



# Dogmatic and Pastoral Coherence of the Second Vatican Council: A Contribution to the Hermeneutics of Its Texts and Message

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to present a synthetic approach to the unity of the theological message of the last of the ecumenical councils, Vatican II. The research perspective is strictly theological, and considering the texts themselves, it sets aside their history. The author's ambition is to propose a coherent interpretation of the three definitions presented by the Council Fathers: liturgy, Church, and revelation. It appears that there is a far-reaching ideological coherence between them. This article proposes finding this common theological foundation in the concept of divine, Trinitarian self-giving in the world. This is what enables a more vibrant exchange between theology and the pastoral life of the Church. These quasi-definitions are the starting point and the theological foundation for most of the Council's proposals, including the mutual opening of doctrine and pastoral care and a broader dialogue with the world. In this way, the article also presents a significant fragment of the Council's hermeneutics, the aim of which is to seek the unity and coherence of the texts as they were promulgated.

**Keywords:** Vatican II, liturgy, revelation, Church, pastoral care, John XXIII, Karl Rahner

This article aims to present the main dogmatic assumptions of the Second Vatican Council and how the consistency of its message is built upon them. In its dogmatic texts, especially in the major constitutions, which are key to interpreting the entirety of the Council's texts and ideas,<sup>1</sup> we can find interesting attempts to "define" liturgy, the Church, and revelation. These attempts should be seen as theological cornerstones and foundations of the entire theological and pastoral vision of the Council's work of renewal, as well as its intellectual, theological, and spiritual unity and cohesion.<sup>2</sup>

At the outset, one fundamental methodological observation must be made. It is important to be aware that the search for unity and coherence should at least partially

<sup>1</sup> "Special attention must be paid to the four major Constitutions of the Council, which are the keys to the interpretation of the other Decrees and Declarations." (Extraordinary Synod of Bishops 1985, "Final Report," 22 [section I, 5]). Following Gilles Routhier, it is also worth emphasizing not only the key nature of the constitution but also the fact that the entirety of the Council's texts forms a unity, a kind of corpus. Cf. Routhier 2006, 389-99.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Levering (2017, 5-7) also bases his introduction to the theology of the Council as an ongoing task on four perspectives set by the great constitutions.

respect Quentin Skinner's important warning regarding the dangerous tendency to "mythologize doctrines," (Skinner 1969, 3–53) which he observed in the field of research on the history of ideas. This concerns a kind of simplistic ideologization of the rather chaotic, diverse, and often incoherent evolution of ideas and their mutual interactions. Not without the palpable presence of the principles of postmodern epistemology, Skinner maintains that often what we call the evolution of ideas can be merely a retrospective and anachronistic projection of our way of approaching complex matters in such a way as to give them some holistic shape and internal coherence. Moreover, such mythologization can also apply not only to macrohistory but also to microhistory, limited to a single author. This occurs when scattered and random ideas are treated as holistic, structured, and intentional systems of thought. I take Skinner's warning quite seriously. However, I do not assume that any search for coherence in any past text or movement of ideas must be doomed from the outset to fall into the aforementioned mythologization. In the case of this article, I limit myself to the interpretation of the Council texts themselves and the speech of John XXIII at the opening of the Council proceedings, which is a crucial hermeneutical key for their proper understanding. At the same time, I do not assume from the outset that the Council Fathers and the editors of the texts assumed the meticulous and detailed coherence of their considerations that I am seeking. These considerations do not require such an assumption, as their focal point is the aforementioned definitions, not the intentions of the individual authors. It is therefore difficult to unequivocally state that the editors perceived this coherence. However, it can be discerned in their texts and linked to significant moments in the documents that attempt to define the fundamental realities that constitute Christian theology and message. This paper is devoted to revealing the coherence of these definitions and their consequences.

This article consists of three parts. The first outlines the relationship between practice and dogma, fundamental to the whole of conciliar theology, as it appears in Pope John XXIII's opening address, crucial for the conciliar hermeneutics. The second part, following the chronology of the appearance of the texts of the great conciliar constitutions, is devoted successively to the conciliar understanding of the liturgy, the Church, and revelation. In the third and final part, I attempt to demonstrate the unity, integrity, and synthesis of the theology of the conciliar texts, particularly their dogmatic foundation.

## **1. Dogma and Practice: Pope John XXIII's Opening Address and Its Latest *Wirkungsgeschichte***

The ideological principles of the Second Vatican Council, convened by John XXIII, were clear practically from the very moment of its announcement in 1959. Their

precise embodiment is present in the pope's opening address, outlining the assumptions and goals of the great work of renewal. The main lines of the event being initiated are clearly present and easily understood in the papal address, including those touching on the relationship between doctrine and practice.<sup>3</sup> It must be admitted that the papal message has sometimes been interpreted quite dialectically. The Council was not about dogmatizing any truths but about the practical dimension of the Church's existence. It is to be considered in the context of the great challenges facing humanity in the turbulent first half of the 20th century.

The pope introduces this theme clearly and unambiguously at the very heart of his address, "The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more effectively. That doctrine embraces the whole of man, composed as he is of body and soul. And, since he is a pilgrim on this earth, it commands him to tend always toward heaven." (Ioannes XXIII 1962, 790)<sup>4</sup> Note the statement about the Council's most important task, which is to guard, transmit, and interpret God's truth (the deposit of faith) more fruitfully. This includes allowing doctrine to once again embrace the whole person, integrating within them the bodily and spiritual dimensions, without any reductionism. Doctrine proves to be a synthetic force, allowing for the integration of the fundamental dimensions of human existence. The pope is convinced that doctrine is not a purely spiritual theory, that it also concerns the material side of human existence. His concise statement about the anthropological integrity of doctrine, its integrating and unifying potential, is of immense significance from the perspective of a world dynamically discovering the richness of matter and developing ever more refined theology.

