

INTRODUCTION

Few topics in the Church today rattle and divide as much as the Second Vatican Council. Fifty years after its conclusion, we are still debating Vatican II's intention and meaning. This is not entirely unprecedented. Lengthy periods of deliberation typically follow any Church council. As one bishop told me, "It takes several decades even to scratch the surface of a council, let alone adequately understand and apply its teachings." That being said, most Catholics can agree that the implementation of Vatican II has been less than ideal.

I began to recognize this as a young seminarian. While I was serving at a parish in Florida, the retired pastor, Msgr. David Page, invited me out for lunch. In the course of our conversation, Msgr. Page noted that his first appointment as a newly ordained priest was a secretarial position to Archbishop Joseph Patrick Hurley, then bishop of St. Augustine, Florida. Msgr. Page accompanied the bishop during his various episcopal ventures, including his participation in the Second Vatican Council. Over several hours, Msgr. Page regaled me with stories about the inner workings of Vatican II. I was utterly fascinated—and inspired to begin researching the council for myself. That research turned into a decade-long study. During that time, I read every document promulgated by Vatican II as well as numerous schemas, commentaries, journals, and letters written by people present at the sessions.

As my study progressed, I started to notice something both perplexing and unsettling, namely, a wide discrepancy between what was taught by the council fathers and what is commonly

promoted at the parochial level. What I read in the documents was beautiful, theological, and orthodox. But much of what I witnessed being done in “the spirit of Vatican II” was quite the contrary.

This realization reoriented my research. I needed to understand not only what had happened at the council but why there has been such a persistent disconnect between its teachings and the general interpretations of those teachings. I finally found my answer in an unexpected source.

While reading Henri de Lubac’s outstanding little book, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, I stumbled across the appendices. There in Appendix C, I spotted an essay entitled “The Council and the Paracouncil.” From the moment I read the first paragraph, I knew I had discovered something vital for unraveling what happened after Vatican II:

Just as the Second Vatican Council received from a number of theologians instructions about various points of the task it should assume, under the pain of “disappointing the world,” so too the “post-conciliar” Church was immediately and from all sides assailed with summons to get in step, *not with what the Council had actually said*, but with what it *should* have said. . . . This is the phenomenon which we should like to designate as the “paracouncil.” . . . Among many people, whether partisans or opponents or simply docile followers (all of whom were equally fooled), this paracouncil, which often deserved the name “anti-Council,” has been mistaken for the true Council; and whatever in the latter’s work did not correspond with the former’s program has more than once been neglected or misrepresented.¹

De Lubac goes on to explain the far-reaching effects of this paracouncil: “What the paracouncil and its main activists wanted and demanded was a *mutation* [of the council]: a difference not of degree, but of nature.”²

After reading this paragraph, everything clicked for me. De Lubac's distinction between the council and the paracouncil provided not only a lucid paradigm by which to understand the inconsistency between the council's teaching and post-conciliar practice, but also a lens through which to view the factions that have developed within the Church since the council.

On the one hand, we have so-called liberal Catholics who, under the auspices of the paracouncil, believe Vatican II opened the doors to a more modern theology. They encourage dismantling the "tired traditions" and "close-minded beliefs" of the pre-Vatican II Church. As a result, numerous aspects of the faith have been muddled and disenfranchised. Liturgy is seen as a self-gratifying enterprise where the satisfaction of our egos dictates the music, preaching, church architecture, and celebration of the Eucharist. Social justice is reduced to simple activism. The Catholic identity of our schools and universities is repressed in favor of a more "progressive" and "inclusive" environment unconstrained by religious doctrine. Thus, in a well-meaning but misguided attempt to relate positively to contemporary society, the genius of Catholicity is supplanted by nonspiritual ideals. This "reverse catechesis" has been a disaster. As a result, millions of Catholics are leaving the Church as she seemingly fades into irrelevance, just one sentimental institution among many in our culture.

On the other hand, many "conservative" or "traditional" Catholics are in all-out rebellion against Vatican II or, more appropriately, what is falsely peddled as Vatican II. Witnessing the deterioration of solemnity, piety, and catechesis in parishes across the world, they seek to circle the wagons by returning to the tried-and-true infrastructures of traditional Catholicism. In so doing, they hope to revive the Church's past glory so that she can reassert her unique presence in the world. This is verified by the growing number of young men and women who are opting for the traditional Latin liturgy, seeing it in opposition to the liturgy of Vatican II. Many

of the people attracted to this conservative mindset are driven by a deep sense of woundedness and frustration with their local parish experience. Far from being contrarian or close-minded Catholics (although some of them are), the majority simply desire orthodoxy, clarity, reverence, and beauty. In an age when truth is relative, tradition is suspect, and beauty is marred, these men and women are seeking a bedrock of holiness for themselves and their children. Seemingly, the only place to find such stability is “traditional” Catholicism, which often shuns the Second Vatican Council and the follies that presumably flowed from it.

