

**Vaticanum II:
History, Theology, and Reception**

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EDITORIAL



EDITORIAL

Rediscovering the Second Vatican Council

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While opening this year's series of catechetical addresses, Pope Leo XIV remarked:

Together with the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, in 2025, we remembered the sixtieth anniversary of Vatican Council II. Although the time that separates us from this event is not so long, it is equally true that the generation of bishops, theologians and believers of Vatican II is no longer with us. Therefore, while we hear the call not to let its prophecy fade, and to continue to seek ways and means to implement its insights, it will be important to get to know it again closely, and to do so not through “hearsay” or interpretations that have been given, but by rereading its documents and reflecting on their content. Indeed, it is the Magisterium that still constitutes the guiding star of the Church's journey today. (Leo XIV 2026, “General Audience,” January 7, 2026)

The present volume of *Verbum Vitae* constitutes a response to this papal call. It represents an attempt at a scholarly reflection on the Second Vatican Council from a variety of perspectives, seeking to present this event as firmly rooted in Tradition, attentive to the living pulse of the Church and the world in the mid-twentieth century, and bearing fruits in various spheres of post-conciliar ecclesial and social life.

This issue was inspired by the scholarly symposium Dialogue in the Church in the Light of the Documents of the Second Vatican Council. The event took place at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow on November 27–28, 2025, attended by the specialists in conciliar studies from across Europe. Michael Quisinsky from Karlsruhe University of Education delivered the opening lecture, expanded in this volume with the article “On the (Ir)Relevance of the Second Vatican Council.”

The second conference session, entitled “Around the Council's Idea of Dialogue,” featured two additional presentations, both of them published in this issue in the revised version. The first one by Rafael Vázquez Jiménez from the San Pablo Higher Center for Theological Studies, Loyola Andalucía University, is dedicated to the “Dialogue *Ad Extra*: The Relevance of *Unitatis Redintegratio* and *Nostra Aetate*,” and the second one by Dirk Ansoerge from the Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy

and Theology—to the “Dialogue *Ad Intra*: The Relevance of *Lumen Gentium* and *Christus Dominus* for a Synodal Church.”

The third session, “Dialogue and the Council from the East-Central European Perspective,” expanded the previous discussions by bringing together three speakers who explored the Second Vatican Council through the experiences of theologians behind the Iron Curtain. The session featured papers by Urszula Pękala from Saarland University (“Dialogue and the Council from Polish and East German Perspective”), Adela Muchova from the Protestant Theological Faculty, Charles University in Prague (“Dialogue and the Council from a Czech Perspective”), and István Csontai from Pécsi Püspöki Hittudományi Főiskola (“They Were There but They Were Not: Hungarian Bishops’ Participation at the Second Vatican Council”). The presentation by Muchova has been further developed in the article included in this issue: “Faith and Culture in Dialogue: Tomáš Halík en Route from Vatican II to Synodality.”

The second day of the conference began with the opening lecture delivered by Damian Wąsek and Marek Gilski from the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, on the “*Vota* for the Second Vatican Council: A Diagnosis of the Pre-Conciliar State of the Church.” This issue of *Verbum Vitae* includes further developed themes from that lecture in the form of two articles: by Wąsek, “The Reform of the Roman Curia in the *Vota* for Vatican II,” and by Gilski, “Papal Primacy and Episcopal Collegiality in the *Vota* for Vatican II.”

The first session of the second day, dedicated to the “Constitutive Conditions of Dialogue,” included papers delivered by Przemysław Artemiuk from the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw (“The Church’s Openness to the World as a Condition for Dialogue”) and Antoni Nadbrzeżny from the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (“Religious Freedom as the Foundation of the Church’s Dialogue with the Contemporary World”). Artemiuk further developed one of the themes of his presentation, namely, the perspective of the Warsaw School of Apologetics, and submitted to this volume the article on “The Reception of Vaticanum II in the Apologetics of Józef Myśków (1927–1988).”

The final thematic area of the symposium was focused on the “Dialogue of the Church in Its Religious Dimensions.” During this session the following speakers were included: Marek Błaza from the Collegium Bobolanum – Catholic Academy in Warsaw (“*Orientalium Ecclesiarum* and Dialogue with the Eastern Catholic Churches”), Zygfryd Glaeser from the University of Opole (“*Unitatis Redintegratio* and Ecumenical Dialogue”), and Tereza Huspeková, from the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow (“The Notion of ‘Religion’ in *Nostra Aetate*: Said, Unsaid, and Still to Say”) whose expanded paper is also included in this issue under the same title.

It is also worth noting that the conference mentioned above and many of the articles published here are connected with the implementation of research projects financed with three research grants: The Science for Society II Programme of the

Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Poland, entitled “The Church as a Space for Dialogue: The Second Vatican Council Read Anew” (Project No. NdS-II/SN/0050/2023/01; The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow); the National Program for the Development of Humanities of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of Poland, entitled “Pillars of Polish Apologetics and Fundamental Theology” (Project No. NPRH/DN/SP/0009/2023/12; The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow), as well as the Program of the Charles University Research Centre (UNCE/24/SSH/019).

Some of the authors of the articles present in this volume are members of the Research Center for the Second Vatican Council, affiliated with the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow. For this reason, many of the themes addressed to in the presented papers are the results of the scholarly research conducted within this institution. The source materials used together with commentaries and auxiliary studies to deepen and critically assess the key issues related to the Second Vatican Council are provided on its website (<https://vatican2center.upjp2.edu.pl/>).

Contributions to the above mentioned conference have been complemented by several additional articles. Robert Woźniak (The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow) discusses the hermeneutics of conciliar texts (“Dogmatic and Pastoral Coherence of the Second Vatican Council: A Contribution to the Hermeneutics of Its Texts and Message”). Jarosław Nowaszczuk (University of Szczecin) presents the Polish bishops’ position on language in the liturgy (“Latin and Vernacular: *Vota* of Polish Bishops to the Second Vatican Council”). Andrzej Napiórkowski (The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow) addresses the problem of applying appropriate methods to conciliar documents (“From the Anti-Reformist Method of the Documents of the Council of Trent to the Pastoral Methods of the Second Vatican Council”). Jacek Kempa (University of Silesia in Katowice) explores the contemporary issue of the tension between autonomy and theonomy, which has characterised both the teaching of the Church and modern thought and culture (“Freedom and the Dilemma of ‘Autonomy – Theonomy’: On a Possible Reading of *Gaudium et Spes*”). Krzysztof Kościelniak (Jagiellonian University in Krakow) presents a detailed account of the evolution of references to Islam during the Second Vatican Council (“The Council Fathers’ Discussions and Controversies on the Inclusion of References to Islam in the Second Vatican Council Documents”). Kazimierz Pek (The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin) demonstrates the influence of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the development of a Polish concept of Mariology (“*De Maria Numquam Satis Vere: The Conciliar Genesis of Stanisław Celestyn Napiórkowski’s Mariology in Context*”). Wojciech Grygiel (University of Opole) analyses how the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on science found a mature and influential form of expression in the teaching of John Paul II (“Speaking from Within Science: Vatican II’s Legacy in John Paul II’s *Letter to George Coyne*”). Finally, Felipe Sérgio Koller, Márcio Luiz Fernandes, and Christiane

Meier (Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas and Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná, Brazil) examine the significance of the legacy of the Second Vatican Council for artistic creativity (“The Work of Cláudio Pastro in the Context of Sacred Art After the Second Vatican Council”).

We express our deep gratitude to all the contributors of this volume of *Verbum Vitae*, especially to the conference participants. We hope that the published articles will encourage the readers to continue their creative reflection on the challenging legacy of the Second Vatican Council.

ARTICLES



On the (Ir)Relevance of the Second Vatican Council

MICHAEL QUISINSKY 

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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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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,¹ 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.²

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

¹ "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.

² 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.³ 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)⁴ 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

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

⁴ 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.⁵ In the papal mind, the Council is not intended to deal with specific, individual truths of faith but to present its synthetic form.

