



On the (Ir)Relevance of the Second Vatican Council

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Abstract: This article discusses whether Second Vatican Council is or can still be relevant today. It analyzes which aspects of the Council can be relevant, how they can be relevant, and for whom they can be relevant in the present day. Therefore, the Council documents, as well as central documents of its magisterial reception, are examined in the article. As a result, synodality appears as a major consequence of Vatican II and also as a sign of its contemporary and future relevance. This inscribes both Second Vatican Council and the current synodal path in the Tradition of the Church with its eschatological dynamic. On the one hand, the relevance of the Council for the Church in all its expressions has to be considered, while, on the other hand, a specific synodal exercise of ministries is necessary for this very relevance.

Keywords: Vatican II, reception, Tradition, Revelation, synod, synodality

1. Introduction: The Church and Its Mission 60 Years After Vatican II

Sixty years after Vatican II, the world and the Church find themselves in the midst of an epoch-making transformation. Some view the Council as an event that lies far in the past, while others believe that it offers potential for the future that has yet to be realized. Between these two extremes, there is a wide spectrum within the Church in which the Council is respected as an implicit backdrop but plays hardly any explicit role. In everyday life, church organization, pastoral processes, and even some theological discussions occur without the Council—even if a quote from the Council is occasionally used to reinforce a specific position. This is, of course, also due to the fact that an event that took place 60 years ago and texts that are just as old cannot simply provide immediate answers to current questions. All this could be substantiated by elaborate theological-historical and sociological analyses of religion. However, this does not answer the question of the Council's relevance or irrelevance. On the contrary, it raises the question of how the relevance or irrelevance of a council can be assessed at all. The first question to ask is what should be relevant or irrelevant about it, then how this relevance or irrelevance is demonstrated, and finally, for whom it is relevant. The question of significance, therefore, refers to a complex set of events involving constellations of relationships, categories of perception and interpretation, as well as their implications for action. In the following sections, the three questions of “what” (2), “how” (3), and “for and by whom” (4) will be considered with regard

to the relevance or irrelevance of the Second Vatican Council. A short conclusion considers the relevance of the Council within the Mission of the Church, which itself has to be addressed within the context of the *Missio Dei* (5).

2. “What” Is Relevant or Irrelevant If “The Council” Is Relevant or Irrelevant?

The question of “what” is relevant or irrelevant may appear to be a variation on the debate about the “letter” and “spirit” of the Council (Quisinsky 2018). In this debate, which was at times heated, there should no longer be any fundamental obstacle to the insight that the letter and the spirit must be considered in their reciprocity. A very inspiring illustration of this is a document resulting from a deliberation of theologians from all over the world that took place during a meeting in Paris in 2015 (Lamberigts et al. 2016). On closer inspection, however, the question of relevance is situated on a different level. On the one hand, it is not true that the Council is only relevant when its texts are quoted and interpreted in the spirit of the Council. On the other hand, it is not entirely easy to determine how it is relevant in this context.

When asked whether the Council is relevant or irrelevant, the first question to ask is what is meant by “the Council” in the first place. Is it a spiritual event? Is it about its central statements and insights? Is it a corpus of texts? Is it a stage in the history of dogma? Is it a fundamental attitude of *aggiornamento*? From the perspective of systematic theology, all these dimensions are equally relevant and intertwined.

This leads to a methodological problem: on the one hand, a somewhat holistic approach is required. On the other hand, such an approach is not possible. It nevertheless seems to be important to consider that whenever one analyzes a single aspect of Vatican II and its reception, one should take into account the connectivity and complementary nature of every statement about the Council.

3. “How” Is the Council Relevant or Irrelevant?

Many expressions of church life that have developed since the Council would be unthinkable without it. In the light of this, there are many different answers to the question of “how” the Council is relevant today. Sometimes, these may even be in a certain tension with each other. However, what unites them is that they are possible and real receptions of the Council. Analogous to Yves Congar’s (1960, 1963) formula of “Tradition and traditions” one can speak in this context of “reception and

receptions,” whereby the reception of the Council (Routhier 2006; Theobald 2009, 2023), like the Council itself, represents a complex moment of Tradition.