The truth of faith, in its many manifestations, is at the very heart of the papal intention for the Council's work.

The Twenty-First Ecumenical Council, which will draw upon the effective and important wealth of juridical, liturgical, apostolic, and administrative experiences, wishes to transmit the doctrine, pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion, which throughout twenty centuries, notwithstanding difficulties and contrasts, has become the common patrimony of men. It is a patrimony not well received by all, but always a rich treasure available to men of good will. (Ioannes XXIII 1962, 791)

The fundamental assumption that Pope John sets before the Council is the continuation of Church teaching. It is to be transmitted pure and integral, without any fundamental changes. From the perspective of the postconciliar debates, it seems that

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<sup>3</sup> On the "pastoral style" of Vatican II, cf. Theobald 2012, 265–85.

<sup>4</sup> All translations are the author's own.

in light of the pope's clearly expressed intention, the subject of fierce hermeneutical disputes along the dialectical lines of continuity or its lack thereof becomes groundless. For the pope, opening the Council, it is clear that the traditional deposit of faith is not accepted and embraced by all. This situation does not mean abandoning it but, on the contrary, rediscovering its value. It appears that such a strong emphasis on the role of the deposit of faith in all its dimensions is the fundamental platform on which the pope wishes to build the entire conciliar message.

Referring to the deposit of faith and placing it at the very center of the Council's activities is not about museum-like behavior but about improving the communication of truth.

In order, however, that this doctrine may influence the numerous fields of human activity, with reference to individuals, to families, and to social life, it is necessary first of all that the Church should never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the Fathers. But at the same time she must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate. For this reason, the Church has not watched inertly the marvelous progress of the discoveries of human genius, and has not been backward in evaluating them rightly. But, while following these developments, she does not neglect to admonish men so that, over and above sense—perceived things—they may raise their eyes to God, the Source of all wisdom and all beauty... Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us, thus pursuing the path which the Church has followed for twenty centuries. (Ioannes XXIII 1962, 790–791)

The Council and its recapitulation of doctrine are intended to help the truth of faith better penetrate people's lives. It is about a renewed, gentle, serene adherence of the faithful to the entirety of revealed truth.<sup>5</sup> In the papal mind, the Council is not intended to deal with specific, individual truths of faith but to present its synthetic form.

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<sup>5</sup> "The salient point of this Council is not, therefore, a discussion of one article or another of the fundamental doctrine of the Church which has repeatedly been taught by the Fathers and by ancient and modern theologians, and which is presumed to be well known and familiar to all. For this a Council was not necessary. But from the renewed, serene, and tranquil adherence to all the teaching of the Church in its entirety and preciseness, as it still shines forth in the Acts of the Council of Trent and First Vatican Council, the Christian, Catholic, and apostolic spirit of the whole world expects a step forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character." (John XXIII 1962, 791–92)

Doctrine is an essential starting point here. However, it must be addressed to the specific historical situation. Evangelization must continue and move forward with all its impetus. Hence, the need for sensitivity to the “signs of the times.” This allows us to perceive the good and true progress of humanity even in the present situation. In this spirit, so typical of John XXIII, the pope speaks with great enthusiasm of the “marvelous inventions of human genius,” (Ioannes XXIII 1962, 791), permeated by the “prophets of misfortune.” (Ioannes XXIII 1962, 789) The Church cannot observe this progress indifferently without fundamental approval. Papal teaching thus rejects the previously present integrist themes, which closed the Church community to the changing context of social life in modernity. We also see here a ramping up of the pessimism of the solutions promoted by the Magisterium, e.g., during the modernist crisis.

Let us note that in Pope John’s mind, the doctrinal and pastoral threads are essentially and inextricably linked. This means that doctrine is not conceived as a kind of museum of ideas, closed to the novelty of humanity’s ever-changing situation. At the same time, the anarchist understanding of the future, which sees it as a revolutionary break with the past, is rejected. Progress cannot be built on the foundation of contempt for the past; it must also be skillfully considered in its construction as man moves forward to the future.

There is no doubt, therefore, that the discussed address by Pope John XXIII is particularly interesting for its integral, coherent connection of the doctrinal and pastoral dimensions of the Church’s life. The pope sees no negative dialectic between them. Moreover, both dimensions are necessary and important to each other. Pastoral care is the transmission belt of doctrine and is the metric of its effectiveness. Doctrine, in turn, has evangelizing value, allowing for a better modeling of ecclesial reality, one that more closely corresponds to the truth of the Gospel itself and the demands of the changing world situation. The papal address conveys a conviction that doctrine is crucial in skillfully linking this Gospel truth with the evolving world of human culture. From this interpretive evaluation, any attempt to contrast doctrine, pastoral care, the signs of the times, and the dynamically developing world distorts the main intention of the Council. Moreover, the text of the papal address establishes an inalienable link between the doctrinal and pastoral dimensions of the Church’s life. The pope not only confirms its existence in history but also raises it to the rank of a fundamental norm not only of the Council itself, but of all Church activity.

It must also be stated that the history of conciliar reception, particularly since the pontificate of Pope Francis, increasingly emphasizes the pastoral dimension, the pastoral nature of doctrine. This is clear in Francis’s text on reforming the statutes of the Pontifical Academy of Theology.

