Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, with its emphasis on first on the whole Church, as the People of God, then the doctrine on Collegiality – the doctrine that all the bishops form a college with responsibility for the whole Church and not just for their own dioceses – raised expectations that, in future, authority would be much more diffuse and not solely associated, as it had been in Catholics' minds, with the Papacy and the Vatican Curia. It was also expected that the doctrine of collegiality, *mutatis mutandis*, would be applied to structures at every level of the Church, right down to the parish.

Episcopal conferences were instituted where they did not already exist. The Synod of bishops also came into being, a new structure created in the immediate aftermath of the Council. But neither delivered what had been hoped for by the reformers. Paul VI had been prevailed upon during the Third Session to add the *Nota Previa Esplicativa* to Chapter Three of the Constitution of the Church, which gave a much narrower interpretation of the collegiality of bishops than the Constitution itself laid down, asserting that the Supreme Pontiff can always exercise his power at will, as his office demands.

This undermined the fundamental concept of Collegiality, a concept which was subjected to the implacable hostility of Joseph Ratzinger. As an aside, I may quote a recent lecture by Christopher Hill, the Bishop of Guildford. "If Vatican II is in a process

of at least partial reception by Anglicans," he said, "the *Nota Previa* is not".

In May the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued *Communiois Notio*, which was followed exactly six years later by John Paul II's *Apostolos Suos* which, as Massimo Faggioli² puts it, reinforced one of the basic assumptions of the International Theological Commission chaired by Cardinal Ratzinger; that is, the need to scale back some of the aspects of Post-Vatican II decentralisation and empowerment of national bishops' conferences. It seemed that power was being reclaimed by the Church's head in Rome, at the expense of the Church's body throughout the world (to quote Faggioli again).

I want to make here a point about the history of the Catholic Church. I began this talk with the expression 'fortress Catholicism'. A more conventional phrase, I suppose, might have been 'Tridentine Catholicism'. From the middle of the Sixteenth Century to the middle of the Twentieth Catholics had been living under the shadow of the Council of Trent, which had been held, albeit spasmodically, from 1545 to 1563. Trent was the last reforming council. The correlate of Vatican II, therefore, is Trent and not Vatican I, which in the end was not concerned with Church reform. The structure of the Roman Curia before Trent was entirely different from that which followed the restructuring of Pope Sixtus V and which basically survives to this day. It wasn't the same Vatican. Secondly, unlike the Roman Curia in the 1960s, a good many, if not most, of the Cardinals surrounding the Popes of Trent were in favour of reform. That, again, is the discontinuity. But despite the backing of so many of the sixteenth-century cardinals the implementation of the reforms of Trent – I'm thinking particularly of the establishment of seminaries – was a long-drawn-out process. There has never really been an attempt to execute one much-vaunted reform of the day, the requirement that all bishops reside in their dioceses.

But to return to Vatican II. When the Council was announced, the attitude of Wilhelm Bishop Hooft, General Secretary of the Geneva-based World Council of Churches since its foundation in 1948, was at best ambiguous. As I suggested, Pope John first cast the Council in the context of Christian unity, and it was after all called by some an ecumenical council. It is debatable whether the term as applied to Vatican II is entirely appropriate. But certainly it was confusing to those who were accustomed to using the term "ecumenical" in the context of inter-church relations. Furthermore, Bishop Hooft was not entirely happy that the Roman Catholic Church should suddenly appear centre-stage in the world of ecumenics, particularly after the hostility which it had shown towards Christian unity in the first half of the twentieth century. "Those who had been working in the ecumenical vineyard in the first hour," he said in a broadcast in May, 1964, "had not looked kindly upon those who had arrived at the eleventh hour."

There was, moreover, a particular grievance. In August 1959 the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches met at Rhodes. It was the first time the Committee had met within the confines of the Orthodox world. And they were particularly concerned to make possible for the autocephalist³ Orthodox churches behind the Iron Curtain to join the World Council. There were Vatican officials present, not as observers – because the Curia was not prepared to tolerate this – but as journalists. In the margins of the conference, however, these 'journalists' engaged in discussions with the Orthodox. Rome had, of course, always believed that the union with the Orthodox

would be easier to achieve than that with the churches of reform.

