



From the Anti-Reformist Method of the Documents of the Council of Trent to the Pastoral Methods of the Second Vatican Council

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Abstract: This article analyzes the approaches to interpreting Revelation found in the documents of the last three councils: Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II. The analysis was carried out using the following methods: comparative, historical-hermeneutical (*Formgeschichte/Formkritik*). In contrast to the scholastic, polemical, and apologetic methods of earlier councils, the Second Vatican Council departed from the dogmatic style of teaching, emphasizing a positive description of the Church, its self-understanding, and its relationship with the world, while avoiding condemnation and negation. An analysis of the conciliar texts reveals two great ecclesial traditions: legal (Tridentine, Vatican I) and pastoral-dialogical invitation (Vatican II). What we are dealing with here is an organic process of development in the understanding of the doctrine of faith.

Keywords: Council of Trent, First Vatican Council, Second Vatican Council, theological methods, hermeneutics, doctrinal continuity, structure and composition of conciliar documents

This article aims to present the theological methods applied in the documents of the Second Vatican Council as well as to show the changes that have taken place in the universal Church as a result of the selection and application of these new methods.

In order to achieve these goals, we will first attempt to outline the methods of theology applied in the magisterial texts of previous councils. Of course, due to the length of the article, we will not refer to all 20 previous councils, but for proper discernment, we will only refer to the types of methods applied in the documents of the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council. This comparative approach will highlight the sharpness and scope of the changes that took place in the teaching of the last council. As we will demonstrate, the methodology applied in the documents of the Second Vatican Council differs from the scholastic methods of earlier councils. This will make it easier to understand the magnitude and nature of *Vaticani Secundi*, which, departing from the dogmatic, polemical, and apologetic way of teaching the faith, brought out new content of the Judeo-Christian Revelation, enhancing the value of the Church and the world.

1. The Medieval Anti-Reformation Methodology of the Council of Trent

In order to demonstrate the transition from the scholastic and anti-modernist methodology characteristic of the texts of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and the First Vatican Council (1869–1870) to the pastoral and dialogical methodology of the Second Vatican Council, several premises must first be addressed. First of all, it is necessary to recall, at least in outline, the historical context of the convocation of these councils, the course of the deliberations, and the decisions taken. Against this background, we will then proceed to analyze the texts of all three councils in order to responsibly compare the hermeneutical changes and, consequently, the emergence of new aspects of Revelation.

The great Council of Trent, which lasted 18 years with interruptions, not only brought together eminent theologians, but also initiated a powerful renewal in the Church. The ecclesiastical crisis that preceded its delayed convocation and deliberations did not begin suddenly but was a process that had been underway for several centuries. Its stages include, first of all, the captivity of the Avignon popes (1309–1377), which was associated with the transfer of the pope and the curia to Avignon, the pope's dependence on the French kings, and, as a consequence, a serious undermining of the authority of the papacy. Next, we must point to the Great Western Schism (1378–1417), when two or even three popes held the office at the same time, mutually excommunicating each other. In addition, the ongoing moral and ethical decline of the clergy (nepotism, simony, low level of education) deepened the disintegration of the unity of the Church and the degradation of its prestige (see Minnich 2022). Therefore, the call for reform of the Church found its amplified voice as early as the 14th century in the reformist demands of John Wycliffe (1329–1384) in England, Jan Hus (1369–1415) in Bohemia, and John Zwingli (1484–1531) in Switzerland. Finally, in the 16th century, it was expressed in the radical theses of Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564). Humanist trends demanding spiritual and moral renewal (Erasmus of Rotterdam) were also significant.

The methodology of the Council of Trent resulted from a combination of doctrinal reform, rejecting the main ideas of Protestantism, and reform of church discipline, which included a whole range of pastoral, formative, and liturgical changes, as well as a number of disciplinary decisions. The priority was therefore to combat teachings other than those of Rome, which gave rise to the so-called Counter-Reformation. As a result, the state of doctrine at the time was revised, and a powerful ecclesiastical renewal took place, thanks to the efforts of the theological schools of the time (Washburn 2023, 53–71).