Theology is to be of the people, mercifully open to the wounds of the human race and of creation, and also woven into the contexts of human history, to which it bears witness

to the hope of the fulfillment of all in the last times. Theology, taken as a whole, should to have a pastoral “stamp”—and this should not be limited to some of its particular parts. Avoiding an opposition between theory and practice, theological inquiry must strive for an inductive approach as it develops its own work, taking as its beginning the diversity of contexts and situations that people face, allowing itself to engage with the seriousness of reality, in order to discern the “signs of the times” in the salvation-bearing event of God-Love, communicated and announced in Jesus Christ. (Franciscus 2023, 1211–12)

It is easy to notice that the main lines of the conciliar hermeneutics of the relationship between doctrine, theology, and practice are both preserved and transcended. Pope Francis, noticing the need for good theology for the life of the Church, also sees the need for constant work on it. It should express the rhythm of the Church’s heartbeat, the tact of the senses of believers. It should be open to their daily experience. Theological activity cannot claim to be a world closed in on itself. In the Church, every honest reflection should bear a pastoral mark and be practically oriented.<sup>6</sup> A small but significant shift in emphasis occurs here. While in John XXIII’s mind, doctrine was of paramount importance, for Francis, the praxis of the people of God is paramount. Both popes recognize the essential importance of theological reflection and doctrine; however, what distinguishes them is Francis’s conviction that theology should flow from the praxis of the faithful. This very conviction became the foundation of the program of synodality, which also encompasses the doctrinal and theological dimensions. The practical nature of theology and doctrine, their service to the faith, demands that they be practiced only on a shared path, in a synodical manner. Francis’s vision of theology as a hermeneutics of dogma through the prism of human history should therefore be considered at the same time both a kind of significantly deeper interpretation of John XXIII’s pastoral intentions from his programmatic speech and their expansion towards increasing attention to *vox populi*. Although Francis’s intuitions, expressed, e.g., in the Statutes of the Pontifical Academy of Theology (Franciscus 2023), go further than those of John XXIII, they remain largely in close correlation.

Francis’s vision became the basis for a concrete transformation of the understanding of theology, proposed in the spirit of the Council by two German theologians, Bernd Hillebrand and Michael Quisinsky. Inspired by the vision and

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, this was precisely what patristic and medieval theology was like, which finds its particular expression in the thought of Blessed John Duns Scotus, who was convinced that *theologia est scientia practica* (*Ordinatio Prologus*, p. 5, q. 1–2, nos. 217–366, ed. Vat. 1:151–237, and *Lectura Prologus*, p. 4, q. 1–2, nos. 122–87, ed. Vat. 16:45–62) (Ioannes Duns Scotus 1950). Cf. Finkenzeller 1960; Olszewski 2002; Surzyn 2023. The departure from this ideal of practicing theology and understanding doctrine took place only in the modern era, especially under the influence of Enlightenment trends, which, when improperly applied to theology, led it astray into a reduced understanding of rationality and method, and, as in the case of Immanuel Kant, deprived it of much practical significance.

method of Vatican II, these authors postulate an understanding of theology as an applied science (*Angewandte Theologie*<sup>7</sup>), characterized by transcending the boundaries (*Entgrenzung*<sup>8</sup>) between dogma and pastoral care and by networking them (*Vernetzung*).<sup>9</sup>

The mutual blurring of boundaries (*Entgrenzung*) between dogma and pastoral practice appears as a key to the future of the Church and society... Only in the mutual blurring of boundaries between dogma and pastoral care can contemporary answers to challenges in the Church and the world be found that are neither unilaterally pragmatic nor unilaterally overly doctrinal. Rather, it is in the “in-between” space between dogma and pastoral care that memory is realized, tradition unfolds, and the fullness of life shines forth. (Hillebrand and Quisinsky 2025, 12–14)

Both authors are convinced that “it is likely that in such a dynamic between dogma and pastoral care, which is always also a dynamic between past and future, between Church and society, between faith and culture, and ultimately between God and humanity, many theological (and previously spiritual) discoveries can be made.” (Hillebrand and Quisinsky 2025, 15) The imperative to transcend the boundaries between dogma and pastoral care stems directly, according to both authors, from the sacramental vision of the nature of the Church, which opens the constitution *Lumen gentium* and also appears in *Gaudium et spes* (no. 48), thus providing the foundation and starting point for the entire conciliar ecclesiology. Hillebrand and Quisinsky argue, going beyond the intention of the texts of the Council, that this sacramentality should not be understood in cultic and spatial terms only but pastorally, as a struggle for sanctification and transformation of the contemporary world in a spirit of service. “Beyond pragmatism and programmatic, this leads, in light of the necessary reciprocity of dogma and pastoral care, as well as their looming divergence, to the question: ‘How can church practice and theological theory jointly fulfill their service in society?’” (Hillebrand and Quisinsky 2025, 13) The idea of the source of the sacramental approach to ecclesiology for the unity of doctrine and practice is indeed crucial for a proper understanding of their relationship. Only a broad soteriological perspective, guaranteed by the category of *veluti sacramentum*, establishes a common

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7 “A new form of theology, ‘Applied Theology,’ is currently emerging. Its origins lie in universities of applied sciences. Considering the consequences and implications of ‘Applied Theology’ quickly leads to a fundamental reflection on the nature and form of Christian theology in general. The possibilities inherent in ‘Applied Theology’ are likely to make a central contribution to a renewal of theology as a whole, developing and contributing essential insights for both church and society.” (Hillebrand and Quisinsky 2021, 10)

8 For more on this topic, see the multi-authored study edited by Quisinsky and Ruhstorfer 2023.

9 “Since the Second Vatican Council, the integration of pastoral care and dogma has been the task and horizon of theology.” (Hillebrand and Quisinsky 2021, 9)

foundation, horizon, and basic orientation for doctrine and pastoral care, which are often actually independent and separated from each other.