When Bishop Hooft heard of these talks he was furious. He had suspected, ever since the announcement of the Council, that Rome would attempt to steal the ecumenical initiative from Geneva. He had, none the less, formally welcomed the announcement and had expressed the hope that ecumenism would be a major feature of the deliberations. By the time of the incident of Rhodes, however, the reunion aspect of the Council had receded. In his first Encyclical, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, on the 29th of June 1959, Pope John made it clear that the chief aim of the Council was the renewal of the Roman Catholic Church. He also had invited the non-Roman Catholics "to seek and enter into the unity for which Jesus Christ prayed".

At this point John's understanding of Church unity was that of submission to Rome, an approach naturally unacceptable to the World Council. By the time the decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, was approved this attitude had been wholly abandoned, at least by the majority of the fathers in the Council. Of particular significance for the future of ecumenism was the section in the decree which talked about the hierarchy of truths, a concept to which far too little attention has been given. As a notion, however, it is not quite as new as it sounds, as it is similar to the theological notes which used to be attached to doctrines. As some people here may know, this is a particular hobby-horse of Professor Nicholas Lash.

Be that as it may, John Moorman, Bishop of Ripon and scholar of Franciscan history in its great variety, was a particularly active Anglican observer at the Council. He wrote the following in his book *Vatican II Observed* in 1967. "The result of the Council has been to alter the whole ecumenical pattern and to carry the ecumenical discussion into a new field. Rome has, at last, begun to interest herself in the problems of unity. A new pattern has emerged as a result of the Council and much of the thought and language which was valid five years ago is now obsolete". Now, it is true that the movement towards Christian unity seems to have, from the point of view of the Catholic Church at least, come to an apparent dead end, though some conversations continue. Partly this may be because Rome has had other preoccupations. But I want to dwell for a moment on the ecumenical movement because it is hard to imagine the Church *without* this commitment to ecumenism. Now, one could not have said this before the Council. Ecumenism, and the Catholic attitude towards it, is one very clear sign of the reception by the Church of Vatican II as is, also, the attitude to religious freedom, or relations with non-Christian religions. As Massimo Faggioli puts it, in a neat turn of phrase, the Council has irreversibly penetrated the DNA of modern Catholicism. Yet clearly there is a widely-held belief that the Council has not been received in its fullness; this is the view of progressives within the Church although it has been viewed as something of a disaster by the traditionalists. After the Council we thought there would be a day of sunshine in the history of the Church. Instead there arrived a day of clouds, of tempests, of darkness, of questioning and uncertainty.

So let me turn now to the factors which impeded the reception of the Council. One has to remember that reception is not a simple term. People receive the message of the Council in different ways according to their background, to their degree of preparation, in accordance with their own particular concerns. Thus when one looks at *Gaudium et Spes*, the pastoral constitution of the Church in the modern world, it is striking

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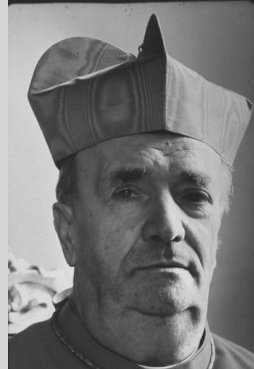
How the Council came about

The understanding of the Council's origin is complicated by the fact that there were contradictory versions given at different times by the Pope himself. The first version to become public was given on the 8th of May, 1962. It is almost certainly the least reliable. It is certain, however, that this Council, widely regarded as a reforming one, was in fact suggested to Roncalli on the night before his



Ernesto Ruffini

election by two of the most conservative Italian cardinals. Ernesto Ruffini, who was Archbishop of Palermo from 1945 (he died in 1967), and in 1946 had been created cardinal in Pope Pius XII's first consistory. The other was Alfredo Ottaviani (1890-1979) who had been elevated to the purple in the same consistory as had Roncalli himself. He has been revealed in Roncalli's diaries – much to my surprise,



Alfredo Ottaviani

I must say – as the future Pope's closest confidant in Rome while Roncalli was away from the Vatican on diplomatic service.