But here’s what de Lubac helped me see: In the end, neither of these groups is responding to the Second Vatican Council itself. They are both reacting to the *paracouncil*, either accepting or rejecting this poor caricature of what the council actually taught and envisioned. For example, “liberals” are often told that Vatican II was a new beginning in the life of the Church, calling for a rejection of old-style Catholicism so as to create a more relatable form of the faith. “Conservatives” are often told Vatican II suppressed Latin and *ad orientem*, disavowed orthodox theology, or paved the way for the perversion of our religion. None of these claims are correct.

The tension between these two camps has disproportionately influenced the last fifty years of theological discussion and liturgical praxis since the council. As a result, the council has become a flashpoint of controversy for many people while the vast majority of Catholics remain indifferent about Vatican II and are left on the sidelines.

But what if there is another way to understand Vatican II? That question brings us to the purpose of this book. I assert that there *is* another way—and that way lies within a reclamation of the genuine intentions of the Second Vatican Council’s teachings. There must be a return to the authentic texts of Vatican II “without reservations that amputate them and without arbitrariness that distorts them.”³ The following pages attempt to carry out that task.

Transcending the political categories of left and right, we will explore the essential nature of Vatican II, with the goal of promoting a constructive and contemplative conversation. This necessitates dispelling several myths about the council that are commonly pushed by either liberal or conservative outlets. At the same time, we will need to discuss with candor what took place in the years immediately following the council that caused these myths to emerge.

To readers who identify as liberal and progressive: You can take great joy in knowing that Vatican II invites and revitalizes the spirit of innovation—but it does so in a way that’s more deeply continuous with tradition than you might have realized.

To conservative and traditionalist readers: Vatican II does not seek to repress or dismiss any of the heritage that you know and love. In truth, it not only supports our great tradition, but seeks a reengagement with scripture and the Church Fathers, providing an even stronger foothold by which to build on the faith and wisdom of our forebears.

Finally, to the millions of Catholics today who don’t fit neatly into polarized political categories: This book is for you in a special way. I meet so many of you in my daily ministry as a priest. I am inspired to find among you a generation of Christians who understand that being Catholic transcends the categories of liberal and conservative. In the words of Bishop Robert Barron, you are a generation who is “both progressive and conservative, both stubbornly alive and stubbornly traditional.”⁴ Your hearts long for a balanced, orthodox, and vibrant Catholicism that may sometimes seem like an unreachable ideal. But I assure you it is not! The Holy Spirit desires the same thing and has provided the recipe for it through the Second Vatican Council.

The following words from Joseph Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI) summarize the mission set before us with piercing clarity:

I believe . . . the true time of Vatican II has not yet come, that its authentic reception has not yet begun: its documents were quickly buried under a pile of superficial or frankly inexact publications. The reading of the *letter* of the documents will enable us to discover their true *spirit*. If thus rediscovered in their truth, those great texts will make it possible for us to understand just what happened and to react with a new vigor. . . . The Catholic who clearly and, consequently, painfully perceives the damage that has been wrought in his Church by the misinterpretation of Vatican II must find the possibility of revival in Vatican II itself.⁵

Reclaiming Vatican II is not simply a *possible* avenue of reforming and refocusing the Church; it is *the* avenue, provided by the Holy Spirit himself through the Mystical Body of Christ. Our duty is to trust in the Lord's inspiration, giving ourselves to what has been given to us so that *his* will may be done.

Soon enough, there will be no one alive who actually attended the Second Vatican Council. It will fall on the shoulders of younger generations, especially millennials like myself, to implement the vision inspired by the Holy Spirit at Vatican II.

The fruition of a council is a responsibility that has been entrusted to only a few select generations. We are one such generation. After more than fifty years of trial and error, we have learned many lessons and grown in understanding. Now is the time to reclaim Vatican II, allowing the full fruits of its graces to blossom in the hearts of God's people. The task is daunting, to be sure, but simultaneously invigorating. In every age, Catholics must choose how to actualize their call to sainthood. Will you join me in choosing to be a saint of Vatican II, a saint who obediently seeks to build a legacy for those who come after us so that they might enjoy the graces of God's will? My prayer is that this generation will take up the mantle of evangelization and reclaim Vatican II. Only then can the full sum of its graces be shared with the world.