The examples cited above of more recent interpretations of John XXIII's initial intuition may raise doubts about the validity of their approach to the relationship between practice and dogma. Therefore, seeking an adequate interpretation of the Council's texts in this light remains a significant task.

## 2. Dogmatic Pillars of Vatican II

The principles presented to the Council Fathers by John XXIII found concrete expression during the deliberations and were applied in the Council texts. There is no doubt that, following John XXIII's intuition, the Council Fathers realized that the work of pastoral renewal of the Church required thinking from within the fundamental truths of faith and, at the same time, rethinking their meaning and presentation. Their decision to give two documents of the highest constitutional rank a dogmatic character clearly expresses their awareness of this matter. However, it would be a mistake to limit the dogmatic foundations of the Council solely to those texts designated "dogmatic." It transpires that passages of fundamental dogmatic importance, forming the main pillars of the Council's message, can also be found in other documents.

In what follows, I attempt to present the three dogmatic "definitions" mentioned at the very beginning of this paper. I use the term "definition" here with great caution. First, defining these fundamental pillars of the entire ideological structure of Christianity is neither easy nor entirely possible. They touch upon the realm of personal relationships, a reality that eludes all closed definitions, although it is open to conceptualization. In essence, *we have no definition of God or man*. We have only a series of true intuitions drawn from the apostolic testimony, allowing us to attempt to define fundamental realities without claiming completeness and, in this sense, finality. Descriptions of the liturgy, the Church, and revelation, as well as the essential contours of Christian anthropology, can be considered definitions insofar as they respect the apophatic nature of theology, whose task is to safeguard the mystery of personal relationships from excessive rationalization. Apophatic modesty is a characteristic feature of the legacy of Vatican II. We would be mistaken, however, to think that it deprives the Council Fathers and theologians of this great assembly "in the Holy Spirit" of their "filial courage." In fact, in their texts, they propose bold, in-depth, and synthetic approaches to key truths of faith. This served them to articulate a renewed vision of the Church's engagement with the mysteries of salvation. Secondly, I use the concept of definition with great caution because it can *de facto* imply the formal dogmatization of a truth. In this sense, the Council did not introduce new dogmatic

formulas into the life of the Church; it did not formalize any truth of faith in the form of a dogmatic formula. Therefore, I apply the concept of definition in a broader sense, one that does not refer to the process of dogmatization. The definition I have in mind is rather about a renewed understanding of the fundamental realities and concepts of Christianity. Although the definitions presented below are not dogmas in the strict sense, they do contain essential content that shaped the essence of the Council's message to the Church and the world. Defining is therefore understood here as pointing to specific rules of a renewed hermeneutics of the truths of faith.

The first of the proclaimed conciliar constitutions (December 4, 1963) was devoted to liturgical renewal. Although the authors did not define it as dogmatic, it has enormous doctrinal significance. Some time ago, Massimo Faggioli argued that this document should be considered paradigmatic in the context of the entire work accomplished by the Council Fathers. Faggioli argues, e.g., that “despite the differences in the relationships of the two popes of Vatican II with the assembly, both John XXIII and Paul VI clearly had in mind the connection between the liturgical reform and the reform of the Church.” (Faggioli 2012, 126) According to the Italian scholar of the Council, one can speak of a conciliar reform of the liturgy and a reform of the Church in the liturgy (Faggioli 2012, 125). Faggioli even claims that “the liturgical debate at Vatican II was the first and most radical effort of modern Catholicism to cope with the dawn of the ‘secular age’ and the ‘expanding universe of unbelief.’” (Faggioli 2012, 4) In this perspective,

*Sacrosanctum Concilium* constitutes one of the pillars of the ecclesiology of Vatican II. The liturgical constitution presents a way to defend the ecclesiology of Vatican II on the basis of eucharistic ecclesiology, thus without making the choice between juridical and communion ecclesiology the first and last word on the Church of Vatican II... [It] opens the way for a new balance between the “clash of ecclesiologies” at Vatican II. (Faggioli 2012, 15)

For the reasons cited, theological research, Faggioli argues, should illuminate the points of contact between the entirety of the Council texts and *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Faggioli 2012, 16).

In essence, the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* text offers a model account of both the essence of reform and its methodology.<sup>10</sup> The Council Fathers place the realities of the liturgy and Sacred Scripture at its center. The reform of the Church begins with

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<sup>10</sup> The constitution in question opens with the following: “This sacred Council has several aims in view: it desires to impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church. The Council therefore sees particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy.” (SC 1)

a recognition of the centrality of these two realities in its life. The Church thus seeks to understand itself through liturgical celebration and a careful reading of inspired biblical texts. Moreover, it should be noted that one of the guiding principles of liturgical renewal itself, which is the core of the renewal of the entire Church, is the restoration of the rightful place of the Word of God in celebration (cf. SC 24, 35, 51).

