Keys to the Council
Unlocking the Teaching of Vatican II

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Contents

Abbreviations ix
Introduction xi

Chapter One: Through Baptism We Are Implanted in the Paschal Mystery 1
(Sacrosanctum Concilium 6)

Chapter Two: Christ Is Always Present in His Church 11
(Sacrosanctum Concilium 7)

Chapter Three: Full, Conscious, Active Participation in the Liturgy 22
(Sacrosanctum Concilium 14)

Chapter Four: A Theology of Divine Revelation 31
(Dei Verbum 2)

Chapter Five: A Theology of Tradition 39
(Dei Verbum 8)

Chapter Six: The Church Is Like a Sacrament 47
(Lumen Gentium 1)

Chapter Seven: The Holy Spirit in the Church 57
(Lumen Gentium 4)

Chapter Eight: Eucharistic Ecclesiology 66
(Lumen Gentium 7)

Chapter Nine: The Baptismal and Ministerial Priesthood 76
(Lumen Gentium 10)

Chapter Ten: The Church’s Mission in the World 87
(Gaudium et Spes 40)

Chapter Eleven: The Role of the Laity in the World 95
(Gaudium et Spes 43)

Chapter Twelve: Christian Marriage and Family 102
(Gaudium et Spes 48)

Chapter Thirteen: The Ministry of the Bishop 111
(Christus Dominus 11)
Chapter Fourteen: Episcopal Collegiality  120
   *(Lumen Gentium 23)*

Chapter Fifteen: The Global Catholicity of the Church  129
   *(Lumen Gentium 13)*

Chapter Sixteen: The Right to Religious Freedom  138
   *(Dignitatis Humanae 2)*

Chapter Seventeen: Communion in Faith with Other Christians  148
   *(Unitatis Redintegratio 3)*

Chapter Eighteen: Reform of the Church  160
   *(Unitatis Redintegratio 6)*

Chapter Nineteen: Hierarchy of Truths  170
   *(Unitatis Redintegratio 11)*

Chapter Twenty: The Church and World Religions  180
   *(Nostra Aetate 2)*

Conclusion  188

Further Readings  194

Index to Conciliar Document References  196
Introduction

January 25, 1959. Few days in the last four centuries would equal its impact on the Roman Catholic Church. Yet that day passed largely without notice for the Catholic Church's nearly one billion members. To appreciate its significance we have to go back three months earlier.

On October 28, 1958, Angelo Roncalli was elected pope. He was a round, lifelong church diplomat, an elderly prelate known more for his self-deprecating humor than for his erudition. He succeeded the saintly but severe Pius XII who wielded an unprecedented spiritual authority in the church. Indeed, so far-reaching was his authority that some theologians and ecclesiastical figures speculated that ecumenical councils, formal gatherings of all the bishops of the universal church, had become obsolete. There was nothing a council could do, many felt, that a pope could not accomplish more effectively.

In some respects Roncalli's election was unsurprising. A custom had developed of electing a "caretaker pope" to succeed a papacy of extended length and influence. The theory, not without merit, was that after an extended papacy, the church needed a chance to stop and catch its breath before determining what new direction it must take. Pius's momentous papacy of almost two decades certainly qualified, leading to the election of Roncalli (who took the name John XXIII) as the ideal caretaker.

It is not difficult, then, to imagine the surprise of the small group of cardinals who had gathered on January 25 for a meeting with the elderly pontiff at the Basilica of St. Paul-outside-the-Walls. The context of the meeting was the celebration of Vespers for the conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. At that modest gathering, Pope John announced what were to be the three central planks of his pontificate: (1) the convocation of a diocesan synod for the diocese of Rome, (2) the reform of the Code of Canon Law, and (3) the convocation of a new ecumenical council. It was the last announcement that was most surprising. The last ecumenical council, Vatican I, had ended rather unceremoniously in 1870.

The onset of the Franco-Prussian War required the French emperor to remove the garrison of French troops that had been stationed in Rome to protect the pope. This action, in turn, opened the door for the Italian nationalist army, eager to seize the Papal States and unify Italy, to march
Ecumenical councils are formal gatherings of all the bishops of the universal church. The Catholic Church traditionally recognizes twenty-one such councils, though some scholars consider only the first seven as truly ecumenical councils since they were the only councils to have voting representation of the East and the West. In this schema the fourteen subsequent councils are referred to as general councils or synods of the Western church. Councils are generally named after the places where they are held.

unchallenged into Rome. The turmoil that followed led to the hasty suspension of the council. It had been almost ninety years since that sad event. No bishop alive in 1959 had any personal recollection of an ecumenical council; councils were simply not part of the consciousness of the church.