The following aspects of the methodology of the Council of Trent that are of interest to us can be noted. It seems that, first and foremost, its teaching—as already noted above—was a response to the demands of the reformers, i.e., the rejection of

the main ideas of Protestantism and the implementation of reforms within the Catholic Church. Furthermore, the Council Fathers were concerned with standardizing the doctrine of the Catholic Church, especially in the areas of exegesis, ecclesiology, soteriology, hamartiology, and sacramentology. The method was also evident in the areas of ecclesiastical discipline reform. Decrees were issued to improve the clergy's morals and their duties, e.g., through the maintenance of clerical celibacy and the requirement to establish diocesan seminaries.

Changes were introduced in church administrative structures, obliging bishops to reside in their dioceses and parish priests in their parishes. The nature of theology is revealed, in particular, in the texts of the post-conciliar catechism and the index of prohibited books. Let us now consider the texts promulgated by the Council.

The conciliar documents can be divided into two types: canons and decrees, which concerned both doctrinal issues and disciplinary reforms (Denzinger and Schönmetzer 1976, 363-421 [1500-1835]). The essential texts include: decrees on Scripture and Tradition (Session IV, April 8, 1546); decrees on original sin (Session V, June 17, 1546); decrees on justification (Session VI, January 13, 1547); decrees on the sacraments (Session VII, March 3, 1547); decrees on the Eucharist (Session XIII, October 11, 1551); decrees on penance and anointing of the sick (Session XIV, November 25, 1551); decrees on the Holy Mass (Session XXII, September 17, 1562); decrees on the sacrament of ordination and marriage (Sessions XXIII and XXIV, 1563). Each decree contained canons, i.e., short doctrinal statements with anathemas for heresy (Jedin 1978, 42-406).

In turn, with regard to church discipline, reform sessions were held, which submitted decrees concerning the reform of the clergy, including the obligation of bishops to reside in their dioceses, the prohibition of the accumulation of church benefices, the establishment of seminaries for the formation of priests, regulations concerning sermons, teaching and the morality of clergy, decrees on worship and piety, regulations concerning relics, images of saints and indulgences. Immediately after the Council, the Tridentine Catechism (*Catechismus Romanus*, 1566), the Index of Prohibited Books (*Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, 1564), the Roman Missal (1570), and the Roman Breviary (1568) were edited.

It should be remembered that, in most of the doctrinal issues questioned by Protestants, the Council Fathers did not seek to develop any new teaching; instead, they merely wanted to reformulate and solemnly proclaim the teaching that the Roman Church had professed since its inception. To this end, in discussions, both among theologians and in plenary sessions, biblical and patristic arguments were invoked most frequently. Their knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, the works of the Church Fathers, and ancient writers remained at a level appropriate to the late Middle Ages. Thus, the biblical and patristic origins of the Tridentine teaching on controversial issues remained clearly influenced by medieval thinking and reasoning (Ozorowski 1988, 15).

What methodology was applied in the above texts? An analysis of the texts that are of interest to us leads to the conclusion that it was a medieval method. It contains two constant elements: *videtur quod non* (it seems that it is not) and *respondeo dicendum* (in response, one should say). The first element consisted of objections, usually taken from the writings of reformers or circulating among them. The second element was usually filled with arguments taken from the Holy Scriptures, patristics, and Tradition. They were used in accordance with the mentality of the late Middle Ages, i.e., without paying much attention to the circumstances in which the quoted texts were written. Reasoned arguments were also cited, most often boiling down to: *ex auctoritate*, *ex absurdo*, and *ex idoneitate* (Ozorowski 1988, 17). Undoubtedly, we are dealing here with classical scholasticism, which was orderly, with a clear and logical structure of individual documents (Knorn 2018, 107–20).

The Tridentine formulations were heavily influenced by anti-Protestant polemics. Controversial phrases were taken from the writings of the reformers, often with the preconceived intention of refuting them. Sooner or later, this attitude naturally led to a selective treatment of controversial issues and a narrow approach to their resolution. The Council failed to make the intellectual effort to penetrate the intentions that guided the first reformers. Yet their statements were often a reaction to abuses that had crept into the liturgy, Eucharistic devotion, and the pastoral care associated with it (Ozorowski 1988, 26–27). The degree of emotionality and irrelevance was sometimes quite high on both sides, and it was not uncommon for each side to attribute to the other views that neither side had actually expressed.