The program of renewal of the Church through the renewal of the liturgy begins and builds on a deepened awareness of the nature of liturgical activity. The Council Fathers understand the essence of the liturgical event from a soteriological perspective: It concerns the salvation of the world. This salvific perspective is again embedded within Trinitarian truth (SC 5–6) and Christological truth (SC 7). In this broad context, they understand the liturgy as

an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. In the liturgy the sanctification of the man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs; in the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members. (SC 7)

The exercise of Christ's priestly office is entrusted to him by the Father, who anoints him for this work with the seal of the Holy Spirit. This entire Christological–Trinitarian structure of understanding the liturgy is complemented by an ecclesial dimension. Christ, who celebrates the liturgy, incorporates the Church into his relationship with the Father, into his worship of the Father.<sup>11</sup> Liturgy is therefore Christ's action of glorifying the Father in his ecclesial body. As can be seen from this most general outline of the conciliar theology of the liturgy, we are dealing here with a very extensive theological vision. The fundamental understanding of the liturgy is strongly dogmatic, based on the fundamental truths of faith. At the same time, in accordance with the coordinates of the preconciliar liturgical movement and Pius XII's 1947 encyclical *Mediator Dei*, the one-sided ritual understanding of the liturgy is transcended. Rather than an art of celebrating rites, liturgy becomes a network of interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, the way in which our definition conceptualizes its nature allows for a certain universal understanding, that is, the inclusion of the entire Church in worship. It is not only the work of ordained persons but, while respecting the difference of functions, the common work of the entire Church, incorporated by Christ into his own celebration of the Father.

The second of these pillars directly concerns the Church itself. In the conciliar dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* (November 21, 1964), we find the following attempt to define the essence of the Church and its mission: "the Church is in

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<sup>11</sup> Reiner Kaczynski points to the Christological centrality of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (no. 5), which deals with the Paschal Mystery. In his opinion, this central aspect of Christ's life is not only the semantic and structural center of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* but also the *Herzwort* of the entire Vaticanum II. Cf. Kaczynski 2004, 63.

Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God [*intimae cum Deo unionis*—R.W.] and of the unity of the whole human race.” (LG 1) This simple definition can be considered as one of the most important statements of the Council. It transcends the post-Tridentine institutionalism, strongly felt in the classic, catechism-based definition of the Church, which we owe to Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (“an assembly of people bound by the profession of the same Christian faith and by participation in the same sacraments, under the governance of their legitimate pastors, and especially of the one Roman Pontiff, the vicar of Christ on earth”).<sup>12</sup> This institutionalism is quite understandable in its context of polemic with Protestantism, which downplayed the external, hierarchical, and institutional dimensions of the Church.

After the Council of Trent, this ecclesiology was oriented toward polemics with Protestants, emphasizing primarily elements minimized or rejected by Protestants; thus, it particularly emphasized the Church’s visibility, purely internal, institutional elements. This juridical-institutional trend in ecclesiology lasted almost until the end of the 19th century. However, due to the development of biblical-patristic studies in the 19th and 20th centuries, there gradually grew an understanding that one cannot limit oneself to discussing the external aspect of the Church; one must address the entire divine-human reality of the Mystical Body of Christ and create a term that would also express the inner life of the ecclesial community. (Łydka 1966, 59)

There is no reason to claim that the conciliar definition excludes or invalidates the classical, post-Tridentine understanding of the Church’s essence. Rather, both definitions should be considered as complementary. *Lumen gentium* does not reject the institutional, hierarchical structure of the Church (cf. LG 18), placing it within a deeper vision of the Church’s understanding of itself as an effective sign of one’s intimate union with God. This distinctly spiritual character of the Church is undoubtedly intended to be the horizon of all its other dimensions and aspects. Therefore, we are dealing here not so much with transcending and rejecting the institutional and hierarchical structure of the Church, but with its embedding within a strongly theological and spiritual vision of the Church, in which intimate union with God is the essential goal and mark of one’s membership.

The concepts of union and intimacy used by the editors of the text seem both crucial and powerful and should by no means be overlooked when analyzing the conciliar definition. They profoundly shape the understanding of the hierarchical structure of the people of God and the ultimate destiny of the Church. This intimacy

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<sup>12</sup> “Nostra autem sententia est, Ecclesiam unam tantum esse, non duas, et illam unam et veram esse coetum hominum ejusdem Christianae fidei professione, et eorundem Sacramentorum communione colligatum, sub regimine legitimum pastorum, ac praecipue unius Christi in terris Vicarii, Romani Pontificis.” (*Contr.* IV, lib. III, cap. II [Bellarmine 1586, 2:317])

is a kind of counterpoint to the entire ecclesial structure and the reason for its existence. It finds its ultimate meaning in the Trinitarian constitution of the Church described in *Lumen gentium* (nos. 2–4) and in the great eschatological finale of the constitution (LG 48–51). It is also this very concept that ultimately justifies the “universal call to holiness.” (LG 39–42) Moreover, by defining the Church through the intimate union with God of the baptized, the editors of the text broaden the ecclesial perspective of its impact on the entire human race. In their view, the Church is an effective sign of unity among people. The Church, therefore, lives for the unification of all humanity. This perspective is immensely important, and formulated so clearly that it constitutes an overture to ecumenism, intercultural dialogue, and what the Council will have to say about other religions. What occurs here is an irreversible and radical opening of ecclesial reality to the broad prospects of mission in the world, which is realized through presence itself and, of course, evangelization. It is significant that the Church finds in its own definition room for a broader concept of universality and openly expresses the awareness that it lives not only for itself but for all. It also realizes that its fundamental mission is precisely the unity of humanity.

It remains an important and significant detail that in the analyzed definition, the unity of all people brought about by the Church is genetically linked to the concept of sacrament. The purpose and effect of the Church’s sacramental nature is primarily union with God and the unity of humanity, not the consolidation of external institutional structures. However, the text does not indicate that these should be excluded. The sacramentality of the Church, understood here analogously, as indicated by the term *veluti*, refers not so much to the external dimensions of the Church but rather to its intimate union with God and with people.