The pope's announcement of a new council stirred the imaginations of many. For some bishops and theologians it represented a remarkable opportunity for church reform and renewal. Still others saw it as a chance for the church to demonstrate the relevance of the Christian message to a world in the midst of unprecedented social upheaval. Many parts of the so-called developing world were breaking free of the influence of European colonialism. The world had just witnessed a horrific global war, the unprecedented genocide of six million Jews, and the first use of a nuclear weapon, leading to the destruction of tens of thousands of civilians. New forms of modern communication, including the widespread exposure to television, dramatically transformed people's experience of the world around them.

For still others the council would serve as but another ecclesiastical tool for both condemning the evil forces at work in the world and purging the church of dangerous heretical movements. As preparations for the council proceeded over the three and a half years following the pope's shocking announcement, the likely outcome of the council was far from clear. The pope had handed over responsibility for the planning of the council to leading officials of the Roman Curia. Under this curial leadership, the preparatory commissions drew on the expertise of mostly "safe" theologians, and the draft documents they produced, with a few exceptions, did not advance topics beyond the status quo. The rules for the actual conduct of the council were not well developed, and the council was further hampered by the decision to have the entire council conducted in
Latin without the benefit of a translation service. As the actual opening of the council approached in the summer of 1962, some leading bishops and theologians feared the council was doomed to failure.

The reasons why the council did not, in fact, fail present a fascinating story that cannot be fully recounted here. It is fair, however, to attribute the remarkable success of the council to the following factors. First, Pope John XXIII offered a remarkable address at the opening Mass of the council. In it he called for an aggiornamento, the task, that is, of bringing the church "up to date." He quite pointedly distanced himself from some negative voices in the church, including some of his closest advisers who were pessimistic about the state of both the world and the church itself. He called for a deeper penetration of church teaching in order to present its great wisdom in a manner intelligible to humanity today. He spoke of the need to replace the harsh medicine of condemnation with the "medicine of mercy." Catholics must learn to persuade others of the truth of the Catholic faith.

A second factor had to do with the representation on the conciliar commissions. On the first day of the council itself, the bishops needed to elect sixteen bishops to serve on each of ten conciliar commissions. There was some subtle pressure placed on the bishops to simply reelect those bishops who had served on the preparatory commissions. Through some shrewd parliamentary maneuvering, the bishops were able to arrange a recess in order to meet in five different language groups to propose their own slate of candidates. The result was a more ideologically and geographically balanced representation on these important commissions.

Third, for many of these bishops, the council provided a remarkable opportunity for their own ongoing education. Many of these bishops had not picked up a theology textbook since their priestly ordination. Now in Rome for several months each fall from 1962 to 1965, a total of four sessions, the bishops were able to attend evening lectures conducted by some of the world's leading scholars. Also, because the bishops were seated not geographically but in terms of seniority, they often had the opportunity to sit with bishops from other countries and even continents. This allowed them to considerably broaden their own ecclesial horizons. The well-known Vaticanologist Giancarlo Zizola tells the story of visiting Bishop Albino Luciani (the future Pope John Paul I) during the council where he was staying at a Roman pensione run by some Italian sisters. Luciani admitted that he tried to spend each afternoon in his room studying, because, as he put it,
everything I learned at the Gregorian is useless now. I have to become a student again. Fortunately I have an African bishop as a neighbor in the bleachers in the council hall, who gives me the texts of the experts of the German bishops. That way I can better prepare myself.

Fourth, many council bishops found ways to organize and communicate with one another to further discuss various proposals. One such group was called the Domus Mariae. This group consisted of only twenty-two bishops, all generally committed to the cause of conciliar reform. They met weekly to discuss topics being considered by the council. What was significant about this small group was their organizational structure. They sought out bishops who were connected to the various national episcopal conferences. The Domus Mariae group then served as a sort of clearinghouse for the consideration of various topics. They would debate issues and offer compromise proposals that would then be communicated to the bishops of the various conferences. In an age without e-mail or even widespread photocopying, this allowed for the rapid dissemination of ideas and proposals while providing a forum for individual episcopal conferences to raise their concerns.

