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How Should We Remember Vatican II?

James Sweeney

Abstract

What happened at Vatican II and the significance of its decisions is strongly contested in the Church today. There is a struggle over the memory of the Council. It is suggested that two hermeneutics are in use, continuity versus discontinuity. On the one hand, it is said that privileging the 'event' of the Council as the interpretative key for reading its documents leads to an ideological distortion and introduces discontinuity with tradition. On the other hand, it is held that the continuity thesis plays down the real changes the Council introduced and, while unexceptional as a theological principle, it is being deployed as a polemical ideology, restricting necessary change. This article distinguishes between theological principle and experience in relation to continuity/discontinuity. It argues that the event of the Council is to be found as much in its effects in the Church at large as what took place in Rome. It analyses the phenomenology of change at both levels and concludes that the tensions between the need for continuity and the impulses of discontinuity need to be recognised and worked with rather than repressed.

Keywords

Vatican II, Memory, Hermeneutics, Continuity, Discontinuity

How should we remember Vatican II? The theme of the 2008 CTA conference was "the challenge of providing the means for the Church to fulfil its mission today as the vantage point for a re-reading of both the documents of Vatican II and the ecclesial event that was the Council". In other words, the purpose of remembering the Council is to help us respond to today's needs, and the scope of our remembering includes both the Council's productions (the Vatican II documents) and its historical character as event.

It is a commonplace that remembering things is not a mental video of past events. It is always a construction, some form of social reconstruction of what was actually going on. When we remember – or re-construct – the past, our current motives and preoccupations

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are involved. Close in time as we are to Vatican II and intimately affected by its decisions, our memory of it and how our memories come to be shaped has crucial significance. Memory, especially our shared institutional memory, is central to the Council's ongoing effect in history and its institutional implementation.

Different stances also shape how we remember. Here are two contrasting quotations. First, Karl Rahner, four days after the close of Vatican II in a lecture in Munich on 12 December 1965, said:

> During the Council we walked through a vast desert, and we came closer to God's holy mountain. But were we now to settle down to rest under the broom-tree of a Conciliar triumphalism, tired, sleepy, and fed up, then would – then please may, then surely must – an angel of God wake us up from our sleep by persecutions, apostasy, and suffering of heart: "Get up, you have a great journey before you".[1]

Ten years later, on 29 June 1975, Pope Paul VI, preaching on the Feast of Saints Peter & Paul, said:

> After the Council, we believed there would be a day of sunshine in the history of the Church. Instead there arrived a day of clouds, of tempest, of darkness, of questioning, of uncertainty. We preach ecumenism but we constantly separate ourselves. We seem to dig abysses instead of filling them in . . . through some fissure the smoke of Satan has entered the Temple of God . . . something preternatural has come into the world to disturb, to suffocate the fruits of the Ecumenical Council, and to prevent the Church from breaking into a hymn of joy at having renewed in fullness its awareness of itself.[2]

Was Rahner prophetic? What is striking is that he seemed to embrace the time of troubles that in fact followed the Council. Paul VI, on the other hand, lamented it. Rahner looked for an angel of God to provoke us, Paul smelt the smoke of Satan. What Rahner foresaw was a drama. Paul expected the harmony of a great historical achievement. Depending on which point of view you take – history as drama or as accomplishment – you're likely to look back at the originating event of the Council quite differently.

So, might we have expected a different kind of post-conciliar period? Or, was Rahner not only accurate, but did he get it right – persecutions, apostasy, suffering of heart? And how are we to understand that?

[1] Karl Rahner, *Das Konzil – ein neuer Beginn* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien, Herder, 1966) p. 2; quoted in Richard Schenk 'Officium signa temporum perscrutandi: New encounters of Gospel and culture in the context of the New Evangelization', in Johann Verstraeten (ed), *Scrutinizing the Signs of the Times in the Light of the Gospel* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), p. 167.

[2] See the website of the Holy See for the Italian text. Quoted in Nicholas Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims* (London: DLT, 2008) p. 259.

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'In the Spirit of Vatican II?'