ABBREVIATIONS

- CCC..... *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992. Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.
- DV..... Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum* (Word of God). Edited by Austin Flannery. New York: Costello Publishing Co., 2004.
- GS Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* (Joy and Hope). Edited by Austin Flannery. New York: Costello Publishing Co., 2004.
- LG Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* (Light of the Nations). Edited by Austin Flannery. New York: Costello Publishing Co., 2004.
- SSC..... Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (On the Sacred Liturgy). Edited by Austin Flannery. New York: Costello Publishing Co., 2004.
- UR..... Vatican Council II, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Restoration of Unity). Edited by Austin Flannery. New York: Costello Publishing Co., 2004.

THE PARACOUNCIL: WHAT HAPPENED?

At the heart of this book is a simple message: The Church today must reclaim the legacy of the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II is *the* avenue for reforming and refocusing the Church. But before we can do that, we need to look a little more closely at why the council needs to be reclaimed in the first place.

Vatican II is a point of contention for many within the Church. Tensions permeate social media and other places of discourse in the Catholic world, with traditional and liberal Catholics disagreeing about Vatican II's supposed implications for liturgy, catechesis, the Church's relationship with the world, and more.

But both sides are laboring under some serious misunderstandings. As outlined in the introduction, both liberal and traditional camps are responding to what Henri de Lubac calls "the paracouncil"—a poor caricature of what the council really taught and envisioned. Thus, before we can reintroduce ourselves to Vatican II's true spirit and begin to reclaim its legacy for the Church, we need to get a better handle on what led to such a massive misimplementation and misrepresentation of the council's vision.

The story behind the rise of the paracouncil is complex. Beginning with specific individuals who used Vatican II as an

opportunity to endorse personal theologies, it quickly morphed into an en masse counternarrative. I have found it useful to identify three aspects of the rise of the paracouncil: 1) the council of the theologians, 2) the council of the media, and 3) the council of the age.

The Council of the Theologians

One of the biggest factors in the rise of the paracouncil was theologians setting themselves up as deputized interpreters of Vatican II—and of Church teaching as a whole. Then-cardinal Joseph Ratzinger offers a clear summary of this phenomenon: “After the Council . . . theologians increasingly felt themselves to be the true teachers of the Church and even of the bishops. Moreover, since the Council they had been discovered by mass media and had captured their interest.”¹ For some theologians, the council documents failed to embody the radical change they hoped Vatican II would achieve. In their opinion, these documents represented half-baked compromises that sought to appease certain factions among the council fathers.

The “Spirit” of Vatican II

Their solution to this perceived shortcoming of the council’s documents? Instead of adhering to the documents of the council, some theologians opted to follow what they called “the spirit of Vatican II.” You can probably see where this is headed. In setting aside the texts and focusing instead on the council’s “spirit,” “a vast margin was left open for the question on how this spirit should subsequently be defined and room was consequently made for every whim.”² In lieu of promoting the documents as written and in cooperation with the magisterium, certain theologians presented the teaching of the council through the lens of their own theological agenda, foisting themselves on public opinion as authentic interpreters of the council.³

This clearly contradicts the proper vocation of a theologian. Theologians are not freelance agents or self-appointed judges of the magisterium. Before all else they are humble servants “officially charged with the task of presenting and illustrating the doctrine of the faith *in its integrity and with full accuracy*.”⁴ However, that ideal was not upheld by various theologians in the years following Vatican II.

One example of this phenomenon: In 1967 (two years after the closing sessions of Vatican II), the Belgian theologian Edward Schillebeeckx published a book commenting on the council’s document *Lumen Gentium*. In it, he celebrates the Second Vatican Council’s definition of the Church as the “sacrament of the world,” calling this understanding of the Church “one of the most charismatic to come out of Vatican II.”⁵

The problem? The Second Vatican Council did not use the phrase “sacrament of the world” a single time in any of its documents! In fact, this term was deliberately excluded by the council, which instead referred to the Church as the “sacrament of salvation” (*LG* 48). I’ll elaborate on exactly what was at stake in that distinction between “sacrament of the world” and “sacrament of salvation” later. But for now, we use the example to demonstrate one startling point: The council taught one thing, and a highly influential theologian openly taught another—while claiming faithfulness to the actual intention of Vatican II. On the heels of the council, Schillebeeckx willfully conflated the message of Vatican II with his own personal opinion.

Sadly, this was not an isolated case. Within the first ten years after the council, popular, influential figures in the Church performed the same parlor trick over and over again in publications and lectures, disseminating their personal theological ideas as faithful expressions of the Second Vatican Council. What’s more, numerous universities and seminaries were quickly subverted by these misrepresentations. Students and seminarians, rather than immersing themselves in the council texts and seeking to

understand them at face value, were *told* what to believe about Vatican II, thus being formed in the so-called spirit of the council.