It is also worth noting the Protestant methodology, which was reduced to a scriptural and fideistic approach. The individualistic interpretation of Scripture—detached from the centuries-old heritage of the Church—led to subjectivism. It can also be said that the controversy over the doctrine of justification took on a particularly ecclesiological character. This was the result of Reformation theology adopting the doctrine of justification as a hermeneutical principle and critical measure of the entire Christian faith. Protestant theologians consistently proclaimed that justification “stands and falls” with the whole Church (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). Based on the theology of St. Paul, Luther prioritized justification, which consequently led the Reformation to make it a key concept (Napiórkowski 2011, 16).

2. Dogmatism of the Two Constitutions of the First Vatican Council

The history of the First Vatican Council (1869–1870)—as the 20th ecumenical council of the Catholic Church—is rather modest, as its deliberations lasted only one year and were interrupted by the Franco-Prussian War. Only two dogmatic constitutions were passed: the dogmatic constitution on the Catholic faith *Dei Filius* and

the dogmatic constitution on the Church *Pastor aeternus* (Denzinger and Schönmetzer 1976, 586-601 [3000–3075]).

The effects of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment that followed brought about significant changes in politics, philosophy, and views on religion. Liberal, relativistic, agnostic, and atheistic attitudes spread along with the view that it is impossible to arrive at the truth through reason. However, the 19th century was not only a period of spiritual change, but also of significant technological, economic, social, and cultural changes resulting from the Industrial Revolution. Within the Church, the modernist movement grew stronger, attempting to use new knowledge to reinterpret Revelation. Unfortunately, Rome condemned its acceptance of philosophical, cultural, and social innovations, fearing their influence on Catholic tradition and its possible transformation.

This gathering of the Council Fathers by Pope Pius IX—300 years after the Council of Trent—was intended to counter theological errors, renew the clergy and the faithful, strengthen the Catholic Church, and work for peace.

The teachings of the First Vatican Council—as expressed in both constitutions—proved to be highly dogmatic in nature. The document on the Catholic faith, *Dei Filius*, first draws attention to the Church itself, describing it as a “sign raised up for the nations,” “a great and constant motive of credibility and irrefutable testimony to its divine mission.” (Denzinger and Schönmetzer 1976, 590 [3013]) As a result of the spread of extraordinary holiness, Catholic unity, inviolable permanence, and inexhaustible fruitfulness in all goods, the Church becomes a “sign for the nations” (Isa 11:12). Here we are dealing par excellence with a rational and apologetic approach to the ecclesiological problem. This constitution primarily shows the supernatural dimension of the Church, accessible to human faith (Kubiś 1982, 194).

The *Dei Filius* constitution, which consists of four chapters (I. “God the Creator of all Things”; II. “Revelation”; III. “Faith”; IV. “Faith and Reason”), contains dogmatic statements and, in its final part, canons, each of which ends with the phrase *anathema sit*, which can be translated as “let him be cursed,” in the sense that whoever does not accept this truth of faith shall be excluded from the community of the faithful. The statements contained in the document, especially in the canons attached to the chapters, are dogmatic in nature and apply to all the faithful. These canons clearly define what is in accordance with the Catholic faith and what is rejected as error (e.g., pantheism, materialism, rationalism, and fideism). Thus, the content of this document has the highest doctrinal rank of conciliar teaching and is considered normative and unchangeable with regard to the defined truths of faith (Denzinger and Schönmetzer 1976, 586–95 [3000–3045]).

An even more canonical character is revealed in the dogmatic constitution *Pastor aeternus*, which contains the truth about the jurisdictional primacy of the pope and his infallibility (Denzinger and Schönmetzer 1976, 595-601 [3050–3075]).

On the one hand, this dogma states that the definitions of the Bishop of Rome are immutable in themselves, and not by virtue of the consent of the Church, and on the other hand, that the Bishop of Rome is distinguished by the infallibility with which the divine Saviour wished to endow his Church (Ferdek 2016, 242). In defining papal primacy, this document rejects liberalism and Gallicanism. In Chapter IV of *Pastor aeternus*, we find a strict definition of infallibility in matters of faith and morals when the pope speaks *ex cathedra* (Denzinger and Schönmetzer 1976, 599-601 [3065-74]).