⁵ "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 integralist 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.⁶ 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

⁶ 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*⁷), characterized by transcending the boundaries (*Entgrenzung*⁸) between dogma and pastoral care and by networking them (*Vernetzung*).⁹

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

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.¹⁰ The Council Fathers place the realities of the liturgy and Sacred Scripture at its center. The reform of the Church begins with

¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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

¹¹ 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”).¹² 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

¹² “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,¹³ 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;

¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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

¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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 intertextual¹⁶ 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

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

¹⁶ “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*¹⁷ coined in German philosophy and theology and popularized by

¹⁷ "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,¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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

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)

¹⁸ On Rahner and Council, see Madrigal 2016, 515–56.

¹⁹ 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.²⁰ Within the context of Christ-centered anthropology (see especially GS 22²¹), 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.

²⁰ "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)

²¹ "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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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 (Nadbrzeżny 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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Papal Primacy and Episcopal Collegiality in the *Vota* for Vatican II

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Abstract: In this paper, we examine the relationship between papal primacy and episcopal collegiality by analyzing the *vota* submitted for the Second Vatican Council. We highlight the growing criticism of the excessive centralization of power in the person of the pope and the Roman Curia, as well as the calls for a restoration of the balance between the primacy and effective responsibility of bishops. The analysis comprises three main areas: (1) the value of papal primacy, (2) proposals for reforming its mode of exercise, and (3) suggestions for strengthening collegial structures—patriarchs, cardinals, and episcopal conferences—in the governance of the Church. Theological, linguistic, and hermeneutical methods have been used, allowing for a thorough reading and interpretation of the multifaceted source material found in the *Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando, Antepreparatoria 1*. We have concluded that the calls for collegiality were not a late invention of Vatican II, but had already matured within the episcopate, both in the East and West. Moreover, the reform of papal primacy and the strengthening of collegiality clearly had an ecumenical dimension and were perceived as conditions for closer relationships among the Churches.

Keywords: Second Vatican Council, papal primacy, episcopal collegiality, decentralization, *vota*

Among the many voices sent to the Vatican in the antepreparatory phase of the Council, one text in particular contained a bold diagnosis of the crisis surrounding the exercise of papal primacy:

The main cause of this evil, it seems to us, is the tendency of most Latin theologians and canonists to concentrate all the power entrusted by Christ to His Church in the single person of the Supreme Pontiff, to make him the source of all power, and consequently to grant disproportionately centralized and practically sovereign powers to the Roman Curia, which acts in his name. From this perspective, they find it difficult to see the apostolic power of Patriarchs and Bishops anything other than a pure and simple delegation of the supreme power of the Pope, limited and revoked at will. In this way, the Pope, the Father of Christians, has become as a Christian currently dissident from his communion, a distorted figure, accused by non-Catholics of insatiable pride and human ambition, often antipathetic, regardless of the charm of his person, his human qualities, and his eminent holiness. (*CVE* Pars IV, 454)¹

¹ In the original: “*La principale cause du mal est, nous semble-t-il, la tendance de la plupart des théologiens et canonistes latins à concentrer toute l’autorité confiée par le Christ à son Eglise dans la seule personne du Souverain Pontife, à faire de lui la source de tout pouvoir et, par voie de conséquence, à donner des pouvoirs démesurément centralisateurs et pratiquement souverains à la Curie Romaine qui agit en son*”

This voice was signed and sent for the Second Vatican Council by the Greek-Melkite Catholic Patriarch of Antioch, Maximos IV Saigh, together with nineteen other bishops of this rite. They noted the disappearance of—what they called—*all power in the Church*. Therefore, the first step was to continue the work of the First Vatican Council, which had clarified the pope's powers but, due to its adjournment, could no longer define the nature and powers of the episcopate. They emphasized that the hierarchy established by Jesus was based on the Twelve, with the primacy of Peter. Therefore, as they wrote, Peter's power should be balanced (*équilibré*) by that of the Twelve (*CVE Pars IV*, 454). The joint statement of the Greek Melkite bishops was evidence of a problematic approach to collegiality, and in fact a confirmation of its absence in many areas in the Catholic Church in the era before the Second Vatican Council.

The fragment quoted above was not an isolated position, as this topic appeared in many pre-conciliar *vota*. Although the relationship between papal primacy and episcopal collegiality in the context of Vatican II has been widely studied, this issue has not yet been examined based on the source material presented here.² This paper aims to fill this gap.

The goal of the paper is to present, systematize, and analyze the complex and multifaceted *vota* from various areas of the Catholic Church submitted as proposals for conciliar topics. Therefore, the main source is the *Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando, Antepreparatoria* 1.

Considering the nature of the source material and the specificity of the issue under analysis, several research methods will be employed. Besides theological analysis, the work on the *vota* will require the use of linguistic and hermeneutical methods in the process of their interpretation.

nom. Sous cette perspective, il leur est difficile de voir dans le pouvoir apostolique des Patriarches et des Evêques autre chose qu'une délégation pure et simple de l'autorité suprême du Pape, limitable et révocable à volonté. De la sorte le Pape, le Père des chrétiens, est devenu, en chrétienté actuellement dissidente de sa communion, un personnage défiguré, accusé par les non-catholiques d'orgueil insatiable et d'ambition humaine, souvent antipathique, quoi qu'il en soit du charme de sa personne, de ses qualités humaines et de sa sainteté éminente." Accessed February 10, 2026. <https://archive.org/details/ADAI.4/page/n449/mode/2up>.

² Although Massimo Faggioli (2005) has addressed the *vota* most extensively, he has focused on the nature of the episcopal ministry, and so he has discussed the relationships to the primacy marginally. The *vota* have also been examined in several recent Polish conciliar commentaries, which, however, concern only selected documents; the *vota* have been analyzed as regards their content, without systematizing the question of the primacy and collegiality. In the context of this paper, most references can be found in commentaries on: *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (Gilski, Wąsek, and Blaza 2025) and *Unitatis reintegratio* (Wąsek, Gilski, and Kałużny 2024). In other studies, regarding this question, one can hardly find reflections on the *vota*; see Rahner and Ratzinger 1962; Kasper 1962, 47–85; Afanasiev 1965, 7–15; Ratzinger 1965; Ryan 1966, 208–41; Sullivan 1983; Buckley 1998; Swaine 1998; Sullivan 2002, 472–93; Krzywda 2008; DeClue 2008, 642–70; Okafor 2013; Wąsek 2014; Marmion 2017, 25–48; Pallath 2024, 36–75; Laksito 2025, 395–411.

The structure of the paper reflects the issues that have most frequently emerged in the research material. The first question will concern the value of papal primacy, then proposals of changes in the way it was to be exercised, and finally, specific suggestions for increasing the role of bishops in the government of the Church.

1. Value of Papal Primacy

In the *vota* for the Second Vatican Council, we find no statements questioning the truth about the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. If there were critical voices, they concerned the forms of exercising his primacy. Those who most sharply criticized the limitation of the powers of bishops and patriarchs in favor of the power of the pope and the Roman Curia also expressed the most beautiful voices regarding the meaning and need for papal primacy itself.

The strongest voice in favor of papal primacy came from the Melkite Greek Church. Patriarch Maximos IV, along with nineteen other bishops, wrote:

The primacy of Peter, the infallible primacy, is a great grace, a charism placed by God in His Church, not for the benefit of a few nor solely for Catholics, but for all Christians: Orthodox and Protestants included. All these Christians *have the right* to benefit from this charism. However, there are obstacles that prevent them from seeing and accessing it, obstacles placed either by themselves or by Catholics. We must, as far as we are concerned, begin by removing the obstacles that originate within ourselves, without waiting for others to make the first move. (*CVE* Pars IV, 456)³

It was not just the Melkite bishops who appreciated the treasure of the papacy, and indeed, it was not just the Catholic Church. Bishop Thomas Leo Parker of Northampton, England, wrote that the value of papal primacy was discernible among some Anglican clergy, who openly professed that the Catholic Church was the one true Church of Christ, and that the Bishop of Rome enjoyed the charism of infallibility. These clerics, though few in number, did not join the Catholic Church simply because they wanted to promote ecumenism within their Church (*CVE* Pars I, 27–28). However, another English hierarch, Cardinal William Godfrey, noted that there were

³ In the original: “La primauté de Pierre, la primauté infallible, est une grande grâce, un charisme placé par Dieu dans son Eglise non pour l’avantage de quelques-uns ni des seuls Catholiques, mais de tous les Chrétiens: Orthodoxes et Protestants compris. Tous ces Chrétiens *ont le droit de profiter de ce charisme*. Or, il y a des obstacles qui les empêchent de le voir et d’arriver à lui, obstacles placés soit par eux-mêmes soit par nous autres Catholiques. Il faut que, en qui nous concerne, nous commençons par enlever les obstacles provenant de nous, sans attendre que les autres commencent.” Accessed February 10, 2026. <https://archive.org/details/ADAII.4/page/n451/mode/2up>.

significant differences of opinion on this issue within the Anglican Church itself; there was no clear position regarding papal primacy (*CVE* Pars I, 41–42).