From this multitude of aspects and processes of reception, let us single out the current synodal process initiated by Pope Francis. It represents a condensed form of the reception and receptions of the Council. The final document of the Synod states:

Rooted in the Tradition of the Church, the entire synodal journey took place in the light of the conciliar Magisterium. The Second Vatican Council was indeed like a seed thrown onto the field of the world and the Church. The daily life of believers, the experience of the Churches in every people and culture, the many testimonies of holiness, and the reflection of theologians represented the soil upon which it has taken root and grown. The Synod 2021–2024 continues to draw upon the energy of that seed and develop its potential, putting into practice what the Council taught about the Church as Mystery and Church as People of God, called to holiness through a continual conversion that comes from listening to the Gospel. In this sense, the synodal journey constitutes a further act of reception of the Council, thus deepening its inspiration and reinvigorating its prophetic force for today’s world. (XVI Ordinary General Assembly 2024, no. 5)

If the synodal journey is a result of the Council in the manner described here, then the relevance of the Council is obvious. However, it is now even more interesting to see how exactly the Synod is a reception of the Council.

On the first level, Vatican II provides a kind of common language and a “common reference.” (Lamberigts et al 2016, 145) In this sense, there is talk of what the Council “taught” having to be put “into practice.” Of course, the question of what happens to the teaching when it is “put into practice” is quite complex. The doctrine of the Church as mystery and as the people of God describes divine-human realities, the “implementation” of which requires people to rely on the gracious and healing grace of God. In this respect, Vatican II is relevant at this level if it helps not only to describe the lived experience of the Church with its structures and dynamics in sociological terms, but also to point out the spiritual direction that was recognized at the Council as the truly decisive dimension.

On the second level, things become a little bit more complicated. It can be observed that the Council answered questions that no longer arise in the same way today and that it did not answer questions that arise today (Lamberigts et al. 2016, 51–78). But it is precisely here that it is anything but irrelevant, as it formulated a “doctrine” whose content necessarily points beyond its form, following the famous distinction made by John XXIII in its opening speech *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*.¹ In doing so, as an event of Tradition, it opened up a space within which answers to new questions can be sought. By taking place within this space, the search itself becomes part of

¹ Quoted after the critical edition in Kaufmann and Klein 1990, 116–50; see also Blum 2025, 42.

Tradition. In turn, this search can lead to a formulation of doctrine that expresses its content in a manner appropriate to the situation and context (Eckholt 2025). The Council becomes relevant here as a transmission event of Tradition, which is not backward-looking, but contemporary in the best sense of the word and therefore goes beyond the Council.

In addition to the questions that the Council answered, but which are no longer our questions, and the questions that the Council did not answer, but which are our questions, there is a third type of questions. These are questions in the life of the Church that the Council could not answer because they only became possible through the Council. The aforementioned tension between the form of doctrine and its content, which always points beyond this form, inevitably leads to new questions arising repeatedly in the life of the Church when new situations of life and coexistence arise. The Council proves its relevance, so to speak, *ex negativo*. For if these questions, which have existed in the life of the Church after the Council and because of the Council, are not considered in the light of this very Council, their impact will be all the greater in the long run. Unresolved questions about the reception of the Council (as well as answers to these questions that go back beyond the Council or are to be found without reference to the Council) not only complicate the practice of synodality but also, much more seriously, complicate the deepening of faith that synodality seeks to achieve.

To put it more simply, one could conclude with Klara-Antonia Csiszar (2025) that the XVI Plenary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which was held in 2024, could only fulfil its task if it recognized its questions as also being the questions of the Council, but at the same time developed contemporary answers to these common questions from the Council.

To illustrate the connection between these three types of questions, which coincide in Csiszar's diagnosis, I would like to refer to the example of revelation theology.² Indeed, the synodal process must address the question of revelation, as the Council did. And at the same time, the synodal process must, together with the Council, illuminate the horizon that the Council first opened up for the Church. In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council answered some important questions that had occupied theology for decades and even centuries. Since the Reformation, positions on the relationship between Scripture and Tradition have been a divisive factor between the denominations. And there is no doubt that the Council made decisive breakthroughs in this area. Revelation was no longer regarded as contained in Scripture and Tradition, but rather as reflected in Scripture and Tradition. At the same time, the primacy of Scripture was emphasized in a way that made it possible to demonstrate its necessary connection with Tradition.