Both documents enjoy the highest dogmatic qualification, as they are conciliar teachings promulgated by Pope Pius IX on behalf of the universal Church. As dogmatic constitutions, they contain binding teachings on matters of faith and morals, which are considered infallible with regard to the dogmas defined in them. As for the method, they clearly follow a scholastic-dogmatic approach, combining theological reflection with the authority of the Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Church. This methodology is also characterized by a logical structure, as both constitutions are composed of chapters (*capitula*) and canons (*canones*). They use precise theological language, consistent with the scholastic method, clearly inspired by Thomism. It is also worth adding that, as in the documents of the Tridentine Council, here too they have their own specific polemical and apologetic purpose, that responds to specific intellectual and spiritual challenges of the 19th century. The language of these documents is the language of antagonistic relations. After all, the surrounding world had long been seen as a “terrible conspiracy of godless people,” as wrote 19th-century popes such as Gregory XVI in *Mirari vos* (1832) and Pius IX in *Syllabus errorum* (1864), which was an appendix to the encyclical *Quanta cura* and contained a list of 80 theses considered erroneous.

3. Documents of the Second Vatican Council

In the second half of the 20th century, Vatican circles were aware, on the one hand, that the proceedings of the 20th ecumenical council, Vatican I, had not been completed, which reinforced the need for its continuation and official completion. On the other hand, the Roman Curia was actively concerned about the radical nature of the new council and its doctrinal and disciplinary changes. Its conservative attitude was further reinforced in 1870 by the proclamation of the dogma of papal infallibility and his jurisdictional primacy. This was evident, as the French Jesuit writes in his council diaries, in the attitudes of Italian hierarchs such as Ottaviani, Tromp, Parente, and Fenton (de Lubac 2015, 383-84). Hence, for many, any council seemed unnecessary, since full authority had recently been granted to the Bishop of Rome (Walkusz 2013, 17-18).

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which promulgated 16 documents in the form of constitutions, decrees, and declarations, had a profound impact. This was not only due to the nature and content of the adopted documents, but, above all, to the development of completely new forms of conciliar and post-conciliar theology. The very announcement of the convening of the council by John XXIII and the statement that “there would be no condemnation of errors or discussion of the purity of doctrine, but rather a renewal in both discipline and doctrine consisting in a return to the sources, for only there can we meet our separated brethren” (Ioannes XXIII 1962, 793 [translation by the author]) set the tone for its deliberations. The style of ecumenical rapprochement and openness to the world that characterized the Second Vatican Council ultimately influenced its teaching. It is nothing new that style and message are not only inextricably linked, but also mutually dependent. The methodology adopted by the council in its documents will therefore be a consequence of its internal synodality and external dialogue (Proniewski 2022, 11–32).

The uniqueness of the Second Vatican Council is also evidenced by the participation of lay people as listeners, auditors, and experts. Representatives of sister churches and Protestants were also invited. Despite many obstacles from the Polish communist authorities, a group of Polish bishops also participated in the council’s deliberations. Initially, there were seventeen of them, led by Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, but several more hierarchs arrived at a later stage. The Polish delegation grew to 25 people, and this was essentially the number that represented the Catholic Church in Poland at the remaining sessions, albeit without the presence of theologians (Walkusz 2013, 27).

The four highest-ranking documents of the Council were: the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*.

In turn, nine decrees were passed, namely: the Decree on the Media of Social Communication *Inter Mirifica*, Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church *Christus Dominus*, Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, Decree on Priestly Training *Optatam Totius*, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*, and Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*.

The Council’s teaching is also contained in three declarations: the Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*, and the Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*. This list of titles of constitutions, decrees, and

declarations already introduces a wide range of teaching topics, which, until now, were partially and occasionally present in the earlier *Magisterium Ecclesiae*.