The importance of the primacy in the ecumenical debate was highlighted by the conference of German bishops meeting in Fulda. They stated that there was no other doctrine that had been the subject of so many debates, symposia, and monographs in Protestant circles than issues in the field of ecclesiology, including the unity of the Church, apostolic succession, and the primacy of the pope (*CVE* Pars I, 738). Moreover, the bishops observed that biblical studies had led many of the most eminent Protestant theologians to find traces and “primitive elements” of the Catholic Church (*vestigia et “primitiva elementa” Ecclesiae catholicae*) in Holy Scripture as well the beginnings of her hierarchical structure, the apostolic succession of bishops, and even the primacy of Saint Peter. They referred to two Lutheran ministers (Richard Baumann and Maximilian Lackmann), who suffered serious consequences in their Churches for confessing the primacy (*ministri lutherani etiam hanc successionem accipientes*). They were suspended from office, because by confessing the primacy of the Roman Pontiff (*per confessionem Primatus Romani Pontificis*), they openly opposed the symbols of the Reformed communities, formulated in the 16th century. These ministers opposed their suspension, affirming that only Scripture, which was the supreme norm of the Lutheran faith, had led them to confess the Primacy of the Roman Pontiff (*se sola scriptura, quae sit suprema lutheranorum norma credendi, ad confessionem Primatus Romani Pontificis pervenisse*), and since Scripture was the only regulating norm, and the symbols were only norms regulated by Scripture, they merely corrected the work of the Reformers (*CVE* Pars I, 746).⁴

In addition, the German Episcopal Conference highlighted the contribution of the First Vatican Council to this issue, which, by defining the primacy and infallibility of the Bishop of Rome, initiated the development of the Constitution on the Church of Christ (*CVE* Pars I, 746).

Many voices were raised about the Council’s addressing the issue of papal primacy and its role in building the unity of the Church, e.g., Domenico Caloyera (*CVE* Pars II, 788–89),⁵ Ruggero Raffaele Cazzanelli (*CVE* Pars III, 845), Angelus Delahunt (*CVE* Pars VIII, 308), defining (e.g., Joseph Emmanuel Descuffi) the pope as the center of Unity (*centrum Unitatis*) (*CVE* Pars IV, 632). At the same time, it was emphasized (Clemente Micara) that many circles were ignorant of the true doctrine of the Church on the primacy (*CVE* Pars III, 718).

⁴ Some theologians, and even moderators of Lutheran communities, recognized the primacy of the Apostle Peter, furthermore arguing that the succession of the primacy of the Roman Pontiff was not in itself impossible (*successionem primatus in Romano Pontifice per se non esse impossibilem*), but simply not confirmed by Holy Scripture.

⁵ Some bishop from the European part of Turkey also suggested addressing the issue of the relationship between the infallibility of councils and the infallibility of the pope, as well as the nature of the fullness of the supreme power of the pope.

As we can see, several years before the Second Vatican Council, the issue of papal primacy was present in discussions held both within and outside the Catholic Church. Numerous voices—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox—recognized the value of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. Therefore, suggestions arose to help other Churches accept the primacy by providing the greatest concessions in terms of customs and traditions, as well as the endless maternal tenderness bestowed by the Church (*maternamque sine fine teneritatem ab Ecclesia praebendas*) (CVE Pars III, 114).

In summary, it is worth noting once again that although critical remarks how the primacy was to be exercised were included in the *vota* for the Second Vatican Council, the doctrine of the existence and necessity of the primacy remained widely accepted. Both Catholic hierarchs and representatives of the Orthodox and Protestant traditions saw papal primacy as a significant element of Christian unity. Many of them emphasized that papal primacy, properly understood and based on the Gospel and the priority of love, could become not an obstacle but a help in ecumenical dialogue. Therefore, even before the Council, there was a growing conviction that a renewed, more collegial and pastoral, understanding of the primacy would be crucial for the future shape of the Church.

How should papal primacy be reformed? In the next section, we will examine some selected changes in this respect.

2. Changes Concerning the Way the Primacy Was to Be Exercised

From the Eastern Churches—though not exclusively—there was particularly much criticism directed at the devaluation of the role of patriarchs and the patriarchal structure. Numerous speakers cited examples from the early centuries of Christianity as well as the current functioning of the patriarchates in the Churches that were not in communion with Rome. The difficulty was perceived as the excessive emphasis on the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, which had led to the removal or limitation of the ancient rights and privileges of the Eastern Churches.

This was pointed out by Isidore Borecky, emphasizing that similar voices were coming from other Churches. The Orthodox—he continued—were ready to recognize the primacy of the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome over the entire Church, but not in the extended form (*non in hac extensione*) that was adopted in the West, but rather in accordance with the norm, idea, and practice (*sed potius ad normam, ideam et praxim*), in force during the first seven ecumenical councils held in the East (CVE Pars VI, 118).

The Armenian Patriarch Gregory Peter XV Agagianian drew attention to the willingness of the Orthodox to accept papal primacy, the pope being understood

as *primus inter pares* among the patriarchs (CVE Pars IV, 398). The aforementioned Archbishop Descuffi of Smyrna, referring to his meetings with other denominations, proposed such a functioning of the Church after the unification of all Christians, in which the pope would have the primacy of jurisdiction and honor (*cum primatu iurisdictionis et honoris*), but the competences and methods of election and exercise of power by the patriarchs would also be described in detail (CVE Pars IV, 632–33).⁶

The voices concerning the exercise of the primacy focused, among other things, on describing the relationships between the pope and the Church. Placing the pope above and in isolation from the Church was met with criticism. Presenting the Bishop of Rome at the center of the Church, yet in close connection with the entire Church, was therefore advocated by numerous Council Fathers. It is worth citing a few of the most representative examples.

Archbishop Jean-Julien Weber of Strasbourg emphasized the central role of popes as Bishops of Rome in the Church: they sit in the middle of the Church (*in medio Ecclesiae sedent*) as the center of the entire Christian world (*ut centrum totius orbis christiani*). However, he postulated a complementary approach to papal primacy, which would take into account both the writings of the Fathers (e.g., Ignatius of Antioch, Cyprian, Leo the Great) and the teaching of the First Vatican Council. As stated by Weber, papal primacy should not be separated from the Church, because the disconnection of the pope entirely from the flock was inconceivable (*disiunctio Papae et gregis prorsus excogitari nequit*). Thus, he proposed to highlight the intimate union (*intima unio*) of the Holy See with the entire Church (CVE Pars I, 416).

A critical voice also came from the German episcopate assessing the forms of exercising the primacy by the Bishop of Rome. The separated brethren in the East—as Lorenz Jäger emphasized—were scandalized by this concept of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and his infallibility with respect to the Church; this primacy, as it were, was cutting him off and isolating him from the Church (*ab Ecclesia quasi prae-scindente et isolato*) (CVE Pars I, 641). Consequently, the archbishop of Paderborn called for a more thorough explanation of the understanding of not only the primacy but also the episcopacy in the Catholic Church, emphasizing in particular the unifying role of the primacy. Such a presentation would allow for a better understanding of its value and might help attract dissenters to the fold of Christ. In his opinion, presenting the primacy required drawing on the traditions of both the East and West (CVE Pars I, 645–46).