The third conciliar definition concerns revelation and is chronologically the latest of the three. The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, was promulgated on November 18, 1965, at the very end of the Council’s assembly. It is therefore a kind of culmination of the Council’s great theological vision, the starting point and foundation for a new missionary and evangelizing awareness. I mentioned earlier that from the very beginning of the deliberations, as expressed in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Sacred Scripture was a significant object of interest for the Council Fathers, who desired to bring it closer to the entire Church as a source of piety, faith, and worship. In this regard, the Council Fathers realized the need to rethink the concept of revelation as the primary category in the vocabulary of Christian concepts.

The history of the concept of revelation is quite rich and characterized by constant dynamic evolution. In the proper sense—as Peter Eicher (1977) and Jean-Luc Marion (2020) have shown in their extensive studies—revelation is a modern idea. However, it has its precursors in earlier periods. Within the patristic era and the Middle Ages, it served to describe God’s visible entry into human history and had phenomenal overtones. Modern theology emphasized its cognitive aspect and made it the foundation of theological gnoseology and a crucial apologetic argument.

And as with the two previous definitions, it was only with the Council Fathers, drawing on the great legacy of theological *ressourcement* (biblical studies, patristics, liturgy), that they were able to discover in the concept of revelation its fundamental motif, which until then had remained significantly hidden and absent from the theological hermeneutics of the reality of revelation. This refers to the personalistic and soteriological dimensions essentially present in revelation. From the perspective of these two theological coordinates, the Council Fathers define revelation in the key of the Trinitarian entrustment to man in the world.

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph. 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph. 2:18; 2 Peter 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14–15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation. (*DV 2*)

This theologically rich text requires commentary.

Above all, in revelation, God reveals himself,<sup>13</sup> speaking through gestures and words about his own life and his plan of salvation for all creation. Revelation becomes not so much an exposition of truth, a lesson, or an instruction manual, but *an event*. The center of this event (in fact, a sequence of events) is the unveiling, the disclosure of his own truth and his intentions for the world, so that people may have access to divine, Trinitarian life. This access itself is also Trinitarian, based on Christ and mediated by the work of the Holy Spirit, achieving its goal in an encounter with the Father. Using a formula taken from 2 Pet 1:4, the Council Fathers define this access in terms of an almost metaphysical realism as it concerns “participation in the divine nature.” Revelation is presented here in existential terms, such as friendship and being together, a community of dwelling and life.

Let us note that the Council Fathers do not eliminate the cognitive dimension of the event of revelation but place it within an existential perspective. In revelation, God truly speaks of himself, revealing his truth. However, this entire process aims not so much at knowledge itself but at creating a real divine–human community through it. Revelation, therefore, does not cease to be a communication of truth;

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<sup>13</sup> On the idea of divine self-communication in revelation cf. Hoping 2005, 739–45.

indeed, the Council Fathers say that it is the fullness of such a communication, its summit. Instead, it is understood primarily from an existential perspective. This perspective is broader than merely cognitive. In essence, Christ himself is the fullness of revelation; through him, people have access to the Father, and through him, we also discover the fullness of truth. The fullness of revelation accomplished in Christ endures in the Church in the form of Holy Scripture (*DV* 11–26) and living tradition (*DV* 7–10), encompassing—in a broad sense—not only teaching but also liturgy and sacraments. In this way, the Council texts come full circle and return to the fundamental nature of the liturgy, the reform of which aimed to bring the deposit of the Word of God closer to the faithful (*SC* 51).

### **3. Theological Unity of Vaticanum II as Centered and Grounded in the Notion of Trinitarian Self-Communication**

The enormous growth in interdisciplinary research on councils has recently allowed us to increasingly realize that they are spaces of mediation and compromise. The naive vision that they were manifestations of an unshakable theological and juridical unity, impervious to differences, is fading away, giving way to complex narratives concerning the genesis, course, and theological and juridical achievements of these exceptional events in the life of the Church. A thorough analysis of the dogmatic formulas proposed by individual councils alone demonstrates that their decisive character is often the result not so much of possessing a final formula but of a stage on the path to it. This belief is confirmed by studies of the history of the reception and impact of councils. These studies irrefutably demonstrate that councils were usually the beginning, rather than the end, of a journey of theological understanding of reality.<sup>14</sup> They sometimes sparked mass protests and, in fact, contributed to the polarization of the theological scene within the Church. It is enough to mention the debates accompanying and following the Council of Nicaea (325) or the great schism after the Council of Chalcedon (451).

The case of Vatican II is no different. Both the history of conciliar activities and the history of their reception confirm this state of affairs. One need only revisit the definitions discussed earlier. The Council's definition of the liturgy raises tensions between the actions of Christ and the Church, clergy and faithful, leading to a strong conflict between traditionalists who reject liturgical reform and progressives who strive for constant innovation. In the case of understanding the Church, the tension runs between those who emphasize its institutional dimension and those who want to see it as a spiritual, charismatic community largely devoid of institutional

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<sup>14</sup> See the famous text by Rahner 1963b.

and dogmatic landmarks. The concept of revelation also leads to significant tensions. This time, it concerns the emphasis on its epistemic interpretation, on the one hand, and a more personalistic approach, on the other. The belief in the permanence of revelation in Scripture and Tradition leads again to tensions between the biblical emphasis in understanding Christianity and the role of Tradition in the other. There is a third area of tension within the concept of revelation between the deposit already given and the continuous development of understanding of truth, between the ecclesial settling of truth and being on a continuous path toward it (*DV* 8).