These and many other factors contributed to a dramatic reorientation of the council that surprised and often frustrated the minority group of bishops resistant to any agenda for ecclesial reform. By the end of the fourth and final session, the council would promulgate sixteen documents: four constitutions, nine decrees, and three declarations. The quality of the material, not surprisingly, was uneven. All four constitutions would make crucial contributions, as would the decrees on ecumenism, the office of the bishop, the apostolate of the laity, the missionary life of the church, and the ministry and life of priests. The declarations on religious freedom and the church's relationship to non-Christian religions would also be important. Other documents, however, suffered from being hastily composed and are rarely cited today.

Appropriating the council's teaching has proved to be a daunting task. There are several reasons for this. The first concerns the massive volume of the conciliar documents. The twenty-one ecumenical councils together produced 37,727 lines of text. Of those some 37,000 lines, Vatican II alone produced 12,179 (approx. 32 percent), whereas the Council of Trent, the next most prolific council, produced 5,637 lines of conciliar text. It is very difficult to digest and synthesize such a large body of material. We must add to this difficulty the lack of a common theological or philosophical foundation to the documents of Vatican II. This becomes
clearer if we compare Vatican II to the previous two councils, Vatican I (1869–70) and the Council of Trent (1545–63). The documents of those two councils exhibit a relative conceptual precision, unambiguous definition of positions and unity of genre that cannot be found in the documents of Vatican II. Both Trent and Vatican I were grounded in a theological scholasticism that gave to each council a real, if limited, conceptual unity. By contrast, in Vatican II's texts we find biblical references alternating with historical expositions, analyses of contemporary issues, citations of previous councils (half of them from Trent and Vatican I), and references to papal texts (half were to the texts of Pius XII).

Yet another difficulty in grasping the council's teaching has to do with a pastoral judgment of Pope Paul VI. Early in his pontificate, Pope Paul expressed a concern that some of the teachings of the council might create harmful church divisions. Consequently, though the rules of the council allowed a document to be approved with a two-thirds majority, Pope Paul made it known that he wished the documents to be approved by a much more significant majority among the bishops. A cursory review of the final voting suggests that the pope got what he desired; no document was opposed in the final vote by more than a handful of bishops. But there was a price to be paid for this high level of unanimity. Significant compromises were made. When achieving full consensus was unlikely, the support of opposing sides of an issue was often secured by juxtaposing, sometimes in the same paragraph, alternative formulations. Of course, to some extent this kind of compromise is evident at every council. It is why conciliar documents should never be read as if they were systematic treatises. Indeed, anyone who has ever served on a committee to draft a common document like a mission statement is aware of this fact. Nevertheless, because of the uniquely transitional character of Vatican II, juxtaposition played a more prominent role than usual. The use of juxtaposition ultimately enabled passage of sixteen documents. It also made it possible, however, for
various ideological camps to appeal to certain passages that appeared to support their particular ecclesiastical agenda while excluding other texts. Any responsible approach to interpreting the council documents has to be aware of the danger of the kind of proof-texting that biblical fundamentalists often employ. The best way to avoid this tendency is to follow a more comprehensive approach to the interpretation of the council documents.

Ormond Rush contends that an adequate interpretation of Vatican II must incorporate three complementary strategies. The first will focus on how the texts of the council developed over time. The focus here is on discovering what the council bishops meant in a particular passage by looking at the history of the text itself. We will want to ask, for example, how a text or passage changed from the preparatory documents to its final form. We will want to look at the teaching of the church prior to the council and ask how this text received that teaching: What principles continued to be asserted? What changes were made? Where was there development? Notes from the conciliar commissions that drafted and revised the texts will be important in arriving at an adequate interpretation of a text, as will the various speeches and debates that transpired during the council. An excellent example of this can be found in the voluminous scholarly literature that is dedicated to *Lumen Gentium* 8 and its teaching that the church of Jesus Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church. Numerous studies have focused on the use of the term "subsists" and have tried to discern the meaning of this word, in the council's intention, by carefully studying various council speeches and the notes from those who participated in the drafting of this text. Rush refers to this interpretive strategy as a "hermeneutics of the authors."

A second strategy will focus on the final form of a particular text or passage. Here, special attention will be given to the genre of the text and the rhetorical style that is being employed. An excellent example of this can be found in the work of the Jesuit church historian John O'Malley. O'Malley has argued that one of the most overlooked features of the teaching of Vatican II is its distinctive rhetorical style.