Finally, it should be noted that the pre-conciliar *vota* clearly revealed a desire to renew the way the primacy was to be exercised so that it would better correspond to both the ancient tradition of the Church and the sensibilities of other Christian communities. Critical voices—particularly from the Eastern hierarchs—did not seek

⁶ The issue of the relationship between papal primacy and the powers of the patriarchs was also raised by Nicholas Thomas Elko (CVE Pars VI, 473).

to weaken the primacy itself, but to restore the proper balance between the primacy and the patriarchal structure, and to conceptualize the role of the pope in a way that would more evidently demonstrate his unity with the entire Church rather than his isolated position. It was pointed out that the power of the Bishop of Rome should be understood in light of the Church's original practice and read in parallel with the traditions of the East and West, which would also foster ecumenical dialogue.

These statements allow us to see a broader intuition: that the renewal of papal primacy should go hand in hand with a deeper appreciation of the role of bishops in the life and mission of the Church. Therefore, the next natural step in the reflections of the Council Fathers—and thus of my own—became the postulates for strengthening the collegial responsibility of bishops and their greater participation in governing the universal Church.

3. Proposals to Increase the Bishops' Role in Church Government

It is impossible—due to their enormous scale—to recall all the voices that demanded an increase in the powers of individual bishops so that they would not have to constantly turn to Rome with requests for dispensations.⁷ At this point, we will only mention these *vota* that postulated an increase in the competences of various groups of bishops, i.e., areas where they act as a college. We will look at the role of the college in the governance of the Church.

The very issue of increasing the powers of the college of bishops in the administration of the ecclesial community and the degree of their responsibility for decisions was presented from various perspectives. The *vota* included historical analyses of the pope-bishop relationships, proposals for rethinking the nature of episcopal collegiality, and specific suggestions for bishops' greater involvement in church government. The Faculty of Theology of the Lateran University provided the most comprehensive historical perspective, presenting in Italian a characterization of the pope-bishop relationships from the 4th–8th centuries (*SVU Pars I.1*, 231–37).

Gabriel-Marie Garrone from France drew attention to the need for the Council to address the issue of unity, seen from both the perspective of the function of the Bishop of Rome and the college of bishops led by the pope (*CVE Pars I*, 428–29).

Regarding the understanding of the relationships between the pope and bishops, the pope and patriarchs, and the pope and episcopal conferences, the Faculty of Canon Law of the Pontifical Gregorian University sent an important proposal that

⁷ For example, it is worth referring to Archbishop Weber, who in this context emphasized that the bishop was the head (*caput*) of the diocese (*CVE Pars I*, 416). There are many more of this type of *vota* submitted from Europe (*CVE Pars I*, 88, 114–15, 215, 246–47, 250–251).

decisions made at the central level should complement what was lacking in local procedures. The need for greater flexibility in the management of church structures was also suggested. The faculty argued that the pope's power should be balanced by the powers of bishops in their dioceses. To achieve this goal, the faculty called for not only the reform of the territorial institutions but also the creation of new administrative units of a personal nature. The idea was to take into account the changing world and the challenges facing the Church (*SVU Pars I.1*, 37).

There were also a few voices seeking to emphasize the role of the council, i.e., the bishops gathered under the pope's leadership. Certain procedural changes were proposed to accommodate ecumenical initiatives. Hence, suggestions were made that the conciliar documents should be issued by the council itself and only approved by the pope (*CVE Pars I*, 412) or that the conciliar acts should be issued not only in Latin but also in Greek (*CVE Pars II*, 730–731).

The written submissions explicitly included three collegial bodies, on which we are now going to focus.

3.1. College of Patriarchs

The issue of patriarchs, their status in the Church, as well as their role, dignity, and power appeared repeatedly in the *vota* for Vatican II. Regarding the governance of the Church, the proposals included increasing patriarchs' powers and autonomy within the patriarchates, participating in the election of the pope, and recognizing their dignity as at least equal to that of cardinals, but often higher. Generally, the idea was to return to the practices of the first millennium, although sometimes with a broader scope. Many of the opinions contained extensive analyses, but there were also undeveloped ideas, suggesting treating patriarchs as counselors to the pope.

Bishop Joseph-Marie-Jean-Baptiste Chappe, France, advocated for granting patriarchs real, not merely honorary, power. He wanted the patriarchs to have the actual ability to issue precepts and even establish laws to be followed throughout the region under their jurisdiction, rather than only issuing exhortations or admonitions (*CVE Pars I*, 297–98).

John George Chedid, Vicar of the Maronite Patriarch of Antioch, noted that the Eastern patriarchs perceived themselves as alien to the government of the whole Church (*alienos a regimine totius Ecclesiae*). In this respect, there was some degradation (*aliquam degradationem*) of the roles they had played in the early Church. Therefore, he postulated that they should be restored to their former status, and that in the governance of the universal Church, they would be allowed to participate to a degree befitting a truly patriarchal dignity (*in regimine Ecclesiae universalis partem, quae dignitati vere patriarchali convenit, realiter habeant*). Chedid saw the appointment of all patriarchs of the Eastern Churches as cardinals as the best solution to the problem (*optima problematis solutio*), which would promote the increase in the

patriarchs' participation in church government.⁸ They would participate in the election of the pope and in the governance of the universal Church (*in Ecclesia universalis regimine*). The Maronite Bishop did not specify the scope of the patriarchs' powers in the Church (*CVE* Pars IV, 416–17).

The question of the patriarchs' participation in church government was also addressed by the Faculty of Canon Law of the University of Paris. In its *vota*, the faculty emphasized that the patriarchs' power consisted in exercising direct and ordinary rule over their Churches as well as over the faithful of their rite who were outside the patriarchate. Their role was to serve as advisors to the pope. Thus, the faculty focused on the patriarchs' real power in the Church (*SVU* Pars II, 514–15). In turn, the University of Beirut proposed granting the patriarchs broader power not only over their own rite, but over all the bishops and faithful living in the territory of the patriarchate (*SVU* Pars II, 42–44).

The Pontifical Oriental Institute supported the recognition of the dignity, power, and privileges of the Eastern patriarchs. The patriarch, as Head and Father (*Caput et Pater*) of the particular Church, should be duly honored, including by the Holy See. A return to ancient tradition regarding the place, role, and function of patriarchs was advocated (*SVU* Pars I.1, 149–50).

Bishop Henri-René-Adrien Brault, France, suggested establishing new patriarchates. He proposed that they should be established in areas converted to the Christian faith, which were not “the West” (*CVE* Pars I, 395).

The *vota* lacked any proposals to create a kind of *collegium* from among the patriarchs. Although the phrases “college of patriarchs” or “collegial power of patriarchs” did not appear, some of the requests seemed to suggest such an understanding of the patriarchs' role in the Church. However, the patriarchs' participation in the process of governing the Church was explicitly mentioned.

3.2. College of Cardinals

Regarding the issue of cardinals, there were voices calling for all nations and rites to have their own cardinals (*CVE* Pars I, 357; Pars II, 538).⁹ Some even proposed that there should be one cardinal for every five million Catholics (the number of cardinals in individual countries would then depend on the number of the faithful in that country) (*CVE* Pars VII, 351). The *vota* regarding equating patriarchs with cardinals

⁸ Requests to appoint Eastern patriarchs as cardinals or to give them equal rights with cardinals repeatedly appeared in the *vota* (*CVE* Pars II, 445; Pars IV, 130, 207, 212, 215; Pars VI, 106; Pars VIII, 67; Pars I.1, 149–50; Pars II, 44–45; Wąsek, Gilski, and Kałużny 2024, 97, 101, 136). The University of Paris proposed the creation of a new group of cardinals, namely cardinal-patriarchs (*SVU* Pars II, 514–15; Gilski, Wąsek, and Blaza 2025, 157). There were also voices proposing to leave a special group of patriarchs without appointing them cardinals, but granting them the power to, e.g., elect the pope (*CVE* Pars IV, 367–68; Gilski, and Wąsek, and Blaza 2025, 95, 101, 104–5, 109; Wąsek, Gilski, and Kałużny 2024, 97).

⁹ Suggestions to increase the number of cardinals (*CVE* Pars II, 550, 730–731).

or granting them the dignity of cardinals were votes for their greater participation in the life of the Church, for their advisory role toward the pope, and also for their active participation in church government.