Sometimes one even gets the impression that the spectrum of issues considered by the Council Fathers was too broad. An American theologian writes that these issues included:

the use of organs during Mass; the place of St. Thomas Aquinas in the seminary curriculum; the legitimacy of stockpiling nuclear weapons; the blessing of water used for baptism; the role of the laity in the pastoral activity of the Church; the relationship between bishops and the Pope; the purposes of marriage; salaries of the clergy; the role of conscience in moral decision-making; appropriate attire (or habit) for nuns; the Church's relationship with the arts; translations of the Bible; diocesan boundaries; the propriety (or impropriety) of joint worship with non-Catholics. (O'Malley 2008, 299)

Even a cursory reading of these documents reveals a powerful transformation of the Church's previous approach in the sense of *ad intra* and *ad extra*, which took place on three basic levels, namely: (1) a comprehensive reform of the Church; (2) ecumenical openness to dialogue (with other Christian denominations, with religions, with people and with the world); and (3) the Church's self-definition as a divine-human community. Some rightly see the teachings of *Vaticani Secundi* as "the end of the Constantinian era," alluding to the privileged status of the Church since the time of Emperor Constantine and the establishment of the Papal States. The Council became a kind of "end of the Counter-Reformation" and "emergence from the trenches" with the abandonment of integrist and clerical positions (cf. O'Malley 2008, 305–7).

4. Radical Change in Methods and Their Diversity

The magnificent Second Vatican Council charted new paths for theological reflection. During the Council deliberations, the existing static Roman theology and the new theology found themselves on opposite sides. Roman theology rightly defended the need to preserve the entire deposit of faith, while the new theology emphasized the need to start from the experience of contemporary people. The Council combined these two moments, achieved a synthesis, which, in essence, can be described as a pastoral message aimed at deepening faith. It revealed the potential for developing an understanding of faith and its application in the everyday lives of contemporary Christians. It was not without reason that these were ultimately debates on deepening personal faith, rather than on proclaiming new dogmas. The enormous legacy of the Council still demands openness to the world in order to purify and confirm its own orthodoxy through evangelization.

Let us now try to identify the basic methods that theologians of the time used in the documents of the Council. A reading of these writings reveals the various theological methods applied there, which had such a profound influence on the renewal of the Church's thought and practice. Let us now enumerate these fundamental ways of exploring Revelation and communicating it in a language that is faithful to the text and accessible to the modern world. At the outset, it is worth noting not only methodological pluralism, but also a certain lack of systematization and clarity in the documents. It is also often the case that many different methods are applied in a single document. The question even arises as to whether, e.g., the constitution *Gaudium et spes* is not somewhat methodologically chaotic.

Although the otherwise valid objection to the generality of the methods is often raised, their dialogical nature must also be emphasized. This was clearly revealed in the constitution *Lumen gentium*, which led to a change in the understanding of the Church. The Council's departure from the ecclesiological vision of *societas perfecta* in order to revalue the Church as *communio* resulted in a different view of the essence and mission of the divine-human community, promoting the subjectivity of lay people and their responsibility for the work of evangelization. The rejection of the pyramidal vision of hierarchical structure, which had been shaped over the centuries, opened the door to the construction of an ecclesiology integrating the socio-legal approach with the sacramental-communion concept (Nadbrzeżny 2023, 2).

The participants of the Council recognized the biblical and patristic method as the leading method that appears in all documents. The teaching of the Council refers primarily to Scripture as the first foundation of theology, presenting it as the central point of theological reflection. The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* reveals not only the nature of Divine Revelation, but also the role of Scripture and Tradition in theology and their mutual connection. *Dei verbum* emphasizes that Sacred Scripture, inspired by the Holy Spirit, together with Sacred Tradition, forms the one sacred deposit of divine Revelation, with both flowing from the same divine wellspring and tending toward the same end (cf. DV 9–10). *Dei verbum* (no. 9) states: "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture are closely connected and interact with each other. For both, flowing from the same divine source, are in a sense fused together and tend towards the same goal."

Subsequently, the texts of the Council repeatedly refer to the Church Fathers, drawing on their thoughts and interpretations, e.g., in *Lumen gentium*. Thus, in this dogmatic constitution on the Church, we find quotations from Irenaeus of Lyon, Cyprian, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Hesychius of Jerusalem, Hilary of Poitiers, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, John of Damascus, and Polycarp. These numerous references to their texts are an expression of the continuity of the patristic tradition with the teaching of the Council, especially on the themes of the origin, universality, unity, and apostolicity of the Church and its structure, but

also on the virginity, holiness, and intercession of Mary. French theologians saw it as the dawn of a new patristic era (de Lubac 2016, 242).