The fallout was significant—and its effects continue to this day. Pope emeritus Benedict XVI alluded to this in his recent letter, “The Church and the Scandal of Sexual Abuse.” While reflecting on the negative influences of seminary formation in the immediate post-conciliar years, he writes:

The long-prepared and ongoing process of dissolution of the Christian concept of morality was, as I have tried to show, marked by an unprecedented radicalism in the 1960s. . . . Indeed, in many parts of the Church, conciliar attitudes were understood to mean having a critical or negative attitude towards the hitherto existing tradition, which was now to be replaced by a new, radically open relationship with the world. . . . There were . . . individual bishops who rejected the Catholic tradition as a whole and sought to bring about a kind of new, modern “Catholicity” in their dioceses.⁶

This “conciliar attitude” spoken of by the pope emeritus is often referred to as the “spirit of Vatican II.” In reality, however, many of the things done in the so-called spirit of Vatican II are quite contrary to the actual teachings of the council. I’ll always remember what one bishop told me during a retreat: “If a person says their theology or program is done in the ‘spirit Vatican II,’ it most likely isn’t.”

The council as interpreted by these theologians became a counternarrative to the official magisterium of the Church. Unsurprisingly, a rift of resentment formed between the “freethinking” academics in universities, seminaries, parishes, and schools and the “close-minded authoritarian” hierarchy of the Church. We can still feel the effects of this division in our parishes and institutions today.

An Example: Latin Language and Vatican II

It is difficult to overstate just how influentially and efficiently the so-called spirit of Vatican II has circulated throughout Catholic culture in the past five decades, causing considerable confusion along the way. Take, for example, the common misconception that Vatican II suppressed the use of Latin in the Mass. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth, as we'll see in chapter 3! But for both those who love and appreciate liturgical Latin and those who have joyfully welcomed celebrating Mass in their own language, misunderstandings about Vatican II's teachings on the matter continue to run rampant.

Recently, I had an interaction with a graduate from one of our Catholic universities in the United States. She has a master's degree in theology. In the course of our conversation, it became clear that she believed Vatican II had suppressed the use of Latin in the sacred liturgy—and that anyone who still valued liturgical Latin was out of step with Vatican II. When I asked her which documents of the council banned or discouraged Latin, she reluctantly admitted that in all her years of study she'd never read any of the actual council documents. A professor had assured her that Latin was against the “spirit” of the council and an obstacle to the Church “moving forward.”

On the other side of the aisle, I spoke with a traditionalist seminarian several years ago at the March for Life in Washington, DC. We walked and conversed with each other for nearly an hour. What I found most interesting was that he also claimed Vatican II had suppressed the use of Latin in the Mass. I asked him the same question about where he read this in the council documents and received the same response. He had not read any of them.

Even a cursory reading of the council documents would go a long way toward answering many of the critiques hurled against Vatican II. Throughout years of conversations and debates, I've discovered time and time again that most people who say they agree

or disagree with the teachings, theology, and practices of Vatican II are actually agreeing or disagreeing with the interpretations of specific theologians—not the publications of the council itself.

The Council of the Media

We are not strangers to the concept of “fake news.” Mass media outlets are prone to morph reports about current events to fit a specific narrative their network wants to push. Believe it or not, this took place just as much in 1963 as it does in our own time. Such was the case with the Second Vatican Council. In a decade already brimming with excitement about societal revolution, the council proved enticing. Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering provide an enlightening summary of the media’s role in interpreting the council:

Never before was an ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church so extensively covered and reported by the modern news media as Vatican II (1962–1965). The impact of this coverage was pervasive and profound in its portrayal of the council in the ideological categories of “liberal and conservative.” The council was dramatically reported as a liberal or progressive accommodation to modernity that aimed to overcome Catholicism’s traditional, conservative resistance to modernity. . . . Journalists of the print and electronic media flocked to Rome. Few had any expertise in Catholic theology and so were dependent upon popularized accounts of the council’s deliberations and debates offered by *periti* [conciliar theological consultants] and theologians with journalistic skills.⁷

Lamb and Levering highlight two important points. The first we discussed above, namely, the media becoming a mouthpiece for theologians promoting their personal interpretations of the council. The second was just as damaging: the media’s parcelling of the Church into liberal and conservative factions.

The Liberal-versus-Conservative Narrative

It is wholly inadequate to interpret events in the life of the Church through a secular society's political categories. The Church intersects constantly with our daily social and political realities—but we must remember that it is a divine institution that must be understood in a spiritual way. To restrictively cipher Church actions as nothing more than a skirmish between liberal and conservative groups will always prove insufficient and lopsided. Yet, that is exactly what the media did when reporting on Vatican II.