² For background information, see Quisinsky 2026.

These were the old questions on which the Council achieved nothing less than a breakthrough. With increasing distance, a new horizon of questions about revelation, its modalities and conditions, its scope, and its reception is emerging. Strictly speaking, the Council itself presented a second document on revelation with the declaration *Nostra aetate*. It seems appropriate to quote a longer passage from *Nostra aetate*, which, on closer inspection, contains fundamental statements about Revelation.

From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times, some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense.... The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself. (NA 2)

These lines contain at least three fundamental questions about revelation, as well as a direction for the search for theological answers. First, there is the question of the revelatory quality of the “certain perception of the hidden power.” How does this relate to the revelation as testified to in the Bible? Second, there is the question of the connection between the truth testified to by Christianity and its “reflection” in other religions. What do these “rays” say about the source of truth and its recipients? And thirdly, there is the eschatological dimension of revelation in Christ, who is indeed the truth in person, but whom human beings are only beginning to approach. How does the historical testimony of Christ’s truth relate to the recapitulation of all history in Christ?

It seems clear that the Council itself did not provide definitive answers to these (and other) questions it raised. And it seems equally clear that these questions arise in many ways today, but that no answers can be given that do not refer to the Council. In other words, today’s synodal process and the Council as a “process” (Lehmann 2006, 13) are connected in the “progressing” way that *Dei verbum* describes as Tradition that eschatologically aims at fulfillment and is “filled” from this fullness:

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops [proficit—M.Q.] in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth [crescit—M.Q.] in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which

they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward [tendit—M.Q.] toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfilment [consummentur—M.Q.] in her. (DV 8)

In this central section of the constitution on Revelation, individual stages of the Church's understanding of faith are relativized or relationalized in two ways: first, by looking back at what the apostles received and thus at Jesus Christ himself, who was recognized by the apostles as the way, the truth and the life; and second, with a look forward to the fulfilment in which everything partial, contingent and imperfect in earthly ways of transmission and dynamics of transmission are delimited in God himself and by God himself into participation in divine life.

This section also makes it possible to grasp the relevance of the Council theologically, as a central historical event in the communal life of faith of the Church on its way through and within history, it was a juncture at which the Church's understanding of faith was expressed in a "binding" (*verbindend*) way (which can be understood both as "normative" [*verpflichtend*] and "binding together" [*zusammenbindend*]). Therefore, in its historical situatedness and limitations, in its opening of perspectives and inherent tensions, it is a central point of reference for today's questions, insofar as these are part of Tradition and an expression of it. This kind of relevance also means that the Council does not need to be "hypostasized," but regarded in its very historic, human, and sometimes all-too-human dimension. For the "progress" mentioned in *Dei verbum* brings together the historicity of faith and the gracious enabling of faith in a way that keeps the Church in the truth precisely when it simultaneously engages with the truth revealed in Christ and with the present moment. This is the ultimate sense of "our times" in the title of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*. It cannot play one off against the other or rank one higher at the expense of the other. However, this radical historicity of the expressions of faith also enables it to gauge the radical nature of this faith: God himself accompanies human history, he can be recognized in this history and invites us to shape history with him. Only in this way is he truly "Yahweh" (Exod 3:14), who does not abandon his people even when they stray onto crooked paths and detours. The Council is therefore relevant in that it represents a binding and uniting form of expression of faith, whose contextual location and thus also historical limitations open up paths to the future and enable it to identify these as God's paths shared with humankind.