On the question of church government, a significant voice was raised from the French community, its author being Joseph-Marie-Eugène Martin. He suggested that the cardinals should meet not only during conclaves, but regularly, with greater frequency. They would exchange and share observations and inform one another about the situation of the Churches in various parts of the world. The purpose of these meetings would be to assist the Universal Pastor in governing the Church more effectively (*efficacius Universalem Pastorem in Ecclesia regenda adiuvent*) (CVE Pars I, 386).¹⁰

Ivan Bučko, Apostolic Visitor for Ukrainian Catholics in Western Europe, noted the assistance provided to the pope by the cardinals in fulfilling his duties. He believed this assistance would be more effective if they represented all Catholic nations (CVE Pars II, 730–731).

3.3. Regional Bishops' Conferences

The institution of episcopal conferences existed before the Second Vatican Council. However, it was not universal. The *vota* for Vatican II focused primarily on establishing broader collegial structures (national, regional, continental) and granting them real power in the process of governing the Church.

Justifying the need to increase the competences of regional bishops' conferences, Bishop Brault, France, highlighted the regional differences existing within the Church. Without understanding the specifics of a region, it was impossible to find appropriate solutions to the emerging local problems. Therefore, a true mandate to govern (*accepto regendi mandato*) should be granted to the Episcopal College proper to each region (*Episcopale vero collegium unicuique regioni proprium*), united around the primate or patriarch (CVE Pars I, 394).

Bishop Paulus Rusch, Austria, called for increasing the autonomy of episcopal conferences (*si conferentiae episcopales sui iuris essent*). The need to send the agenda of the episcopal conference to the Secretariat of State in advance made it difficult to introduce new issues. Greater independence would foster greater accountability (CVE Pars I, 88).

The Belgian circles sent a request to make regional and national conferences of Ordinaries (*conferentiae Ordinariorum in variis regionibus et nationibus*) more effective. This would allow for more in-depth examinations of problems, better coordination between bishops, and the development of more uniform solutions for a given region (CVE Pars I, 150).

¹⁰ A similar voice in SVU Pars II, 579.

The importance of local bodies with real competences to govern the Church in individual countries was highlighted by Bishop Jacques-Eugène-Louis Ménéger, Secretary General for Catholic Action in France. Without them, unity could not be achieved, neither in action nor in defining the purpose and direction of action. Therefore, it was necessary for one body—whether personal (the primate) or collegial—to have limited, yet precisely defined, power to make laws (*potestate leges edendi, limitata quidem, sed presse definita*). Referring to the example of the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) and the Philippine Episcopal Conference, Bishop Ménéger asked whether these experiences should not be used to ensure the coordination of the Church's activities within larger regions (*CVE Pars I*, 476).

The French bishops also signaled the dangers associated not only with convening synods (provincial or plenary), but also with the increasingly frequent (regional or national) assemblies of bishops. While necessary, these gatherings should be subject to certain canonical rules. It happened that not only did the equality and independence of bishops decline, and that diocesan bishops relied too much on these assemblies without demonstrating their own initiatives, but also that the laity perceived these collegial bodies as having real jurisdiction, in the space stretched between the universal Church and the particular ones. Therefore, it was desirable—Jean-Édouard-Lucien Rupp postulated—that these assemblies should be presided over by apostolic envoys or delegates, and that they would not deal with moral, dogmatic, and liturgical matters, but rather with practical issues that required resolution (*CVE Pars I*, 482).

All in all, we see that the reflections contained in the *vota* demonstrated a clear desire for bishops to be more deeply involved in the governance of the universal Church. The proposed solutions—both historical and legal-ecclesiological—aimed at restoring the balance between papal primacy and bishops' real responsibility within their structures. Thus, there were many calls for the revitalization of the old collegial forms, especially the role of patriarchs and cardinals, who were assigned advisory and co-management functions in the Church, as well as greater autonomy in making decisions concerning their particular Churches.

In this context, a particularly significant conclusion was the growing awareness of the need to establish, formally recognize, and strengthen regional episcopal conferences as permanent bodies in which bishops—in their shared responsibility—could exercise their ministry of governance in a manner more relevant to the realities of the contemporary world. In the *vota*, it was emphasized that these structures should have not only advisory roles but also specific executive powers, especially in pastoral, administrative, and liturgical matters. It was believed that episcopal conferences could play a key role in the decentralization of the Church, facilitating decision-making closer to the local communities and reducing the need to delegate every issue to Rome.

Ultimately, these submissions allowed for one fundamental conclusion: if the Church was to remain faithful to her tradition and at the same time respond to the challenges of modernity, she must recapture the dynamics of collegiality, in which the pope acts in unity and communion with the bishops, and the bishops—within structures such as patriarchates, the college of cardinals and episcopal conferences—participate actually, and not only declaratively, in the governance of the universal Church.

Conclusions

Our analysis of the *vota* concerning the relationship between papal primacy and episcopal collegiality has revealed a fundamental truth: no one questioned the very existence or necessity of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. Criticism, though sometimes very sharp, concerned only the way in which it was to be exercised and the consequences of the excessive centralization of power in the pope and the Roman Curia. The written submissions ranging from Patriarch Maximos IV and the Greek Melkite bishops to the reflections of the German and English bishops unanimously indicated that the time had come to balance—reinterpret—the prerogatives of Peter with the real responsibility of the Twelve, i.e., the college of bishops.

The source material examined has shown that the issue of collegiality was not an *ad hoc* “invention” of the Second Vatican Council or the fruit of purely theoretical debates among theologians, but had been maturing within the episcopate itself long before the opening of the Council. Bishops from both the East and West, diocesan hierarchs, and university representatives unanimously pointed to the need to return to the practices of the first millennium, in which the patriarch, the synod of bishops, and regional structures participated effectively in church government. In this light, the subsequent teaching of *Lumen gentium* on the college of bishops, the legal establishment of episcopal conferences, and the establishment of the Synod of Bishops appear as a response to the specific requests and tensions revealed in the pre-conciliar *vota*.

The ecumenical dimension was significant in the material under analysis. Many authors of the *vota* noted that the way of exercising the primacy was one of the key “flashpoints” in relationships between the Catholics and Orthodox Christianity as well as the communities stemming from the Reformation, but at the same time, this area could lead to a kind of rapprochement. The *vota* of the Eastern bishops, indicating their readiness to accept the primacy of the pope understood as a service of *primus inter pares* and rooted in the practice of the early councils, demonstrated that reforming papal primacy and strengthening episcopal collegiality were not merely an internal organizational matter of the Catholic Church but had direct significance for ecumenical dialogue.

Finally, the examination of the *vota* has exposed a growing awareness of the need for permanent structures in which bishops could exercise their responsibilities in a collegial manner: from clear requests regarding the role of patriarchs, through reflection on the function of the college of cardinals, to numerous suggestions aimed at establishing and strengthening episcopal conferences at the regional and national level. From a historical perspective, it can be stated that the Second Vatican Council—and the subsequent post-conciliar legislation—did not introduce radically new solutions, but rather institutionalized and developed the intuitions already present in the awareness of the episcopate at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s. Importantly, voices demanding the creation of local, single-person centers of governance were very rare (the exception were suggestions for establishing new patriarchates¹¹). We have rather observed a tendency to establish advisory and administrative bodies.

The results presented in this paper seem not to signify the end of the discussion on the relationship between papal primacy and episcopal collegiality, but rather point to its important stage: they reveal the historical roots of our contemporary thinking about this issue and indicate that the future of the Church—including her ecumenical dimension—depends largely on whether it will be possible to permanently combine unity around the Successor of Peter with the actual, and not merely declarative, participation of bishops in governing the universal Church. The Council did not fully accomplish his task, and so it still appears as a perspective.

Translated by Maria Kantor

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¹¹ A study of this issue in the perspective of the conciliar debate can be found in Wąsek and Gilski 2023, 109–27.

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The Reform of the Roman Curia in the *Vota* for Vatican II

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Abstract: This paper addresses the problem of the scope and directions of the reform of the Roman Curia postulated in the *vota* submitted for the antepreparatory stage of the Second Vatican Council. It has been structured around three thematic areas identified from the source material: procedural and organizational changes, calls for the internationalization of the Curia, and postulates for the decentralization of power in the Church. The study employs a theological-historical and linguistic analysis of the *Acta et documenta*, complemented by a hermeneutical interpretation of the written submissions and proposals of reforms. The findings reveal a striking unanimity among bishops from the different continents: the reform of the Curia was viewed not as a secondary topic, but as a necessary condition for the renewal of the Church. The analysis concludes by identifying the triple dynamics of anticipated changes: increasing the efficiency of the Curia, expanding its catholicity in the sense of universality, and strengthening collegiality—all while full respecting papal primacy.