These two, Ruffini and Ottaviani, had proposed a General Council to Pius XII in 1948. They wanted one, they said, because of the doctrinal errors which were inflicting harm upon the faithful. Secondly, because Canon Law needed to be brought up to date (they actually used the term *aggiornamento*) and because Catholics had to be united against Communism. And because, they argued, it could also be an occasion for the definition of the dogma of the Assumption of Mary.

In the end, of course, Pius XII did not choose the Conciliar route. It was in any case a view in the Church that after the definition of Papal Primacy, and especially of infallibility, at the first Vatican Council in 1869-70, Councils were unnecessary. Some, at least, of the supposed heresies Pius attacked in his 1950 Encyclical *Humanae Generis*, and in the same year he proclaimed the Assumption of Our Lady to be a truth of the Faith to be held by the whole Church.

Nevertheless Pius XII had made tentative moves in the direction of a Council and handed the planning of it over to Ottaviani's Holy Office. Whether Roncalli himself had ever considered the calling of a Council before Ruffini and Ottaviani had a word in his ear on the evening of 27th October 1958 we don't know. After that date he thought about it quite often and he possibly made up his mind on the night of the 8th January 1959, though he was later to give the impression that the idea had come to him on the 20th January 1959 in conversation with Domenico Tardini, whom he had made Secretary of State in November 1958 and created a Cardinal a month later.

The formal announcement, as I have just mentioned, was made to an extraordinary Consistory of just 17 Cardinals gathered together in the Basilica of St Paul Without the Walls in a service to mark the end of an octave of prayer for Christian Unity. The news of the Council, Pope John recorded, was greeted with a devout, and impressive, silence. Now, it was not only the Council that was announced that day. The Pope, who took very seriously his pastoral responsibilities as Bishop of Rome, said he would summon a Roman Synod. And he accepted the Ruffini-Ottaviani suggestion that an aggiornamento of Canon Law was required.

The Roman Synod, it should be recorded, met but proved to be of little more than symbolic significance. The updating of the Code was indeed put in train, lasting until the Pontificate of John Paul II. The Council met 3½ years later, after a remarkably short time for preparation. But then, John was feeling his age and was eager to get it under way.

It is questionable, however, whether the Council that took place was the Council the Pope had in mind when he first spoke of it to the Cardinals in St Paul's Outside the Walls. There was, in Pope John's address, a special appeal to non-Catholics. It was, he said, a renewed invitation to our brothers of our separated Christian churches, to share with us in this banquet of grace and brotherhood. The words sounded remarkably like an invitation to take part in the Council to those who were not of the Roman Communion.

The official version of what he said has a rather different emphasis. The renewed invitation was "to the faithful of separated communities, likewise to followers in goodwill in the search for unity and grace" which was not what he said. The term 'churches' had disappeared and the apparent invitation to take part was played down. The non-RCs were to follow the Papacy in the search for unity rather than to join in as seemingly equal partners. For the context of the Pope's words suggests that one of his chief aims for the Council was Christian Unity.

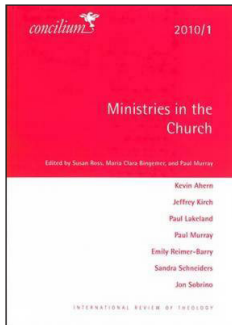
Reception of the news within the Roman Curia was muted, to say the least. It was all too much for the Vatican's semi-official newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* which only mentioned the calling of the Council on an inside page, making instead the Pope's standard condemnation of Communism its lead story. *Civiltà Cattolica*, the Jesuit journal which is censored by the Secretariat of State, managed to avoid mentioning the Council for a whole year.