There's a struggle in the Church today over the memory of the Council and, according to Nicholas Lash, it is not just about *how* to remember it – the basic issue of hermeneutics – but even about *what* actually happened.[3] His charge is that a revisionist history is at work and it is being deployed as a polemic. Now, polemics succeed not by the simple truth of what is said but by their capacity to establish and sustain a social position, to entrench a point of view in the cultural consensus. A polemic is always a power bid.

Embroiled in this controversy is the five-volume *History of Vatican II* edited by Giuseppe Alberigo from Bologna.[4] His main critic is the curial Archbishop Marchetto[5] , while Lash comes to Alberigo's defence and the scholarly seriousness of the *History*. But this is more than an academic dispute over which historical hermeneutic is more defensible. It is a polemic. Marchetto accuses Alberigo – contrary to all the evidence in Lash's view – of an ideological presentation of the Council documents by using the 'event' that was the Council as the interpretative key for understanding it. But this charge can itself be seen as ideological.

In Marchetto's view, the *History* is slanted to undo the careful compromises between different positions embedded in the Council texts, so that:

> It thus emerges that what was an extreme radical position in the heart of the conciliar majority (opposed to 'consensus' – there was also extremism in the minority, which would later be manifested with the schism of Archbishop Lefebvre) succeeded, after the Council, almost in monopolizing the interpretation.[6]

The allegation that Alberigo is the polar opposite of Lefebvre is pure polemics. It is a claim for the hermeneutical middle ground – in fact the high ground – a bid to capture the interpretative stance. Of course, it is equally possible to maintain from the post-conciliar record that it is the heirs of the conservative minority who are unpicking the conciliar balance and consensus.

Nicholas Lash assembles the evidence for this. He points out: the restrictive way *Dominus Jesus* interprets *Lumen Gentium's* critical phrase 'subsists in'; the narrowed canonical approach adopted by the CDF on the meaning of "churches and ecclesial communions"; and

[3] Nicholas Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims* (London: DLT, 2008). On the topic of this article I follow Nicholas's very full and dramatic account in chapter 18, 'In the Spirit of Vatican II?'.

[4] English version edited by Joseph Komonchak and published by Peeters of Leuven (1995, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2006).

[5] Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travellers.

[6] Quoted by Lash, *Op. cit*. p. 263.

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Benedict XVI's motu proprio *Summorum Pontificum*, not only reversing the thrust of the liturgical renewal but, by ignoring the views of many bishops and episcopal conferences, also running contrary to the spirit of collegiality. Where Vatican II left many things open to further theological and canonical enquiry – for example, the relationship of collegiality and papacy – Rome now narrows interpretation, and does so in line with the Council's conservative minority, and does so in an increasingly polemical way.

Of course, the episcopate – and Rome – do have the responsibility of overseeing the Council's implementation, and this involves the lines and limits of interpretation. The Synod of Bishops on the 20th anniversary of the Council in 1985 laid down six norms of interpretation . But today the focus is put more narrowly on a 'hermeneutic of continuity' as opposed to 'discontinuity'.

This was outlined in the landmark address of Pope Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia in 2005. His thesis is that Vatican II stands continuous with tradition, and its interpretation must not be led by whatever of the new it introduced (while, of course, it did introduce some new things). The Pope is a stern critic of any sense of break in the tradition leading to a radically new kind of Church. He seems to hold that the authentic mode of the Church's progress through history is one of uninterrupted continuity, a seamless unfolding of its mystery and mission:

> . . . . it all depends on the correct interpretation of the Council or – as we would say today – on its proper hermeneutics, the correct key to its interpretation and application. The problems in its implementation arose from the fact that two contrary hermeneutics came face to face and quarrelled with each other. One caused confusion, the other, silently but more and more visibly, bore and is bearing fruit.

This has become the quasi-official view, and continuity/discontinuity is now a slogan used routinely to delineate distinct ecclesial positions.[7] But does it have any real magisterial authority?[8] Or is it simply a theological/methodological position? And if, as Lash charges, it goes hand in hand with manifest misinterpretations of the actual texts and orientations of the Council, where does that leave it?

On a close reading, Pope Benedict's curial address is actually more subtle. While at the beginning he makes the stark contrast between continuity and discontinuity, later he develops a quite nuanced understanding of their intricate relationship. Having considered the course

[7] For example, in the Bishop of Lancaster's *Fit for Mission? Church* (2008).