As this example from revelation theology shows, the relevance of the Council lies in a complex interplay between the questions of today (as articulated, in particular, by the Synod) and the questions of yesterday (i.e., the questions of the Council), and more specifically in the context of the question of the relationship between God and humankind in history. For if God addresses human beings as friends and

interacts with them (*DV* 2), then history to date is relevant to our present understanding of God, and our present understanding of God is relevant to future history, with the Church, as a “sign and instrument both of the most intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (*LG* 1) in the context of God’s “universal love.” (*NA* 4)

4. For Whom and Through Whom Is the Council Relevant?

It is therefore possible to demonstrate how fundamental and far-reaching the relevance of the Council is in terms of its content. This applies first and foremost to the Church as a whole. It is therefore worth recalling Karl Rahner’s dictum that it will be a long time before the Church, “to which the Second Vatican Council was given, will be the Church of the Second Vatican Council.” (Rahner 2013, 783) This raises many issues, some of which the Church has already made great strides in addressing, while others are only beginning to appear. In 2018, the International Theological Commission wrote:

The fruits of the renewal promised by Vatican II in its promotion of ecclesial communion, episcopal collegiality, and thinking and acting “synodally” have been rich and precious. There is, however, still a long way to go in the direction mapped out by the Council. In fact, today the drive to find an appropriate form for a synodal Church—although it is widely shared and has been put into practice in positive ways—seems to be in need of clear theological principles and decisive pastoral orientations.

Hence, the new threshold that Pope Francis invites us to cross. In the wake of Vatican II, following in his predecessors’ footsteps, he insists that synodality describes the shape of the Church that emerges from the Gospel of Jesus, which is called to become incarnate today in history, in creative fidelity to Tradition.

In conformity with the teaching of *Lumen gentium*, Pope Francis remarks in particular that synodality “offers us the most appropriate framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself” and that, based on the doctrine of the *sensus fidei fidelium*, all members of the Church are agents of evangelisation. Consequently, making a synodal Church a reality is an indispensable precondition for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God. (International Theological Commission 2018, nos. 8–9)

On closer inspection, this text offers a promising perspective, but one that is also a challenging task. On the one hand, the Council concerns the whole Church, as does the Synod. But this does not dispense with the question of how life together in the Church must be organized so that the whole Church is synodal. On the contrary, the more the structures of the Church are adapted to this, the better the *sensus fidei*

of all the baptized can be brought to bear.³ The same applies to the respective actors. All the baptized contribute to the *sensus fidei fidelium*, but there is also a need for those who, with the help of appropriate structures and processes, take responsibility and care for specific expressions of the *sensus fidei fidelium*. In other words, the new appreciation for baptism and the baptized does not replace the question of the role of the ministry and the ordained but rather poses it in a completely new way: a “synodal ministeriality” (Quisinsky 2025) is needed. The Second Vatican Council provides important foundations for its development. This also includes the fact that the ordained, who *qua* ordination have a special responsibility for proclaiming the Word of God, need theological competence as it is asked for by *Optatam totius* (OT 16). This competence also involves dealing with texts from the Bible, texts from tradition, and texts from the Magisterium. Against this background, it is of course good and right to engage in the broadest possible discussion of the conciliar texts in church life. But one must also be realistic: one can live as a Catholic without having read these texts, and perhaps this life can embody more fully what the Council sought to make possible (Nault 2010). Therefore, calls for “everyone” to receive the Council because it is relevant to “everyone” are as correct as they are abstract and general. This general call needs to be translated into concrete terms. The Council must first be or become relevant again for those who shape synodality, by being recognized as the magisterial point of reference for their decisions, enabling them to place themselves in a Tradition that, with today’s possibilities (*aggiornamento*), seeks to open up the potential for the future that comes from God.

5. Conclusion: The Relevance of the Council in the Context of the Church’s Mission

As the perspective outlined above makes clear, the question of the relevance of the Council is part of the question of the synodality of the Church and its practical and substantive orientation. Thus, the Council is at the service of the Church’s mission, which does not exhaust the *Missio Dei* (Aveline 2023, 150). Hence, the relevance or irrelevance of the Council is determined by whether, with its help, the Church succeeds in truly being a “universal sacrament of salvation” (LG 48; GS 45; AG 2)—a sign and instrument of a salvation that is ultimately God himself: “On this earth that Kingdom is already present in mystery. When the Lord returns it will be brought into full flower” (*His in terris Regnum iam in mysterio adest; adveniente autem Domino consummabitur*) (GS 39).

³ On the link between *Dei verbum*, synodality, and *sensus fidei* see Rush 2023.

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