In New York Cardinal Spellman, who had taken part in the conclave which elected Roncalli, complained that he had first heard about the Council from the press. Then he said that he thought the Pope had been pushed into it. In Milan the first reaction of Giovanni Battista Montini, whom John had created a Cardinal, but because of his more modest rank of Archbishop had not been in the Conclave, remarked that the Pope did not realise what a hornet's nest he was stirring up. Montini was very soon to become Pope Paul VI. As late as Lent 1963 he was writing in a pastoral letter that today there were no errors in the Church, or scandals, or deviations or abuses to correct, so why did they need a Council? Once the die was cast, however, he committed himself fully to the Council..

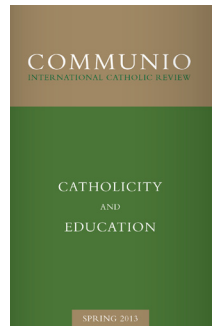
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that some have chosen to pay more attention to what the document has to say about the Church in its social and political context – American theologians in particular – while Asian theologians have been more concerned with what it has to say about the embedding of the Church within different local cultures.

Gaudium et Spes is a convenient place to start, because apart from the radical rejection of religious liberty by some of the most traditionalist of the fathers no document of the Council proved to be more fought over or more divisive. The divisions are exemplified by the foundation of two opposed periodicals which are probably well-known to you all: *Concilium* and *Communio*. The former, *Concilium*, was founded in 1965 while the Council was still under way by theologians who were most influenced by the



theology of St Thomas Aquinas. Among these founding members of *Concilium* were Hans Küng, the Dominican Yves Congar, Edward Schillebeeckx and the Jesuits Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner. Ratzinger was at first among this group but he soon withdrew and in 1972 with Hans Urs von Balthazar, Henri de Lubac, Walter Kasper and the Oratorian convert from Protestantism Louis Bouyer founded the rival publication *Communio*.



The earlier publication *Concilium* embraced a radical interpretation of the Council, seeing the Council (as Rahner said in 1965) as “the beginning of the beginning”. The later one, *Communio*, chose instead to emphasis what has been called “the hermeneutics of continuity”, despite the fact that one of its founders, Josef Ratzinger, had written in 1966 that the Council was “undoubtedly a rupture” with what had gone before. The divisive issue, to quote the excellent Massimo Faggioli once again, was *Communio*’s idea of Vatican II validating *ressourcement* as a method for further work in theology versus *Concilium*’s idea of Vatican II as the beginning of a *reformatio*, a more comprehensive updating of the Catholic Church, in its theology and structures.

Now *ressourcement*, I should explain, is a term employed by the new theology, the *nouvelle théologie*, a movement which arose in the mid-twentieth century, predominantly – as its name suggests – among French-speaking scholars, and means a return to the sources (these being the Bible, the fathers of the Church and the liturgy). It had a considerable influence on many of those who were advisers to the bishops at Vatican II. But after the Council it fell out of favour with the more radical theologians because the stress on the past was seen as prescriptive rather than liberating. But that is what some people wanted to do: they wanted to limit the impact of the Council. This proved to be a considerable challenge.

In 1564, immediately after the end of the Council of Trent, Pope Paul IV established the Congregation of the Council which alone had authority to provide an authentic interpretation of the Tridentine decrees. Nothing similar occurred after Vatican II, with the perhaps happy result that the interpretation of the Council was left not to a Roman congregation but to theologians and to the bishops. As a consequence there have been multiple interpretations, multiple receptions, of the Conciliar documents.

For a Church whose teaching was regarded by many within the Church and some outside it as clear and unchanging the multiplicity of receptions presented a considerable problem. It was a problem for Pope Paul VI. *Humanae Vitae* was the result. This was a crisis for married couples but it was also, suggests John O'Malley, a crisis for the management of change, and of how the Church deals with its past. Pope Paul's strategy for limiting the interpretation of Vatican II, in the absence of a new congregation of the Council, was to propose a *Lex Fundamentalis Ecclesiae*, to stand as an introduction to the Code of Canon Law. This *Lex Fundamentalis*, said Paul VI in November 1965, was to contain the Constitution of the Church.