[8] Alberigo maintains that there was a similar restrictive interpretative move by the Roman authorities after Trent. See Giuseppe Alberigo, 'From the Council of Trent to "Tridentinism" ' in R.F. Bulman and F.J. Parrella, *From Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations* (Oxford: OUP, 2006) pp. 19–37.

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of Church history from the nineteenth-century, the Pope concludes, somewhat tortuously:

> It is clear that in all these sectors, which all together form a single problem, some kind of discontinuity might emerge. Indeed, a discontinuity had been revealed but in which, after the various distinctions between concrete historical situations and their requirements had been made, the continuity of principles proved not to have been abandoned. It is easy to miss this fact at a first glance. It is precisely in this combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels that the very nature of true reform consists.

Put plainly, in history and in ecclesial reform there is both continuity and discontinuity, and they are not so easily distinguished and reconciled. A balanced hermeneutic acknowledges both. Then why stigmatise those who find the fact of discontinuity most striking and laud only those who see continuity?

This is where polemic comes in. The agenda is not theoretical hermeneutics. The proposition that Vatican II was in continuity with Catholic tradition is, in fact, incontestable. Does anyone actually hold that there was a radical break in the tradition? One suspects a straw man here, put up simply to be knocked down. The real agenda is different, and has to do with ecclesial practice and policy.

The Event of Vatican II

The crux of the matter is the Council as event. This causes great nervousness in official circles. Those who privilege 'event' are criticised for a selective reading of the Council texts, only taking account of their new features and discarding established positions with which these were left in tension. But the conciliar 'event' was wider and deeper than a disputation between theological positions.

Andrew Greeley calls Vatican II "the Catholic revolution". Here he admits to a change of mind. For long he resisted but eventually he became convinced that the Council was a revolutionary event (he reshaped his memory of it). The revolution, he says, was the dissociation of two previously united features: Catholicism's rich symbol system and its strict moralism. In the wake of Vatican II, it became possible for Catholics to move decisively away from the narrow moralisms of an authoritarian system. However, this was not a rejection of the Catholic culture or way of life. Rather, in Greeley's catch phrase – and here he is talking about the United States – "Catholics stay Catholics because they like being Catholics". They are captivated by Catholicism's sacramental imagination, its celebration of life and love, and its sense of the communion of saints, especially our Lady. However, Catholics now practise their faith in a much changed cultural climate.

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For Greeley, the event of Vatican II lies less in the Council itself than in its effects in the Church at large. These effects were spontaneous not engineered, outbursts of "collective effervescence" not planned processes, an unpredictable shifting of the tectonic plates. There is abundant evidence of this in the immediate post-conciliar period: the Catholic priesthood, religious orders and parishes plunged into turmoil of self-induced but actually rather unfocused change.

What triggered it? According to Greeley, the shift came with the dissolution of the ideology of an immutable Church, when the structure of an unchanging Church shattered. Some key events started the process. The move at the Council by Cardinals Lienart and Frings to set aside the commission nominations was not a simple bureaucratic power play. It was a "structure-shattering event", relativizing the power of the Curia. Others followed: the liturgical changes, changes in ecumenical relations, eating meat on Fridays, the mere prospect of change to the prohibition on contraception (whose eventual reaffirmation did nothing to reinstate the structure). All this showed the Church not to be immutable, and Catholic culture was changed irrevocably.

In the light of this analysis it becomes quite unreal to underplay the character of Vatican II as an event. Like it or not, it was an historic shift within the Church whose consequences were unpredictable. To portray it as a simple occurrence, a moment of decision making – of crucially important decisions, but decisions that could and should be logically understood and carefully implemented – is seriously out of tune with the facts.

Dynamics of the Council

How did the event take off? Melissa Wilde has written "a sociological analysis of religious change" at Vatican II.[9] She explains the changes and the extent to which they were pursued, by a close study of the dynamics of the Council itself. Her two main axes are first, the specific interests pursued by four different groupings of bishops (Northern Europe and North America; European Catholic countries and the Roman Curia; Latin America; Asia and Africa) and, second, their informal, behind-the-scenes organisational mechanisms.