Despite these tensions, present not only in the Council's debates but also sometimes perceptible in the documents themselves, the Council Fathers managed to develop a coherent theological vision of fundamental aspects of Christianity, which becomes visible only in a simultaneous reading of all the Council's texts, and whose basis and place of greatest visibility is the spiritual and theological unity of the definitions under discussion.<sup>15</sup> What is the hard theological core of this vision? Is it even possible to discover any common form of thought that would lend theological depth to the aforementioned definitions? To a large extent, the richness of the Council's texts opens the hermeneutical field to the many interpretations we are *de facto* witnessing. The task of this hermeneutics should be more than simply providing new, radically contextual and partial, even circumstantial, interpretations. On the contrary, the task of conciliar hermeneutics should be to attempt to discover the intertextual<sup>16</sup> coherence of the texts and their message, and even more importantly, the theological foundation on which it rests. This foundation is twofold.

First, the Council's texts find their starting point in the mystery of the Triune God and in his act of historical, concrete, bodily self-giving to the world. God is at the very center of the Council's concerns.

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy contemplates the Trinitarian work of sanctifying the world by including it in the action of the Incarnate Son. Christ, constantly present in his Church (*adest*), includes it in his own act, which is the glorification of the Father and the deifying sanctification of humanity. The first intuition, as

<sup>15</sup> Hünemann demonstrated the existence of such coherence also on the formal level, not only the ideological one. See Hünemann 2006, 5–95.

<sup>16</sup> “Two hermeneutical insights from literary hermeneutics are helpful here: the notion of ‘intra-textuality’ and the notion of ‘inter-textuality’. Intra-textuality refers to the relationship of linguistic units (words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters) within a single conciliar document. The interpreter needs to see those individual units in a particular document in the light of other units within the same document.... Inter-textuality refers to the relationship of such linguistic units and single documents to all the other documents of Vatican II and their linguistic units. This highlights the importance of appreciating the council documents not only as discrete texts on particular topics but also as a body or ‘corpus’ of interrelated texts. The individual ‘texts’ have a broader ‘context’—they are to be interpreted in terms of the vision that the whole collection projects. However, that is not to lessen the integrity of each document and their own importance in a hermeneutical circle of understanding; the comprehensive vision of the council as a whole can only be reconstructed by means of evaluating the elements of the individual documents.” (Rush 2020, 103–4)

it were, of the conciliar reform is the inclusion of humanity in God's work. Here we are dealing simultaneously with a transcendence of extrinsicism and excessive ecclesial passivity among the faithful. The Church, to use Romano Guardini's well-known phrase, must awaken within their souls. Liturgy is crucial in this awakening and in every reform of the Church. At the same time, the foundations of the theological theory of action are revealed here: The Trinity acts in the world in such a way that it opens up a field of synergistic cooperation. Let us note that this inclusive, synergetic action of God always comes first, and it is this action that constitutes the foundation of creation and the entire life of the Church.

The depth of the purpose and nature of this cooperation, its metaphysical foundation, is revealed in the conciliar Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. The Church's deepest nature is determined entirely by being an effective sign of intimate union with God. The goal is the union of humankind with the Trinity, which constitutes the Church as a community, the people of God, and the body of Christ. The sacramental approach introduces a crucial element of missionary dynamism into the understanding of the Church. The Church exists to signify and effectively effect union with God. The Church is an act of evangelization. Behind this entire definition lies the concept of God, who desires intimacy with humanity and unity among themselves and continually brings it about. It is this intimacy that gives life and structure to the Church.

The Council's definition of revelation should be interpreted consistently from this perspective. It explicitly and directly expresses the essence that the two previous definitions have already articulated. The concept of revelation encompasses, most deeply and broadly, simultaneously in a synthetic way that touches the essence, the entire economy of God's engagement in the world. Revelation is an act of God that, when accepted, brings about a real transformation of man. The essence of this act is the gift of self. The same gift that creates the liturgy, in which Jesus' being in the Church and for the Church constitutes "whole public worship." (SC 7) This same gift, being for the Church, including him in his own act, creates the Church as a divine-human community. Through the liturgical inclusion of people in himself and in his own action, God makes the Church's existence possible. The Church, in turn, lives in and for Trinitarian intimacy. The liturgy and the Church have a distinctly epiphanic, revelatory character precisely as an unveiling of the Trinitarian gift of self.

Precisely because of the above elements of conciliar thought, the concept of *Selbstmitteilung*<sup>17</sup> coined in German philosophy and theology and popularized by

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<sup>17</sup> "God wishes to communicate himself, to pour forth the love which he himself is. That is the first and the last of his real plans and hence of his real world too. Everything else exists so that this one thing might be: the eternal miracle of infinite Love. And so God makes a creature whom he can love: he creates man. He creates him in such a way that he can receive this Love which is God himself, and that he can and must at the same time accept it for what it is: the ever astounding wonder, the unexpected, unexacted gift... Thus in this second respect God must so create man that love does not only pour forth free and

Karl Rahner,<sup>18</sup> appears to accurately reflect the foundation of the Council's theology and to be a factor in the unity of its texts and its message.<sup>19</sup> The authors of the Council's texts and theological concept managed to avoid the genetically idealistic connotations of this concept and their semantic shallowness. In this regard, I disagree with Peter Hünemann's reading and interpretation, which sees the moment of the Council's intellectual unity in its transcendental orientation. Unfortunately, his approach reveals a strong reduction of the historical moment of the phenomena described by the Council, which allows him to articulate its unity and coherence in a logical perspective in the spirit of Kant's transcendental logic (Hünemann 2023, 128–29). However, this is far too little in the context of the concrete corpus of texts left to us by the Council Fathers. There is no doubt that Hünemann's interpretation bears clear traces of Rahner's transcendentalism, as it is most commonly understood. But is this transcendentalism truly an uncritical adaptation of Kant's system? It seems that Rahner's appeal to transcendentalism is merely one component of a broader vision that combines a request for divine action in history with elements of the transcendental method. However, this means conceiving Rahner's system as radical transcendentalism and then transferring this interpretive scheme to the entire Council's work is a significant and unjustified reduction and ultimately a mistake. Hünemann's interpretation can be accepted as long as it relates in some partial way to the theological theory of knowledge present in the Council's texts and implicitly concealed within them (Hünemann 2023, 127).