To many this seemed an excellent proposal: a statement which would lay out in the Code the rights of the People of God. A Commission set about drafting such a document and then suddenly in 1981 – indeed, almost immediately after it had been approved earlier that year by a specially-convened commission – it was abandoned. Why it was abandoned I do not know, and there has been remarkably little discussion about the *Lex Fundamentalis*. But its main purpose seems to have been to enshrine a particular interpretation of ecclesiology, a restriction upon the Church and upon the future development of theology. The revised Code appeared in 1985 without the *Lex Fundamentalis* though some of its provisions that we know about have been actually incorporated into the text.

John-Paul II chose a different route to curbing enthusiasm for Vatican II, namely the Catechism of the Catholic Church. There had, of course, been a Catechism of the Council of Trent encapsulating the authorised understanding of that Council. But at the Synod in 1985 to mark the 20th anniversary of the close of Vatican II the fathers of the Synod, after much prompting, suggested that there should be a Catechism to represent the authorised interpretation of Catholic doctrine in the light of the Council.

Now, this Synod of 1985 was a very curious affair. According to the historian Alberto Melloni the questionnaire sent out to 135 participants "contained the presupposition that the Synod would demonstrate the limits of the reception of Vatican II". Six months were allotted for the replies to be formulated and 95 were eventually received. Nearly all the responses, said Melloni, distanced themselves from the negative tone of the part of the questionnaire of the Secretary-General of the Synod and also of J Ratzinger's hypotheses.

The Catechism, when it eventually appeared, was also a very curious affair. It has since been treated by the Vatican as a definitive statement of Catholic belief when it is nothing of the sort. It is presented as an alternative to the Conciliar documents though it does not have, and cannot have, the same authority as a Council of the Church.

Now let's be clear, there has never been a Council of the Church quite like Vatican II. Virtually all Catholic bishops were present and that included bishops from many Eastern rites as well as Western. Moreover there were observers present from many, if not all, of the major Christian denominations. They played a larger part in the formulation of the Conciliar documents than is often acknowledged. We know much more now about how events unfurled thanks to the five-volume history of the Council edited by the late Giuseppe Alberigo (and in its English edition by the American theologian and historian Joe Komenchak). That history, too, has come under fire in an attempt to undermine the impact of the Council.

It is, of course, true that Vatican II was not without its failings. Some of the documents are uninspiring and uninspired. As Bishop Christopher Hill remarked in the letter I quoted earlier, in any Conciliar reception it is never the whole body of Canons or the texts of the Canons that are received. Only some parts of any Council are remembered. One obvious omission from the Conciliar text is any developed theology of the laity. Worst of all, the ecclesiology of Vatican I, and the still older ecclesiology of *Communio*, are placed side by side and remain unconnected.

Now, when a year ago I undertook to deliver this lecture on the reception and non-reception of the Second Vatican Council I thought it would be a simple matter of drawing up a balance sheet, as it were, of the ways in which the Council impacted, or failed to impact, on the life of the Catholic Church. I discovered, however, on thinking about it, that the issue was not quite so straightforward. Apart from a small minority – the followers of the schismatic Archbishop Lefebvre, for instance, and a few other groups – the Council has been received by all in the Church. But as I have also suggested, people have received it differently, depending on any number of factors such as cultural context, but most significantly, perhaps, in the light of their theological background and preferences. I have mentioned the two schools of thought gathered around the two periodicals *Concilium* and *Communio*. The latter was founded in conscious reaction to the former in the belief that *Concilium's* emphasis on dialogue underplayed the revelations received by Christians in Christ.