Furthermore, the conciliar texts also point to the historical-salvific method, where the history of redemption and salvation is a key theological perspective, emphasizing the development of the understanding of Divine Revelation and the mission of the Church in the history of humanity and the world. Revelation took on a responsive character and became personalized (Mastej 2001, 195–254).

Another method that can easily be identified in the teachings of the Council is the personalistic method, which emphasizes the dignity of the human person and their relationship with God and other people. An example of this is the content of *Gaudium et spes*, where we find an analysis of the signs of the times and a personalization of human history in the light of God's plan (see Gózdź 2010). The same can be said of *Dignitatis humanae* on religious freedom. The personalism of *Dignitatis humanae* is highlighted by a linguistic analysis of the text, which brings out concepts such as dignity, freedom, truth, conscience, coercion, and the common good (Gilski, Wąsek, and Nadbrzeźny 2024, 245–60).

In the document *Nostra aetate*, on the other hand, we encounter dialogical and relational approaches. Here, the Council uses language that is open to dialogue with the modern world, avoiding a condemnatory tone.

Reflection on the mystery of the Church as *communio*, as the people of God made up of all baptized individuals, removes the narrow hierarchical perspective that had prevailed until then. Here we have a vision of the Church understood as a community of all the baptized with God. A significant achievement in this regard was the constitution *Lumen gentium*, which redefined the understanding of the Church that had existed until that time. The Church is a sacrament of salvation both for believers and for the whole world, that is, throughout human history, it is a visible sign of Christ, who brings the gift of salvation to all (Nadbrzeźny 2009, 54).

Another important element of the Council's methodology was the Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, which radically changed the relationship with Christians not affiliated with the Holy See. The pastoral and doctrinal nature of the decree showed the issue of Christian unity in close connection with the renewal of the Church. The so-called hierarchy of truths proved to be an important question. Revising the previous approach to communities not in communion with Rome and their ecclesiality, the decree emphasizes a new vision of the Church and significantly modifies the concept of restoring lost unity. The authors strive to use language that is easy to understand to people of different traditions and show considerable sensitivity to different views of Revelation and the diversity of its interpretations in individual Christian Churches (Wąsek, Gilski, and Kałużny 2024, 311–435).

The issue of the need to renew the theological method appeared directly in the decree on priestly formation *Optatam totius*. Theology is to show the development of doctrine throughout history, starting with biblical sources, through the Church

Fathers, the history of dogma, to speculative and practical reflection. It is to serve the ecclesial community, liturgy, and social life, interpreting eternal truths in the light of the changing conditions of human life. The Council calls for a departure from purely speculative theology in favor of a dialogical approach in the spirit of service to contemporary man. Its task is to explain Revelation in a way that is easy to understand, while maintaining the hierarchy of truths and respecting ecclesial and historical experiences. The conciliar document also emphasizes the need for cooperation with the Magisterium.

Thus, the Second Vatican Council set new paradigms for its theological methods: the historicity of doctrine, the centrality of Scripture, the vitality of Tradition, and the service of the Magisterium to the people of God and the world, a new approach to other religions, and especially a change in attitude towards Jews and other Christians. Theology is seen here as a process of dynamic interpretation of Revelation in the context of the community and all of humanity to which the Church is sent. In the teaching of the Council over the last five centuries, we are therefore dealing with a clear transition from canonicity, dogmatism, and speculativeness to a pastoral, ecumenical, and dialogical orientation. The scope of dialogical methodology will expand when we consider areas of external ecclesial dialogue such as ecumenical dialogue, dialogue with Judaism, other religions, atheism, culture, art, science, and the mass media.

Theology, existing in history, requires interpretative evolution, as confirmed by the works of Matthias Joseph Scheeben, John Henry Newman, Karl Rahner, and Joseph Ratzinger, which emphasize the dynamic development of Catholic methodology in changing contexts.

5. From Legalism to Pastoral-Dialogical Invitation

Comparing the documents of the last three councils, we can see a significant change in the methods applied in the texts in question. Therefore, on the one hand, it is necessary to emphasize a certain continuity in the teaching of all three councils, and on the other hand, to clearly highlight the change in methods of interpreting Revelation that occurred over the years. The pastoral and dialogical rhetoric of the Second Vatican Council emphasized a shepherd-like approach, rooted in Pope John XXIII's intentions regarding *aggiornamento* (updating) and *ressourcement* (return to the sources). This was evident in many documents, especially in the constitution *Gaudium et spes*, which speaks of conscience, joy, and engagement in the affairs of the modern world. In turn, the dialogical approach (cf. *Lumen gentium*, *Unitatis redintegratio*, *Nostra aetate*) was based on a conversational method, encouraging listening, cooperation, and mutual enrichment between the Church, the laity, and society.