The idea of self-communication is used in the conciliar texts in a specific way. It simultaneously encompasses the dynamic moment of action in history, the act we discovered in the aforementioned definitions as their essential moment, as well as the unequivocal definition of the object of this dynamic in the form of self-gift. What the conciliar texts in question say about the liturgy, the Church, and revelation clearly indicates that they refer to the reality of God's living gift of himself, which concretely, historically involves us in his own action. In this inclusive gift of himself, God constitutes the Church as a community, consolidated around his self-gift and dynamically living for the entire human community. The Trinity is known only through this gift of himself for us humans in the mode of revelation. Here we see that revelation, knowledge, and endowment occur together and simultaneously here in God's self-disclosure.

For this reason, one should ask whether the famous sentence from *Gaudium et spes* (no. 24) on the role of self-giving in human life could not serve as a theological

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unexacted, but also so that man as real partner, as one who can accept or reject it, can experience and accept it as the unexacted event and wonder not owed to him, the real man." (Rahner 1963a, 310–311)

<sup>18</sup> On Rahner and Council, see Madrigal 2016, 515–56.

<sup>19</sup> I do not accept the thesis of Santiago Madrigal, who affirms that the main topic and factor of unity for the Council was dialogue with the contemporary world (Madrigal 2011, 93–106).

hermeneutical key to the Council's texts.<sup>20</sup> Within the context of Christ-centered anthropology (see especially GS 22<sup>21</sup>), it appears that it reflects the entire multidimensional theology of the Council's work. People realize themselves only through a sincere gift of self (*plene seipsum invenire non posse nisi per sincerum sui ipsius donum*), because this is precisely how the Trinity, the model of all that exists, lives. This conviction is evangelically revolutionary, and as such, it constitutes the basis for the entire vision of the Church's reform and a factor of unity in its integral vision of reality.

Secondly, from it stems the entire pastoral dynamic of the Council, including its opening to the world in its otherness. If the pastoral character of Vatican II is beyond doubt, the fact that it flows directly from dogma seems obvious. The Council, in accordance with John XXIII's initiative, adopts the dogmatic moment, the aspect of preserving and transmitting doctrine, as an inalienable perspective on the condition and vocation of the Church in the present. The pastoral moment thus flows integrally from the dogmatic moment and is mediated by it. At the same time, it is a crucial moment in the Council's hermeneutics of dogma. Precisely because the practical dimension of the Council Fathers' reflections contained in the documents flows from dogma, it can shed significant light on it. The Council texts implicitly assume that an inalienable element of understanding is its pastoral application. Perhaps this very application defines the central point of dogma's meaning. Let us just recall that, firstly, the generator of dogmatization processes in history was usually a soteriological motive (dogmas defend the truth of salvation); secondly, they came from the pastoral environment; and finally, they were formulated by shepherds.

Thus, it was possible to establish essential dimensions of the unity and coherence of the Council's vision. Primarily, the foundation, centrality, and heuristic power of the Trinitarian-based theology of gift were highlighted. The Council's texts are indeed theologically coherent. And since this theological and doctrinal coherence enables and generates a pastoral perspective, it can be stated that they are also coherent in terms of demonstrating the unity and coherence of doctrine and practice. The Council's theological coherence, built on the vision of God as a communion of self-gift, far from being a dead monolith that excludes plurality of interpretations, determines the question of unity of doctrine and action, dogma and practice, tradition and reform.

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<sup>20</sup> "Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, 'that all may be one ... as we are one' (John 17:21-22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself." (GS 24)

<sup>21</sup> "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown." (GS 22)

In other words, one can speak of a two-dimensional coherence of the Council's message: the unity of its theology and its coherence with practice. The renewed vision of the Church, its communal and synodal character, and the understanding of its action are a direct application of the definitions analyzed earlier, which interpret each other.

## Conclusions

The above analyses provide concrete postulates for the hermeneutics of the events and texts of the Council.

First, there needs to be a renewed interest in the place, role, and nature of the definitions offered by the Council Fathers in their texts. The point is not to reduce reflection on the Council's message solely to them. Rather, it is to more clearly articulate their heuristic power and hermeneutical usefulness in the context of the Council's pronouncements as a whole. Reclaiming their centrality in the process of seeking the meaning of the actual Council texts should become a crucial task for the future.

Secondly, the search for unity and coherence in the Council's message, also at the level of the relationship between dogma and practice, demands an acceptance of its theological character. Historical and contextual aspects, while important, are not ultimately determinative in the process of generating the message and its coherence. Rather, they are a significant catalyst for this hermeneutical process.

Third, the Vatican II texts and message are coherent internally and among themselves. The theological basis for this unity and coherence appears to be the Trinitarian self-giving to humanity in the universe.

Fourth, it should be remembered that the presented coherence and unity do not exclude the existence of a multiplicity of approaches and perspectives in the documents. This can sometimes evoke a sense of inconsistency and disunity. In fact, it stems more from the complexity and multifaceted nature of the realities described and often directly refers to the paradoxical nature of the truth of faith built on and woven around the Trinitarian dogma. Ultimately, unity and coherence can only be achieved through a network of relationships between approaches, threads, themes, and interpretations. At least until "we know as we ourselves are known" (1 Cor 13:12).

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