Without going into the importance of the different theologies in play,[10] Wilde demonstrates how practical interests were crucial in

[9] Melissa Wilde, *Vatican II: A Sociological Analysis of Religious Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[10] A criticism of Wilde's thesis is that it underplays the progressive majority's greater intellectual firepower; their programme for renewal was underpinned by the extensive theological, biblical and liturgical research of the twentieth-century.

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determining the course of the Council. The main interests of the Northern European and North American group (also influenced by the *nouvelle theologie*) lay in ecumenical relations and a new stance towards society, while the interest of bishops from the European Catholic countries and the Roman Curia (influenced by a more traditional theology) was in reasserting established Church positions so that nothing would really change. The fact that the bishops of the other groupings (and also, at a crucial point, from Eastern Europe) fell in with the 'progressive majority', and that their own somewhat different interests were accommodated, was what carried the day and led to an overwhelming consensus for change.

A crucial factor was the bishops' own legitimacy as church leaders, and its different sources across the different societies. Those from Catholic monopoly countries and the Curia enjoyed entrenched legitimacy. Northern European and North American bishops, because of their societies' pluralism, depended on a negotiated legitimacy and needed to establish effective relationships both in the society and ecumenically. Missionary bishops from Africa and Asia depended on expansion – on the growth of their churches – for a secure sense of legitimacy; while Latin American bishops by and large enjoyed the entrenched legitimacy of the Catholic countries, but it was in crisis due to the social and economic circumstances of the continent.

Wilde shows the crucial role of informal organisational mechanisms in pressing the case for renewal and change. The progressives – a broad spectrum, led by the North Europeans – quickly set up an informal structure of communication and consultation. The conservatives, under the leadership of the Curia who had had control of the pre-Council process, were slow to organise informally. When, late in the day, they established a coordinating mechanism it was looser and much less effective.[11] A crucial factor was that for the progressives, informal organisation was consonant with their culture – they were promoting collegiality – whereas for the conservatives, who held to papal authority, informal organising was culturally discordant. Moreover, the progressives organised via episcopal conferences, while the conservatives viewed these with suspicion.

The consequence was that the two groups tended to view themselves and each other through very different lenses. The dominant progressive majority perceived the programme of renewal and change as inspired by the Holy Spirit – this was a new Pentecost. The conservative minority saw it as politically inspired and executed, the work of men, and a real danger to the authentic tradition of the Church. It was up to Pope Paul VI to broker a consensus, which he succeeded in doing to an astonishing degree. But it meant compromise texts,

[11] The 'progressive' network was organised from the Domus Mariae while its 'conservative' counterpart was the Coetus Internationalis Patrum or CIP.

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leaving some issues unresolved, papal interventions in some final drafts, and even closing down some debates (priestly celibacy, birth control). Nevertheless, the Council came out resolutely in favour of change.

This is what the actual record of the years 1962 and 1965 shows. A real agenda of change was pursued, and pursued in ways that can be plainly described. What made Vatican II such an electrifying event was that everyone involved, whether they approved or not, was aware that, after an era in which immutability had become the 'fifth mark' of the Church, real change was under way. But this was not thought of as either simple continuity or discontinuity. Great care was taken, in fact, to legitimise the changes by reference to tradition.[12]

Continuity or Discontinuity?

What lay beyond the control of the Council Fathers, however, was what their deliberations sparked off in the Church at large. Was Vatican II received in a reductionist manner, so that discontinuity was emphasised disproportionately? This can be plausibly argued for the early post-conciliar years. The Council's decisions were widely *experienced* as significantly discontinuous, and certainly discontinuous with the immediately preceding era. As Nicholas Lash says, many silly things were said and done after the Council, for example at the wilder reaches of liturgical experimentation. And the threat of radical discontinuity might not be entirely past. The Dutch Dominicans' proposal last year, for example, for a Eucharistic presidency legitimated by the parish community without the necessity of episcopal ordination seems to ditch any Catholic theology of Orders. Rome is not being simply alarmist.