Most documents from prior councils fairly closely followed a more juridical or legal rhetorical style common to Roman law. We should remember that it was Emperor Constantine who actually convened the first Council of Nicea. Councils themselves were often viewed as judicial and legislative bodies that rendered judgments and issued decrees. Often
included in these documents were penalties, known as canons, to be assigned to those who failed to comply.

For O’Malley, the most striking feature of Vatican II was its dramatic departure from this rhetorical style. Vatican II employed a literary genre taken from the ancient rhetorical tradition known as the epideictic genre, also known as “panegyric.” According to O’Malley, a panegyric “is the painting of an idealized portrait in order to excite admiration and appropriation.” The key idea here is that this genre seeks to persuade the reader toward the emulation of an ideal. This new rhetorical approach is reflected in the council’s distinctive terminology. In place of the harsh language of condemnations and penalties, the council makes considerable use of “horizontal” terms like “brothers and sisters,” “people of God,” “the priesthood of all believers,” and “collegiality.” O’Malley also notes the use of “terms of reciprocity” like “cooperation,” “partnership,” and “collaboration.” Third, he finds “humility-words” like “pilgrim” and “servant.” Finally, he identifies “interiority words” like “charism,” “conscience,” and “joy and hope, grief and anguish.” In O’Malley’s view, attending to this linguistic shift is essential for arriving at an adequate appreciation of what the council was trying to communicate in its documents. What we encounter in these linguistic changes is nothing less than a new understanding of the church and a new way of communicating the Christian message.

Rush also considers within this second interpretive strategy (which he refers to as a “hermeneutics of texts”) the need to attend carefully to the specific context of a passage, that is, how it fits in both the larger document in which it appears and how it relates to other conciliar texts. Here, one must ask, going back to the example of the substitut passage, how the authentic meaning of this passage in Lumen Gentium 8 might be enriched and clarified by the Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio) 3.

Finally, Rush claims that an adequate interpretation of the council’s teaching must also look at what has happened in the almost five decades since the close of the council. How have people read the council’s teaching? How has it been appropriated, developed, and/or reinterpreted in later church documents, canon law, church practices, and the lived faith of the church? This he refers to as a “hermeneutics of receivers.”

This slim volume cannot possibly provide a comprehensive interpretation of the council’s teaching. Rather, our hope is to guide the reader into a direct engagement with the conciliar documents themselves. The difficulty is that the sheer volume of the council documents can overwhelm the reader. To address this problem we have identified twenty passages
from the council documents that we believe provide interpretive "keys." Drawing on the considerable scholarship on Vatican II, including the fruit of all three of the interpretive strategies we have discussed above, we have identified twenty passages that can lead the reader to a greater appreciation for the larger vision of the council. These passages provide, we believe, an important entry point into the council documents and a lens for comprehending the council's overall teaching.

As one might imagine, identifying these passages has not been easy. To be honest, the selection process began as a kind of "five books you would take on a desert island" exercise. The first list included forty passages! We were able to pare down that list to twenty, largely because we realized that many other related passages could be considered in the process of exploring each of the twenty we have chosen. Both of the authors of this volume are ecclesiologists by training, that is, we specialize in theological questions related to the nature and mission of the church. Our interest in the theology of the church has doubtless influenced the passages we have selected. For example, the council documents have some very important things to say about the church's moral teaching that we were unable to explore in any detail.

It is our hope that this volume will serve not as a substitute for the documents of Vatican II but rather as a helpful guide to lead the reader into a more informed study of the council documents themselves. A majority of Catholics alive today have no personal recollection of the church before Vatican II or even of the crucial period that immediately followed the council when many of the council's teachings were first being implemented. For many of the students we teach, Vatican II is simply the last of twenty-one different ecumenical councils with little more relevance to their lives than the Third Council of Constantinople. It is our hope that this volume will help to remedy this regrettable situation. We are convinced that Vatican II remains the most important event in Roman Catholic history since the Protestant Reformation. At a time in our church when much of the council's teaching is being minimized, dangerously reinterpreted, or altogether ignored, an authentic and informed understanding of the council is more important than ever. We hope that these "keys" to the council will unlock a vision of the church that remains both challenging and liberating, a vision capable of guiding our church in the decades to come.