The starkest expression of this particular conviction was the declaration *Dominus Jesus*, reinterpreting the careful phrase of the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church that the Church of Christ 'subsists in' the Catholic Church. It asserts as Catholic doctrine the conviction that the Roman Catholic Church is the sole true church of Christ and rejects the notion that other Christian bodies, the Orthodox churches excepted, can properly claim the title church: they can only claim to be ecclesiastical communities. This document was approved at a plenary meeting of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and bears the signature of its then Prefect, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, now of course Pope Emeritus. The declaration was approved by Pope John Paul II and was published on 6th August 2000.

It is, of course, true that the expression 'subsists in', which many understood to be drawing the distinction between the Church that Christ founded and the Catholic Church, was open to various interpretations. *Dominus Jesus* addressed the issue and the CDF⁴ returned to it in July 2007 during the pontificate of Papa Ratzinger, reaffirming the absolute identity of the Church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church whereas the churches (or ecclesiastical communities) of the Reformation "do not enjoy Apostolic Succession in the Sacrament of Orders and are therefore deprived of the constituent development of the Church. These are ecclesiastical communities which, in the absence of the sacramental priesthood, have not preserved the genuine and integral substance of the Christian Eucharistic Mystery and cannot therefore, according to Catholic doctrine, be called churches in the proper sense".

In *The City of God* Augustine famously distinguished between the City of God and the City of Men, which implicitly seems to oppose the Church and the World. The Augustinian school is wanting to set the Church and the World in a situation of rivalry: it sees the world in a negative light. Evil and sin so abound in the world that

the Church should always be suspicious of it. Naïve optimism, the neo-Augustinians will undoubtedly say, is frequently to be found in those who enthusiastically espouse *Gaudium et Spes*, that most contested of Vatican documents. It was Augustine, one must remember, who invented the concept of Original Sin.

Those who wish to limit the impact, the reception, of the Second Vatican Council make common cause with those who criticise the Alberigo-Komenchak History. They complain that the authors of the History have used all kinds of extraneous sources to illustrate the course of events – including contemporary accounts by journalists. While it might seem commendable to concentrate attention on the documents themselves, what the critics are in fact doing is playing down the place of the Council in the history of the Church and in the history of the world.

The Second Vatican Council was an event in history. It was an event marked by the number and variety of bishops who attended, by the input of so many learned theologians, by the presence of large numbers of ecumenical observers and by the active interest in its doing by the world's media. It was an event because, like other councils, its final statements were meant – and to a very large extent did – command a consensus it was in its committees and sub-committees and pressure groups not far removed from a parliamentary procedure. It was also an event, as Professor O'Malley has insisted, because of its style, quite different from what had gone before. Trent, like other councils, produced documents of varying length, but these were encapsulated in Canons to be observed, and of course Vatican II did nothing of the sort.

If I may quote an anonymous reviewer in *The Economist* recently, historians have a professional fondness for turning-points – years that act as hinges in history rather than as numbers in a sequence. Some of these hinges turn out to be anything but. 1848 proved to be, in A J P Taylor's phrase, a turning-point in history when history failed to turn. But others rounded down the ages. There are unquestionably dates which mark the turning-points of history: the ending of one epoch and the beginning of another. Those who do not see the Second Vatican Council as just such an event wish to continue interpreting the history of the Church and its doctrine in the tradition of the Council of Trent. But I would argue that Trent, like Vatican II, was a turning-point in Church history. Henceforward, again I would suggest, we will interpret the tradition of the Church, including the work of Trent, through the work of the Council of Fathers between 1962 and 1965. Some may feel uncomfortable with that, but that is indeed what is happening already, when interpreting the history of the Church and the Second Vatican Council. That has been happening since the close of the Council, and that is the measure of its reception.

Notes:

1. Said by the anthropologist Clifford Gibbs
2. Massimo Faggioli is an assistant professor at the University of St Thomas, Minnesota. He is the author of *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (Paulist Press, 2012)
3. A head bishop of an autocephalous (or self-headed) church is not responsible to any higher ecclesiastical authority
4. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

This article is based on a talk given to the Ealing Circle in May, 2013