The importance of methodology is evident, as opting for one form or other results in reaching completely different conclusions when interpreting the sources of Revelation. An analysis of the texts of the Councils of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II reveals not only this “methodological leap,” but also, as a consequence, a change in content. In the first two councils, we are dealing with a clearly contentious, combative, apologetic, and even condemnatory (*anathema sit*) goal. In contrast, the Second Vatican Council presented its teaching as a positive description of the Church and its understanding of itself, but also of the surrounding world, where we find no prejudicial attitude denying or condemning anything or anyone.

The structure of the documents of the two councils is also clearly different. In the texts of *Vaticani Secundi*, we do not find chapters directly related to canons, which in legal terms referred to external conduct in order to ensure that it was in accordance with the accepted rule. Tridentine issued about 130 doctrinal canons, which is a huge number, and they all had the same formula: “If anyone ... let him be anathema.” This term suggested that observance of the canons was the path to salvation. The “canons” were legal acts related to public discipline in the Church, not to orthodoxy of faith. At Trent, disciplinary regulations were called “decrees” or “canons.” However, all doctrinal condemnations were called canons (O’Malley 2006, 303).

Thus, the structure of the individual documents of the Second Vatican Council is inconsistent, as is the use of a different methodology in virtually every document. This was a consequence of its rank (constitutions, decrees, declarations) and then its target audience. The author himself was also important. The process of creating each of the 16 documents was collegial and dynamic. The final promulgation of the document was preceded by long and arduous preliminary preparations. Even before the Council itself, preparatory commissions drafted about 70 different schemata (drafts). Next, the schema was submitted to the Council for deliberation, where reports, i.e., introductions to the schemata, discussions, and votes took place, with majority approval (at least two-thirds of the votes). The schemata were modified many times based on interventions, reflecting the methodology of returning to the sources (*ressourcement*): the Bible, the Church Fathers, and the apostolic tradition. In their editorial work, theologians from various schools and traditions of the universal Church on a global scale avoided scholasticism in favor of biblical and historical theology. After the death of John XXIII during the council, the influence of the new Pope Paul VI increased. Continuing the work, he introduced several new commissions, e.g., on the media and the laity. This methodology emphasized a communion- and dialogical ecclesiology, which stood in stark contrast to the confrontational style of the Council of Trent or Vatican I. Monsignor Gérard Philips (1899–1972) made a significant contribution to the text of the constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, managing to strike a balance between progressives and traditionalists at the time of its drafting (Laksito 2025, 398–99).

The contribution of Ratzinger, who, as a conciliar expert (*peritus*), sought to achieve a theological balance in *Lumen gentium* between continuity of tradition and renewal, is also worth noting. On the one hand, he opposed reducing the Church to a purely sociological institution or democratizing it at the expense of its divine origin, and on the other, he decisively moved away from its clericalization. The German theologian pointed to the organic unity of the Church, rooted in Scripture, Tradition, and the sacraments. In his view, the Church is the people of God who, through baptism and the Eucharist, walk towards holiness (Ratzinger 2001, 5–8).

It must be remembered that theology exists in history, not in eternity (Schoonenberg 1965, 192). Theologians who believed that their reflections would be binding on believers for all time belonged to a stage in history where there was little or no awareness of their own historicity. The Church must not be viewed as an eternally unchanging community with immutable teachings and rites, but as a historical and dynamic reality with a rich and vibrant theological tradition. Hence, history is an essential dimension of theological methodology. Even formal doctrinal declarations must evolve in their interpretations along with changes in times and contexts (Parrella 2006, 321). Already in the 19th century, Scheeben and Newman developed a serious basis for the development of the understanding of the truths of faith in the face of changes not so much in the basic message of dogmas as in their understanding. Rahner tells us that faith that “clings to forms that were once effective but are now ineffective and meaningless” is a faith “committed to its own destruction.” (Rahner 1976, 52)