Keywords: Second Vatican Council, Roman Curia, Church reform, decentralization, *vota*

Without thorough reforms of the Roman Curia, it is impossible to accelerate any changes in the Church. The Curia governs the Church not only in Europe, but throughout the world. Therefore, it urgently needs to be adapted to the scale and complexity of contemporary problems (*adaptare ad amplitudinem et complexitatem quaestionum*) (CVE Pars I, 260–261). This opinion was submitted by the Church in France in response to John XXIII's call to formulate issues to be addressed by the Second Vatican Council. It was not an isolated voice. Similar postulates for the Curia's reform came from all over the world, from both bishops and universities. Thus, by the late 1950s, the need to reform the Curia appeared essential to the renewal of the Church. Many believed that without it, other reformatory efforts would be doomed to slowdown if not to failure.

The aim of this article is to collect and systematize texts concerning the reform of the Roman Curia, submitted from around the world as the *vota* for the Second Vatican Council. I intend to seek answers to the problems which bishops and faculties of theology saw in the functioning of this institution, as well as to indicate the directions for the changes they proposed.

The main source material is the *Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando*, Antepreparatoria 1, i.e. twelve volumes containing the *vota* for Vatican II. Although the Central Preparatory Commission created a synthesis of the

vota in its document *Analyticus conspectus*,¹ it is selective and at times biased; therefore, I have decided to analyze the main *Acta*.

The very issue of the Roman Curia has been the subject of analysis by the Magisterium of the Church as well as by numerous theologians, lawyers, and historians. Among the normative texts, we find constitutions successively reforming the Roman Curia.² Other works include various monographs and articles, whose authors have attempted to outline the issue in a broad perspective, as well as monographic studies on specific subjects.³ However, none of these publications have provided comprehensive references to the *vota* for the Second Vatican Council as well as their systematization and analysis. In this respect, the present paper is innovative. Besides providing an overview of the pre-conciliar period, it sheds new light on the subsequent conciliar debates and the solutions contained in the Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church *Christus Dominus*, as well as the popes' consequent reformatory efforts and theologians' proposals.

Although the entire text of this paper has taken the form of a theological-historical synthesis, developing this process required the use of theological and linguistic analysis as well as the use of a hermeneutical approach in order to draw conclusions from the historical material.

The preliminary analysis of the *vota* in the scope undertaken has allowed me to distinguish three thematic groups, which will constitute the next points of this paper. First, I am going to address procedural issues, then the internationalization of the curial officials, and finally, the postulates for the decentralization of the Church in the area of activity and competence of the central ecclesial offices.

1. Changing the Way the Roman Curia Is to Function

When analyzing the *vota* regarding the Roman Curia, the submissions most frequently concerned changes to the way matters entrusted to this institution had been handled and to the organization of its work. The authors addressed issues of bureaucracy, communication, structural reorganization, selecting the right people, shaping the right attitudes among those already serving in the Curia, and preparing candidates to be employed there. Since the changing world required adapting to new standards, the Roman Curia should reflect on improving its ways of functioning.

¹ *CVE* Ap. II.

² It is worth mentioning the most important ones: Pius X 1908; Paul VI 1967; John Paul II 1988; Francis 2022.

³ The most important publications in the chronological order: Sztafrowski 1981; 1990, 21–81; Del Re 1998; Szczot 2007; Catta, Palombi, and Salvatori 2022; Faggioli 2022; Ghirlanda 2022, 355–420; Kućko 2022, 169–88; Rozkrut 2022, 57–71; Ghirlanda 2024; Ekpo 2024; Prudlo 2025.

Bishop John Edward Petit (England) suggested reducing the scale of reporting to Rome. He meant that there would be no need to send so many reports to the different congregations (*CVE Pars I*, 25).

In turn, Archbishop Gordon Joseph Gray (Scotland) drew attention to the communication problems between Rome and distant regions. He suggested that the *vacatio legis* should be at least three months for Roman decrees. Less important matters—he emphasized—could be announced over the Vatican radio at a set date and time (e.g., at 6:00 p.m. on Friday) in Latin, and immediately afterward in the vernacular. It happened that decrees of the Holy See had reached the local Churches too late. Bishops often extracted the first information about them from profane journals (with great risk of error), and the decrees themselves were only sent after a useful time (*CVE Pars I*, 34).

According to Bishop Bruno Wechner (Austria), it was primarily the lack of permission to use national languages in communication with the Roman Curia that led to negative consequences. Therefore, he proposed that in the Vatican tribunals, the German language may also be admitted so that the burdensome translation of acts, especially in canonical processes, and the excessive loss of time associated with this, as well as the spiritual harm to the faithful (*damnum fidelium spirituale*), which was often related to it, may be avoided (*CVE Pars I*, 99).

Bishop Louis Morel, a Belgian missionary who served in China, criticized the insistence of the Roman Curia on providing the quickest possible answers to questions submitted to the local Churches, while the central institution took a relatively long time to process them. He cited as an example a letter drafted by the Curia on June 18, 1959, which—as indicated by the postmark on the envelope—was not sent until July 31. He concluded that since in Rome, it took 44 days to send a written letter, there should be no requirement that a reply, especially on a matter as serious as the Council, should be returned within 28 days. The author referred to a letter regarding the Council, which he had received on August 3, with a request to write a reply no later than September 1. In his opinion, this was just an example among a thousand and a thousand (*Exemplum hoc sit inter mille et mille*). Bishop Morel continued that requests for dispensations sent to the Roman Curia had taken months (*per menses et menses*) to be considered. Although this issue did not concern faith and morals, in his opinion, it could nevertheless be submitted to the Council Fathers so that appropriate discipline could be established or renewed in the Roman Curia (*CVE Pars I*, 135).

The Curia should be reorganized to meet new challenges and needs. According to the Apostolic Delegate to England, Gerald Patrick Aloysius O'Hara, a separate office should be established, linked to the Secretariat of State, to promote constant and cordial relations with the press worldwide, both Catholic and secular media. This would prevent press publications from being dependent on information from irresponsible individuals, lacking any authority, often referred to as “Vatican spokesmen” (*portavoce vaticani*) (*CVE Pars I*, 52). He also postulated that a new Congregation for

Bishops (*S. Congregatio pro Episcopis*), similar to the S. Congregation for Religious (*assimilari S. Congregationi pro Religiosis*), would be established, since many a time bishops did not know which congregation they could turn to for solutions to their problems (*CVE Pars I*, 50).

Structural modifications were also advocated by the Apostolic Delegate for Australia, New Zealand, and Oceania, Archbishop Romolo Carboni. He proposed to create a new Congregation, “On Catholic Action” (*De Actione Catholica*), which would direct the apostolic activities of the laity throughout the Church. Moreover, he suggested establishing a Statistics Office, which each year would faithfully distribute official statistics of the Holy See, scientifically prepared, with the collaboration of all nuncios, inter-nuncios, apostolic delegates, and local ordinaries, covering all aspects of the work and life of the Church worldwide (*CVE Pars VII*, 617).

Archbishop Joseph-Marie-Eugène Martin (France) raised the question of the need to adapt the number and structure of the Roman tribunals to the growing needs of the universal Church (*CVE Pars I*, 385–86). Yet, he did not develop further the issue of adapting the Roman Curia to modern standards.

