

“A Break from the Past”

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Are rival interpretations of nineteenth and twentieth-century Catholic history vying for our attention and making competing claims to be the true history? In "Continuing the Conversation" (September 8, 2000), Robert Egan asked the question and called for a public discussion of the two interpretations that have emerged from antagonistic understandings of Vatican II and the upheavals that followed.

To summarize Egan's main points: In version one, Vatican II, meant to complete the work of Vatican I, was distorted by various secular and cultural ideologies. The papacy of John Paul II is seen to have reestablished balance in the church and to have offered an alternative to the easy acceptance of modernity. In contrast, version two rests on a more positive attitude toward modernity and liberalism. In this view, Vatican II was a dramatic turning point in which the church was tested and renewed by its encounter with the modern world. The papacy of John Paul II is understood as an interruption and even a disruption in the practice of the dialogue, engagement, and collegiality called for by Vatican II.

Have two versions of post-Vatican II history emerged? Are they competing for legitimacy in our understanding of Catholicism? Commonweal put the questions independently to two historians, James Hitchcock and John W. O'Malley. Their replies follow.

--THE EDITORS

I teach a course titled "Two Great Councils: Trent and Vatican II." In it I pit the two councils against one another because I believe, with Aristotle, that it's basically through the discernment of likenesses and differences that we learn. Between Trent and Vatican II there are many likenesses, many differences. Although I could provide a long list, I will here limit myself to one of each. I hope thus to establish a framework for assessing the significance of Vatican II for the church today.



The two councils are alike in that they are extremely wordy. In the Alberigo/Tanner collection of the documents from the twenty-one councils recognized as ecumenical by the Catholic church, two councils--Trent and Vatican II--take up about one-third of the space. This simple bit of information suggests to me as a historian that the documents are trying to say something more than business as usual. Historians agree that Trent is one of the most significant councils in the history of the church and, indeed, initiated what is often called "the Tridentine era" of Catholicism that lasted for a long, long time.

The documents of Vatican II are twice as long as Trent's. They were produced by an apparatus of bishops and theologians incomparably more elaborate and sophisticated than those that produced Trent's documentation, and they venture into areas never before touched upon by any council. Vatican II made front-page news for four years, arousing in people from almost every walk of life and every religious background astonishment, delight, despair, and incredulity. Bishops who participated spoke of "the end of the Counter Reformation," even more boldly of "the end of the Constantinian era," and more boldly still of "a new Pentecost." Maybe this was a passing rapture, or maybe, especially given the extraordinary length of its documents, the council intended to change things more radically than simply turning the priest around at Mass to face the people, even more radically than did Trent. If so, what precisely was the change? Can it be put in a word or two?

Before trying to answer those questions, let me point out a difference between Trent and Vatican II. Although both were extraordinarily verbose--that is, both had a lot to say--they were verbose in different ways. While exhortation and exposition were surely not absent from Trent, its more significant documents were framed in prescriptive language. They were meant to effect closure. Trent "defined" certain doctrines, which means it closed discussion. In its reform decrees it did the same thing analogously by prescribing certain behavior, especially for bishops and priests, and by threatening punishment for failure to comply: Make Them Behave. The documents of Trent, then, have a closed, top-down, and prescriptive style, which by and large is the style employed by every other ecumenical council--except Vatican II.



The style of Vatican II is different: this is the clue indicating the significance of the council. As is always said of it, it defined nothing. Its language, while theologically correct, tends to be (or at least often sounds) non-technical. It legislated little, and, even when it did, it did not prescribe punishment for offenders. To accomplish the goals of the council, the documents appeal to the good will of those to whom they are directed and therefore strive to motivate them to heartfelt acceptance. The documents read more like invitations than injunctions. What is the significance of this "new" style?

The new style is profoundly significant and, in my opinion, goes to the heart of the council. The council is about style. This time the cliché got it right: The medium is the message. For more than thirty-five years, we have been debating the meaning of Vatican II, especially in the face of interpretations that tend to minimize its import by contradicting what others see as "the spirit of the council." We can take the phrase "spirit of the council" to mean that the documents of the council have a reality and meaning that transcend a narrow reading of the texts which, in prooftexting fashion, fishes out sentences to accommodate a minimal interpretation. "Spirit of the council" means no aspect of the council can be understood without taking a broader reality and meaning into account.

But "spirit" is a vague term, incapable of providing firm guidelines for interpretation. What it tries to indicate is altogether valid, but the word is too soft to do the reality justice. "Style" might at first glance seem to labor under the same, or worse, disabilities, for we tend to think of style as ornamentation, "mere rhetoric." Yet on a deeper level we know well that content and mode of expression are inextricably intertwined, that there is no thought without expression, and expression is what style is all about. The problem we've had in interpreting Vatican II stems in large ecclesiastical measure from our obsession with trying to figure out *what* the council said without taking due account of *how* the council said it. Yet upon first glance--and, I think, upon last glance--the *way* the council put things is its most obvious, striking feature. Its style sets Vatican II off from every previous council. It is worlds apart from Trent. It spoke in a new way.