Both during and after the council, journalists constructed a dramatized narrative detailing supposed clashes between liberal and conservative blocs behind the walls of St. Peter's. Media outlets sought to portray Vatican II as a battle between progressive freethinkers and close-minded traditionalists. News reports that catered to this simplistic liberal-versus-conservative story line tantalized people's imaginations. For months, headlines poured out from the council giving a play-by-play analysis of the bishops' proceedings. Disagreements were exaggerated, partial information was leaked prematurely, and pseudo-truths were reported.

This is not to say the council was free of conflict and completely cordial. The memoirs of *periti* such as Louis Bouyer and Henri de Lubac are enough to dispel that notion. But to depict the council as a fight between two warring ideologies is certainly deficient. The truth of the matter is much more nuanced.

Unfortunately, the media's tendency to see conflicts through a liberal-versus-conservative lens is still hurting the Church in our own time. Media reports on synods, papal meetings, and bishops' conferences are covered more like American politics than spiritual gatherings. As a result, certain topics become triggers that immediately cast people into a frenzy, thus compromising our ability to dialogue and think critically about important subjects. This is because the press uses "categories from the world, and they don't fully appreciate that [the Church is] dealing with a different way of

being, a different way of thinking.”⁸ The Church’s discourse must transcend the limiting dichotomies of conservative and liberal. Truth must be the Church’s only concern, not appealing to a Gallup poll or appeasing a political faction.

Even Catholic media sometimes succumb to the liberal-versus-conservative mindset. Certain religious news agencies thrive on manufactured drama between the liberal and conservative camps. Likewise, many laypersons and clergy on social media are constantly at odds with one another, at times even falling into slander and defamation. I believe this to be a pressing spiritual danger for our generation, especially for those within the Church who are seeking legitimate reform.

One of the consequences of this polarized discourse is the constant undercutting of sincere attempts to live and minister in accord with Vatican II. For example, if a priest wants to start celebrating the ordinary form of the Mass in Latin twice a year so as to be in accord with the council’s directive to accustom the faithful to the Latin language, he is immediately dubbed a conservative traditionalist even though he celebrates Mass in the vernacular the other 363 days of the year. Yet, if that same priest says something positive about Pope Francis in a Sunday homily, he is dubbed a liberal progressive who hates tradition. In reality, he is just a *Catholic* priest, a man seeking beauty, goodness, and truth wherever it is to be found, and obedient to whatever forms the Church offers it to the world.

If we are to reclaim Vatican II and continue striving toward authentic renewal, we must broaden our horizons and break out of the restrictive categories of liberal and conservative. A layperson who likes the Mass in Latin is not a conservative Catholic any more than a layperson who likes “On Eagle’s Wings” is a liberal Catholic. They are both simply Catholics seeking Christ.

That being said, I am not advocating for some type of relativism. There are proper and improper ways to practice Catholicism. But in order to discern appropriate forms of orthodoxy (“right belief”) and

orthopraxis (“right practice”), we must be free of triggers as well as uncharitable presuppositions about others’ opinions and motives.

In the end, this can only be accomplished through love. For “love unites us to God . . . has no limits to its endurance, bears everything patiently. Love is neither servile nor arrogant. It does not provoke schisms or form cliques, but always acts in harmony with others.”⁹ These words from Pope St. Clement are timeless, applying even to our current situation. We must presume the goodness of the other even if that goodness is misguided or confused. Doing so affords us the patience necessary for true dialogue.

Go to the Sources

There is another reason for the media’s powerful influence that speaks to a deeper problem with modern education as a whole, namely, our willingness to rely on secondhand reports and summaries of important topics.

In addition to my ministry as a parish priest, I am a teacher. One of the first things I teach my students is to rely on primary sources over secondary sources. If you are studying George Washington, don’t just read a textbook paragraph or a Wikipedia article about him. Instead, read one of his letters or his inaugural speeches. If you are studying Dante Alighieri, read the *Divine Comedy*. If you are studying Antonio Vivaldi, listen to one of his concertos. Enter into an intellectual relationship with the person’s work and make a preliminary judgment based on that encounter. Only after you take this fundamental step can you begin a healthy engagement with secondary resources and listen to various opinions.

Most people get this backward. We start with the secondary sources before turning to the primary—or worse yet, never bother with the primary at all—with the result that ignorance proliferates. This most certainly happened (and continues to happen) with the Second Vatican Council via mass media and social media. When I listen to analyses of the council from different media outlets or