The Salesian Pontifical University suggested changes in the Roman Curia and the establishment of new dicasteries: Sacred Congregation for Christian Doctrine (*S. Congregatio doctrinae Christianae*), Sacred Congregation for Secular Clergy (*S. Congregatio cleri saecularis*), Sacred Congregation for the Christian People (*S. Congregatio populi christiani*), Sacred Congregation for Studies (*S. Congregatio Studiorum*), and Office for the Coordination of Competencies and Activities of Dicasteries and Apostolate (*Officium coordinationis competentiarum et activitatum dicasteriorum et apostolatus*) (*SVU Pars I.2*, 143).⁴

Bishop Josef Schoiswohl (Austria) saw the need to take action to change the attitudes of all those who served in the Church so that their service would be more evangelical: “to overcome vain glory, the desire for power over others, personal intolerance, the false prudence of the world, cunning, and flattery, so that from the Roman Curia to the last parish house all may serve all in charity” (*ut a Romana Curia usque ad ultimam domum paroecialem omnes omnibus in caritate serviant*). He suggested that although this seemed to be beyond human strength, the Lord was fully aware of these difficulties, so He placed the commandment of love above all other commandments (*CVE Pars I*, 66).

A postulate to changes in the way of selecting those who work in the Roman Curia (*mutationes in modo eligendi eos qui in Curia laborant*) was voiced by the French circles. However, Bishop Pierre-Marie-Joseph Puech, who formulated this request, did not propose any specific procedure for selecting suitable candidates (*CVE Pars I*, 261).

⁴ The Salesian University presented a number of detailed proposals for dividing the dicasteries along with the justification for such actions (*SVU Pars I.2*, 141–42).

Bishop John William Heffernan, an Irish-born priest who served in Kenya, emphasized that prelates in the Roman Curia should be experienced and learned in missionary matters. He believed it would be particularly desirable that they had some personal experience of missionary life (*ut quamdam experientiam personalem vitae missionariae habeant*) so that they might better understand the difficulties and more easily propose solutions (CVE Pars II, 105).

There were also other critical voices concerning this area, emphasizing that officials working in the Roman Curia were derealized. Their excessive “removal” from people and a lack of relationships with those they express opinions about—as Pierre-Marie Théas pointed out—led them deeply injure many souls (*profunde laedunt plurimas animas*). The French bishop emphasized the value of interpersonal relationships (CVE Pars I, 421).

In its decisions, the Roman Curia should take into account the particular conditions of each nation (*peculiares cuiusque nationis condiciones respiciat*). It was Cardinal Franz König (Austria) who drew attention to that problem. He did not elaborate on it, merely appealing for the possibility of using the German language in the acts transmitted to Rome (CVE Pars I, 78).

Among the frequently recurring requests was the need to improve coordination and cooperation (*coordinatio ac cooperatio*) between the different congregations in those matters which pertained to the various mission regions. For example, Archbishop Ferdinand Périer of Calcutta (India) proposed this issue as a topic for reflection for the council. He emphasized the need to select in the Congregations consultants and others who best understood the way of thinking, feeling, and acting of peoples living in different regions so that the Congregations would not issue decrees that would contradict the praiseworthy customs of these nations, but rather may foster and help a certain adaptation of rites, ceremonies, and religious practice as far as possible, in accordance with the traditions and customs of these peoples (CVE Pars IV, 116–17).

Archbishop Louis-Marie-Fernand de Bazelaire de Ruppierre suggested that, while maintaining the wisest traditions of the Roman Curia, methods adapted to contemporary customs and techniques should be used in considering various matters (*adhibeantur methodi hodiernis moribus et technicis adaptatae*), guided by prudence (CVE Pars I, 269). However, he did not develop his proposal.

A request from Australia aimed at improving the functioning of the Roman Curia, which the Apostolic Delegate Carboni understood that the offices might hasten the processing of cases and providing answers, and this was all the more so—as he noted—when the fastest means of transmission were available on both sides (CVE Pars VII, 617).

The University of Toulouse addressed the issue of governing the congregations, requesting that given the pace of world change (*mundi mutationum celeritas crescit*), the function of governing the dicasteries should not be reserved only for cardinals.

The dicasteries should be renewed taking into account the age of their members. Many cardinals were old and *de facto* irremovable, a situation that should be changed. The University submitted a number of detailed proposals regarding the function of the particular dicasteries. Here are some of them:

- a) similar cases should not be dealt with by the different dicasteries (clearly defined scope of their competences);
- b) priority in the dicasteries should be introduced (apostolic dicasteries should be given priority over political or administrative ones; and in each dicastery, priority should be given to the propagation of the faith and the care of souls);
- c) the dicasteries should be internally divided into departments responsible for the different regions of the world (analogously to the division in religious orders), with those heading them coming from the countries whose cases they were to deal with, and after the lapse of 10 or 15 years, they could be appointed as bishops in those countries;
- d) the Congregation of the Holy Office should include people who were experts in each field of study so that they could deal with new questions that arise in the world (for it is impossible to be vigilant about doctrine unless one is aware of the new circumstances in which doubtful things appear; it would be more useful to help and show the way to those who deal with theology in the Church than to merely suppress errors) (*SVU Pars II*, 578–79).

The Faculty of Theology of the Lateran University drew attention to the frequent criticism of the organization of the Roman Curia. It was noted that the complaints were heard not only outside Rome but also among the curial officials themselves, who lamented the deficient organization of their institution. The complaints primarily concerned the actual organization of the Curia, focused on granting privileges and graces. Instead, there was a need for a central organization (*organisatio centralis*) that would be prepared to defend ideas, systems, and methods, exerting a positive influence on the peripheral areas. Therefore, the Lateran University opted for centralism, only postulating that the currently existing pathologies in the functioning of the Roman Curia should be responded to by its reorganization. Action is necessary, as stated, “to overturn pernicious distrust” (*ad evertendam perniciosam diffidentiam*) toward this institution. It was emphasized that although the reorganization of the Roman Curia fell within the scope of the competence of the Holy See, the Council Fathers could make a positive contribution to determining its main directions (*SVU Pars I.1*, 224–25).

To sum up, the critical voices from the aforementioned circles formed a coherent picture of the Roman Curia as an institution increasingly out of touch with the reality it was fundamentally intended to serve. Its actual procedures made it resemble a bureaucratic “labyrinth,” where documents took weeks to process, and bishops from distant countries learned about decisions more quickly from journals than

from official communiqués. The slowness of action, the obscurity of competences, and communication difficulties created an image of the Curia that required radical, rather than cosmetic, changes.

The new proposals raised a systemic question: Should the Curia continue to function as a central organ concentrating power or rather as a coordination center supporting the particular Churches in their diversity? The proposed reforms—from better coordination, through the creation of new congregations, to the admission of the vernacular languages—were intended to improve the Curia’s pro-evangelization function.

Many voices called for a more evangelical style of ministry: humility, service, realism, and closeness to the faithful. Others emphasized the need for professionalization—selecting competent candidates, especially those with missionary experience, and refreshing the structures, too often ruled by irremovable and elderly dignitaries. To achieve many of these goals, the internationalization of the office in question was required, and I will look at this in more detail in the next section of the present paper.

2. Internationalization of the Roman Curia

All nations, as stressed by Bishop Georges-Marie-Joseph-Hubert-Ghislain de Jonghe d’Ardoye (a Belgian prelate who worked in Egypt for a long time), should be increasingly called upon to cooperate and help in the governance of the universal Church, especially at the level of the Curia of the Supreme Pontiff, so that even non-Catholics could perceive the universality of the Church. The hierarch referred to his personal experiences and conversations, especially in times of war. This kind of internationalization, he noted, would help attract our separated brethren to the true Church of Christ (*CVE Pars I*, 152).

Another Belgian Bishop, Xavier Geeraerts (Vicar Apostolic in the Democratic Republic of Congo), postulated that the governance of the Church should show its true catholicity and internationality so that its international character could be clearly evident (*character internationalis plane elucet*) (*CVE Pars I*, 149).

Bishop Marcel Daubechies (Zambia) postulated that the assignment of roles and offices for the general administration of the Church (*assignatio munerum et officiorum pro administratione generali Ecclesiae*) were to be even more international. This, he believed, would be of great benefit to the demonstration of the universality and catholicity of the Church, especially to non-Catholics (*CVE Pars V*, 411).

The ecumenical significance of internationalizing the Roman Curia was also highlighted by the aforementioned Archbishop de Ruppierre. Reforming, or rather improving, the Curia would contribute—in this French archbishop’s view—both to the “ecumenical” cause and to the common good of the Church. He had in mind the

supranational and universal character of the reform so that clerics from the dioceses of the whole world (including the regions dependent on the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith) would be selected and called to serve in the Congregations, Tribunals, and Roman offices (*CVE* Pars I, 269).