However, is the continuity/discontinuity thesis an adequate frame for such concerns about order and discipline in the Church today? As a theological statement the assertion of a fundamental continuity is entirely unexceptional, and it is hard to believe that any serious person would disagree. Smuggled into the thesis, however, is an assertion about the manner of change, the way theology and doctrine develop. To admit change – as all must do since Newman – but rule out any element of discontinuity would be simply incoherent, and as we have seen Pope Benedict does not take that line. The argument to be had, however, is about how change occurs.

The continuity proposal seems to be that change can only legitimately occur as a seamless unfolding of the mystery and mission of

[12] See Joseph A. Komonchak, 'The Council of Trent at the Second Vatican Council', in R.F. Bulman and F.J. Parrella, *From Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations* (Oxford: OUP, 2006) pp. 61–80.

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the Church. But this is to play down the reality of history. Do not historical events, even external historical events, sometimes mark the Church in quite definitive ways? The idea that events can quite properly disrupt the established flow of continuity, and even mark a break with the immediate past and introduce something new or renewed, is surely not unthinkable. We inevitably think of Constantine! Rahner's historical thesis of Jerusalem Church, European Church and World Church suggests the same. Is not the notion of a post-Tridentine Church a helpful and accurate construct? Would anybody claim that at Trent nothing really significant happened, that there was no real change in the shape of the Church? Are the two millennia of Christian history not markedly different?

The most serious limitation of the continuity hermeneutic – so it seems to me – is its a-historical character. Although it takes an historical form – that a contrary hermeneutic of discontinuity took the field first and had to be defeated – this is merely an assertion about post-conciliar history, not an historical explanation. Why did the post-conciliar Church, as Paul VI lamented, fall into discord? Was this just a mistake? The sins of individuals?

What the continuity hermeneutic fails to acknowledge are the historical forces at work inside and outside the Church, the manifest uncertainties in contemporary culture, and the effects of these on the life of faith. The Council is portrayed as having been lucidly clear. However, the actual life and historical trajectory of the Church doesn't fit neatly into this theorised picture. There is a tinge of ideology here and it shows up in the polemic. Berating those who face these contemporary dilemmas openly – whether as dissenters or plotting a radical break with tradition – is to create scapegoats for a fearful situation that is rejected as intolerable.

The assumption lurking in the background is that the history of the Christian Church is, or should be, an epic story of achievement, in the course of which, certainly, negative forces have to be defeated, but that these do not enter into the heart of the story itself. Sin lies outside the true story of the Church. Rahner's vision, with his uncanny call post-Vatican II for "an angel of God (to) wake us up from our sleep by persecutions, apostasy, and suffering of heart", runs contrary to this. As Karen Kilby's paper has shown, in Rahner's view, the Church itself and not just its individual members, as well as being One and Holy, is marked by sin. In this perspective, we have to expect that all the work of conciliar implementation, by advocates of continuity as well as discontinuity, by theologians and bishops, at local church level and in the Roman Curia, will be marked one way or another by resistance to the call of the Spirit. Being preserved from radical failure does not guarantee full fidelity. The mission of the Church and its renewal is achieved in struggle.

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Conclusion

Reflecting on the historical evidence – theological, sociological, cultural and organisational – it is in fact difficult to see how the divisive and polemical aftermath of Vatican II could have been avoided. Most of the early protagonists of change (Rahner excluded) assumed implementation would be an epic of accomplishment. They were wrong. But the idea that the Church can now, adhering to the true hermeneutic of continuity, reclaim that lost opportunity is very dubious.

In many respects the conciliar renewal has yet to get under way. We have not yet had more than a glimpse of what a Church reconciled ecumenically would look like, nor of the Church after it has truly taken root in all the diverse cultures of the world. Add to that the internal challenges of collegiality, the contribution of women, the role of the laity, pastoral practice, and we have an agenda that doesn't readily submit to trouble free implementation. Continuity, while expressing a correct theological insight, risks becoming an ideology of resistance to change, or keeping change under tight central control. Reassertion of control by Rome has been very evident since the Council, and maybe it has preserved the unity of the Church, but it comes at a cost. How well it will serve the Church over the next half-century, and whether the ecclesial *experience* will be marked by continuity or discontinuity, is open to question.

Dr James Sweeney CP
Heythrop College
Kensington Square
London
W8 5HQ
Email: j.sweeney@heythrop.ac.uk

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