But was it new? Well, it was new for a council, but otherwise it replicates, to a remarkable degree, the style the fathers of the church used in their sermons, treatises, and commentaries down to Saint Bernard in the twelfth century, before the advent of Scholasticism. I believe this similarity is not accidental. *Lumen gentium*, the doctrinal centerpiece of Vatican II, provided the stylistic model for subsequent church documents. The formulation of *Lumen gentium* was surely influenced by the patristic revival led by Henri de Lubac and others, which used as a resource not only many patristic motifs regarding the church but also the fathers' style of discourse. It was a style based on rhetoric understood as the art of persuasion, the art of finding common ground that will enable previously disagreeing parties to join in action for a common cause. It was not, in the first instance, the art of winning an argument and proving your enemy wrong. The style of this *nouvelle theologie*, to use Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange's contemptuous designation for what de Lubac represented, was perhaps even more at issue than doctrines when that theology was being held suspect and subversive before the council. The style--"mere style"--was the threat.

This takes us to an even deeper level. Michelangelo painted traditional subjects, but it is his style that makes them memorable. Without style, no Michelangelo. Style is not manners or ornament but the expression of deepest personality. My "how" better expresses who I am than my "what." I am a Jesuit, a historian, an American. That's what I am. But it's my style that makes me real--loving and genuine, or cunning and contrived. Nobody loves me for my what. If I'm loved, I'm loved for my how. If I enter the pearly gates, it will be because of my how, not because of my what.

At stake in the debates over the interpretation of Vatican II is the style of the church. What was the change Vatican II wanted to effect and can it be put in a word or two? The change was a change in style, and, yes, I have put it in a word. *How* do we want the church to be--*how* in its procedures as well as in the hopes and fears and loves of all its members, as these are expressed individually and collectively? That was the big question Vatican II addressed and answered. It answered it by the overall style of its language as well as by specific vocabulary that reflected and made explicit what the style implied.



The term "dialogue" recurs incessantly in the documents of the council. After the council, the word was so shamelessly invoked as the panacea for all the problems that one became pained on hearing it. Even today it sounds "so seventyish." That should not obscure for us the profound implications of the term. For the first time in history official ecclesiastical documents promoted respectful listening as the preferred mode of proceeding, as a new ecclesiastical "way." "Freedom of speech" was a value of the modern world, open to abuses, of course, but nonetheless based on a respect for conscience and the dignity of each person's convictions. Dialogue tried to open the church to it.

Dialogue assumed a certain specificity with "ecumenism." This was respectful listening to the other. The respectful listening necessarily implied a readiness to change in the light of what the dialogue might reveal. It implied the church as learner as well as teacher. It was rooted in the respect for conscience and trust in its truths that the council expressed with such force. The decree on revelation, moreover, underscored the mystery of our encounter with the divine and hence the inadequacy of all our confessional statements about it.

The institutional correlate of dialogue was "collegiality." This term rests on a venerable theological and canonical heritage, but a heritage that had been consigned almost to oblivion. It indicates true collaboration between bishops and their priests, among bishops, of bishops with the pope--collaboration, not just consultation. It indicates a significant break with the longstanding and then-current style of ecclesiastical dealing. Although the documents of Vatican II themselves give little evidence of it, we know from other sources that a change in the style as to how the Holy See itself functioned was a special *desideratum* for most of the bishops who attended the council.

What was the style that needed changing, and from where did it spring? The style was "modern" in that it crystallized in the nineteenth century as the Catholic reaction to the French Revolution. "Liberty, equality, and fraternity" had overthrown the God-given order of society, and thus the revolution and the philosophies that underlay it had no redeeming qualities. Against them the church could assume only an uncompromising stance. As



"modernity" in the nineteenth century assumed an ever-more ideological definition, the church, especially in the person of Pius IX, rejected it with even greater intransigence. As the evils of democracy spread, the papacy began to function in ever more autocratic fashion, even in dealing with bishops. When "modern ideas" seemed to creep even into Catholic circles, the papacy, most notably under Pius X, pursued a policy of internal surveillance, punishment, and retaliation unprecedented in its effectiveness. The Holy Office of the Inquisition functioned with a vigor it had not known since it was instituted in the sixteenth century.

A new papacy and a new papal style had come into being that emphasized, almost to the point of caricature, the authoritarian strains in the Catholic tradition and that set the church against and above every person and idea outside it. Benedict XV, Pius XI, and Pius XII tempered these policies and attitudes. Pius XII, in a Christmas message toward the end of World War II, for instance, put in the first good word for "democracy" ever to come from the Holy See. Still, an ecclesiastical style, not altogether dissimilar in certain particulars to the style of modern totalitarian states, prevailed. To that extent it was an acceptance of a truly bad aspect of modernity. It was a top-down style which ignored the horizontal traditions of Catholicism that had made the patristic and medieval church such a vibrant and creative reality. Respect for conscience, with its deep roots in the Catholic tradition, got badly sidelined, even as it was being emphasized by nineteenth and twentieth-century thinkers in the secular and Protestant traditions.