As Giuseppe Alberigo points out, since the end of the 16th century, the papacy has encouraged the faithful to treat Trent as the normative source in matters of faith and discipline. The reform decrees of Trent, which were a response to the historical challenges of the reformers and aimed at reforming abuses in church life and structure, turned into an effective but rigid system. The constitutions of the First Vatican Council were drafted in a similar spirit. In turn, the documents of the Second Vatican Council, aimed at renewing the Church and updating its self-understanding and relationship with the modern world, led the Church to a rather turbulent theological polarization between at least three groups. The first group embraces the spirit of the conciliar documents, the second wants to push the reform beyond what has been clearly stated. The third, in many cases, the official magisterium, embodies a restorationist attitude that can be called “neo-Tridentine.” (Parrella 2006, 326)

The approaches to interpreting Revelation in the first quarter of the 21st century are largely a result of the letter and spirit of the Second Vatican Council, but also of a careful approach to the radical changes that Christians are experiencing on a global scale. The approach to Revelation as God’s self-revelation to man in history—as we read in the constitution *Dei verbum*—was undoubtedly a great breakthrough (Rusecki 2007, 94–102). Therefore, they reflect both a continuation of classic conciliar approaches and new approaches resulting from globalization, post-secularism,

and technological developments, including access to the Internet and artificial intelligence (AI).

Among the characteristic new research methods, contextual hermeneutics, strongly presented in liberation, feminist, and postcolonial theology, deserves attention. There has also been a significant interdisciplinarity, i.e., the integration of theology with philosophy, social sciences, psychology, and natural sciences. An example of this is the dialogue between theology and neurobiology on the subject of consciousness and the soul. Political (social) theology is developing more dynamically, focusing on the role of religion in the public sphere and addressing the relationships between faith and politics, ecology, and social justice. The 21st century has seen a revival of narrative and postmodern theology, which emphasizes storytelling and experience as sources of theological truths. Due to the emergence of numerous online platforms, especially AI, digital and media theology is also developing, examining the impact of the Internet and digital media on faith, evangelization, and the life of the Church. In turn, thanks to the conciliar document *Unitatis redintegratio* and John Paul II's encyclical *Ut unum sint*, ecumenical and interreligious theology entered the teaching and practice of the community of faith.

It can therefore be said that the Second Vatican Council made a significant effort to transform the Church from a "besieged fortress" to a friendly community (*communio*), open to dialogue with other Christian Churches, non-Christian religions, and secular culture, often drawing on atheistic or agnostic ideas or religious indifference (Nadbrzeźny 2023, 5).

Unfortunately, there are still few studies that address the issue of the style and literary genre of the documents of the Councils of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II, even though these are the most obvious features that distinguish them from each other. This creates the impression that the history of forms (*Formgeschichte*) and form criticism (*Formkritik*) have become merely hermeneutical tools reserved exclusively for biblical scholars and cannot be used to interpret church documents (O'Malley 2006, 301–2).

Conclusions

The main objective of this article was to highlight the changes in methodology that have occurred in the official teaching of the Church in recent decades. The analysis covered the texts of the last three councils, namely: Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II. Therefore, the main method of research was comparative.

The analyses carried out in the study justify the conclusion that a major methodological breakthrough has taken place. As demonstrated, the structure of the documents of Vatican II differs from that of earlier councils. Unlike Trent, which issued

about 130 doctrinal canons employing the formula “If anyone ... let him be anathema,” the documents of Vatican II do not use such language or canonical form. Their editing was based on the ressourcement methodology, i.e., a return to the sources—the Bible, the Church Fathers, and apostolic tradition—and avoided scholasticism in favor of biblical and historical theology. The process of creating the documents was collegial and dynamic, with numerous modifications made after conciliar debates and votes.

A better understanding of these changes is also aided by the observation that the Councils of Trent and Vatican II embody two great ecclesial traditions which, although related, are nevertheless significantly different. These traditions are the legal tradition (or canonical, legislative-judicial tradition) and the pastoral-dialogical (rhetorical/narrative) tradition. Both have their roots in the ancient Greco-Roman world and predate the advent of Christianity. The differences between them are clearly evident in the methods they employ. One may therefore ask the question whether they are mutually exclusive or complementary.

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