It was a change in this closed, ghetto-like, authoritarian style that the council wanted to effect. The council's statements on freedom of conscience were desperately needed to redress the balance. Rather than maintain the siege style that rejected everything in the modern world, the council wanted to open the church to what was valid and helpful in it, much of which was a retrieval of its own deepest traditions. It did not, for instance, want to turn the church into a democracy, as its almost obsessively repeated affirmations of papal authority demonstrate. But it did want to redefine how that authority (and all authority in the church) was to function, namely, with a respect for conscience that transformed church members,



especially the laity, from "subjects" to participants. Vatican II did not want the church to abdicate its role as teacher of the gospel, but it insisted the church, like all good teachers, needed to learn as it taught. The church could teach seated around the table in the seminar room as well as by thundering truths to passive ears from the heights of the lecturer's podium.

What happened? The council hit the church like a great meteor from outer space. For a decade or so, the meteor seemed to wreak havoc. How could it have been otherwise? A radical change had been called for. Immediate implementation was the battle cry, but it was a battle cry without a battle plan. Holders of ecclesiastical offices were especially hard hit. They did not know how to function in this new mode and sometimes even wondered if they were to function at all. In 1968 the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* created even more confusion, partly because of what it taught, partly because of how Paul VI made the decision. In the same decade a wider upheaval erupted around the world, most notably among students, attacking authority and law enforcement of every kind. As in the Chinese curse, the times were interesting.

By the mid-seventies moderate voices within the church had begun to prevail. Dialogue, collegiality, ecumenism, and positive engagement with "the modern world" began to take concrete form. Within the United States, the episcopal conference seemed to exemplify beautifully how these realities could come together in a new ecclesial style that was genuinely collaborative without entailing an abdication of responsibility. It seemed a style consonant with the council's insistence on the respect due to every human being's conscience and opinion.

This is not to say all was well. (Is it ever?) With the election of Pope John Paul II in 1978, a strong hand took the helm. The papacy entered into a new phase in world affairs, assuming a leadership that, with the aid of the modern media, it had never before enjoyed. Within the church itself, electronic communications of various kinds helped the papacy assume an importance and all-encompassing authority unknown in previous ages. It sometimes began



to seem that papal authority was no longer just the ultimate authority in the church but the only authority. As never before, we had come to live in a papal church.

Questions about the style with which such papal authority is exercised should not, therefore, come as a surprise. John Paul II is not only aware of the issue but has himself called for its examination in his 1995 encyclical *Ut unum sint*. In December 1998, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a document along similar lines titled "Reflections on the Primacy of Peter." The clock cannot be turned back so as to ignore the advantages of a strong Petrine ministry, but the question recurs as to just *how* that ministry is to be exercised. The Petrine ministry is not only the most important in the church, it sets the pattern for how bishops deal with their priests, how priests deal with their flocks, and how Catholics deal with one another and with everyone else.

All is not well. For an analysis of the problem I refer the reader to Archbishop John Quinn's *The Reform of the Papacy* (Crossroad), and to two excellent articles in *America*--Hermann J. Pottmeyer's "Primacy in Communion" (June 3-10, 2000) and Ladislav Orsy's "The Papacy for an Ecumenical Age" (October 21, 2000). For whatever reasons, the fundamental teaching of Vatican II--its teaching about style, its teaching about how the church is to conduct itself--has in practice either been eroded or never been implemented. Collegiality, as Orsy points out, has become an empty word. Not only has centralization of decision making accelerated at a breathtaking pace, but the Vatican's style often seems more autocratic, less dialogical, and less collegial than ever. Lip service is paid to Vatican II, but an almost systematic deconstruction of the great aims of the council sometimes seems afoot even in the Roman curia.

How is the church? Is it compassionate; fair in its procedures, eager to hear both sides of controversial issues, open to the future, respectful of each person's truth? Does it look for common ground with people of good will in order to create an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect? Or does it make its own decisions without considering whether the "separated brethren" and others like them may have something to contribute? Is it suspicious



and secretive, even in its dealings with its own members? Does it rely on special oaths, intimidation, and double talk to secure acquiescence to doctrines and decisions? Is closure on every issue to be secured from on high at the earliest possible moment, with no possibility of revision in the light of further discussion? Are those healing, eminently Christian, words, "I'm sorry," reserved only for mistakes committed in the distant past and never to be addressed to living persons?

Vatican II was a doctrinal council. It taught about the church. It taught about the church through ideas like collegiality and dialogue and by its style, which correlated with such ideas. It called for conversion from an old style of being church to a new style. Old ways don't die easily. Conversion is hard, but the council was certainly clear about what the conversion would look like. For me that's the challenge of the council and its deepest, pressingly pertinent significance.

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