Bishop Louis-Marie-Joseph Durrieu (Burkina Faso) continued in the same spirit. He emphasized the facilitation of communication so that bishops coming to Rome would meet people from their nations, speaking their languages, in the congregations (*CVE* Pars V, 62–64).⁵

The postulates for internationalizing the Curia were not limited solely to matters related to nations, continents, and languages. The Eastern Churches submitted suggestions that various rites should also have representatives in the Roman Curia. For instance, Isidore Borecky, Greek Catholic bishop of Toronto, called for the Roman congregations to be staffed with officials who had a good understanding of the situation of the individual Churches in different nations. He meant not only lower-level officials, but also bishops and cardinals (*CVE* Pars VI, 118–19). A similar suggestion was made by Bishop José Romão Martenetz (Brazil), who proposed increasing the number of officials belonging to the Eastern rites and facilitating access to these offices for the faithful of the Eastern rite (*CVE* Pars VII, 334).

As we can see, the calls for internationalization were justified primarily by the possibility of facilitating contacts within the Church, making her more credible outside (ecumenical perspective) and improving her management. The point was to bear witness to the universality of the Church and to help the pope. Archbishop Benjamín De Arriba y Castro of Tarragona went even further in his postulates, emphasizing the need for the Church not only to be ecumenical in her General Councils, and ecumenical or catholic (*oecumenica seu catholica*) in her constitution, but also to appear to be so, to an even greater extent than it was shown, in her Curia (*CVE* Pars II, 345). The Spanish cardinal understood the concept of ecumenism not only in the sense of multiculturalism, multinationalism, and diversity, but also in the sense of interconfessionality.

Bishop Sergio Pignedoli (Italy) spoke along the same line, urging that non-Catholics attending the Council would experience great hospitality—they feel welcome not only in the house of the Common Father, but also in the Curia (*CVE* Pars III, 851).

In a word, the postulates for the internationalization of the Roman Curia sounded like the cry of the Church being dispersed throughout the world, yearning to recognize herself in the mirror of the central institution—and in that reflection, to see her own face. Bishops from Africa, Asia, America, and Europe spoke with one voice: if the Church was to be universal in the *theological sense*, her

⁵ The same tone can be seen in the response given by Archbishop Josip Antun Ujčić of Belgrade (*CVE* Pars II, 537).

administrative center must cease to look, think, and act as an institution of one nation, one language, and one experience. It seems that such a vision did not merely concern the Church's organization but was imbued with a symbolic meaning: the Church would be more credible outside if her internal structures reflected respect for unity in diversity.

Particular attention should be drawn to the ecumenical dimension of the reforms proposed in the *vota*. Considering the nature of the pre-conciliar relationships between Catholics and other Christian groups, the suggestion that the Curia served as a forum for interfaith meetings seemed revolutionary. The same is true of the proposals that representatives of the different Catholic rites should be allowed to serve in this institution. For the authors of such requests, this was not merely a matter of justice and administrative efficiency, but an attempt to overcome a certain historical tension within the Catholic Church. The background for those voices was the desire for greater responsiveness from Rome to the local Churches, linked to the call for decentralization, which will be discussed in the next point.

3. Decentralization of the Church

The decentralization of church structures was a major topic in the *vota* submitted to the Council. Many bishops noted the growing centralization associated with the increasing powers of the Roman Curia. They also signaled voices from outside the Church, perceiving this trend as a hindrance to the unity of the Church and an obstacle to ecumenical dialogue and conversions to Catholicism. For example, in the *vota* from Denmark and Finland there was much emphasis on the Lutherans' admiration for the Catholic Church, while simultaneously expressing concern about the excessive centralization of the Church's structures (*CVE* Pars I, 159, 163).

Reducing the "centralization" of the Church—this was a voice coming from France—was necessary in relation to the Eastern Churches, especially in the perspective of building unity. The Latin Church should set an example in this area (*Ecclesia latina det exemplum*) (*CVE* Pars I, 224).

The Greek-Melkite Catholic Patriarch Maximos IV Saigh, along with nineteen Eastern bishops, voiced a very strong and critical argument against the centralization of the Church. The main cause of this evil, they noted, was the tendency of most Latin theologians and canonists to concentrate all the power entrusted by Christ to His Church in the single person of the pope, and consequently to grant disproportionately centralized and practically sovereign powers to the Roman Curia, which acts in his name. The centralization of power in the person of the pope, and in practice in the Roman Curia, caused the disappearance of all power in the Church (*CVE* Pars IV, 456). Therefore, Patriarch Maximos IV called for strengthening the

powers of the Eastern bishops, i.e. their right to elect both their patriarch and other bishops. In his opinion, the Roman Curia should not stand in the way of such actions (*CVE* Pars IV, 462).

The Latin Rite bishops also voiced strong criticism of the growing, yet senseless, excessive centralization (*sine sensu supercentralizata est*) of executive power in the Church. Bishop Michael Rodrigues (India) expressed this sentiment, closely linking the issues of power with responsibility. He advocated for a reversal of centralization. Bishops should be left with a greater responsibility in governing their dioceses. Decentralization, Rodrigues continued, was desired by the bishops of the most distant regions, which seemed to demonstrate that this was not a question of the “hunger for power” (*non agi de fame potestatis*) on the part of a few, but of an undue limitation of the responsibility (*de indebita limitatione responsabilitatis*) of those who, as successors of the Apostles, enjoyed the fullness of the priesthood. In the world, and even in religious orders, a sure sign of the greater good was to give lower officials a share in the ultimate responsibility, without reserving to themselves the decisions for which the officials were competent. Therefore, in Rodrigues’s opinion, only priests of proven faith and sincere devotion to the Holy See should be appointed to the office of bishop, but then they should be given that authority and power which demand and even call forth the best that is hidden in them. Moreover, the scope of competences of the apostolic delegates in mission lands should be clearly defined so that they did not govern their dioceses above the heads of the bishops (*non vero regere dioeceses supra capita Antistitum*). With very few exceptions, as the delegates did not know the language of their territory, they could not read local newspapers and periodicals, which nevertheless reflected the thinking and feelings of the people living there. Therefore, in their assessments and judgments, they depended on a few whose authority and integrity were often left much to be desired (*CVE* Pars IV, 97–98).

Calling for a certain decentralization of government in the Church, Bishop Joseph-Pierre-Albert Wittebols (Congo) suggested that the privileges and powers enjoyed by the Eastern Churches be granted to other Churches as well. He believed in

a universal and united Church in the future constituted of diverse churches more adapted to the worship of nations; namely: the Latin-Western Church; the Greco-Oriental Church; the Slavic Church; the Asian Church; the African Church. Thus, we will be able to achieve unity in diversity and further promote the adaptation of liturgical, disciplinary and pastoral matters to the proper worship of each nation. (*CVE* Pars V, 196–97)

The aforementioned apostolic delegate to England, O’Hara, proposed that, as part of decentralization, tribunals like the Roman Rota should be established on every continent, which would oversee the speedy resolution of all kinds of disputes. Such tribunals would have the same authority as the Roman Rota and would also be constituted exactly like it, namely with their own judges and other officials fully qualified

for their duties, and appointed by the pope. Therefore, thanks to such tribunals, cases would be resolved more quickly, to the great benefit of souls (*CVE* Pars I, 51).

The decentralization of the Church would also benefit from increasing the competences of bishops, who would no longer have to turn to Rome in many matters, but instead they themselves could decide them. Such voices were most common in the *vota* (*CVE* Pars I, 72, 215, 321, 365–66, 446; Pars III, 519). It is worth citing one of the most spectacular examples. Bishop Martin suggested that cases should be resolved where they arose, without the need to appeal to Rome. He primarily referred to matters relating to marriage. Excessive procedural concentration in one place created the risk of delays and responses that were not appropriate for each case being considered (*CVE* Pars I, 385–86).⁶

In summary, it should be noted that the written submissions concerning the need for decentralization expressed collective opposition to a system that had ossified over the centuries and led to such a concentration of power in Rome that it no longer responded to the actual needs of the local communities. The authors of the *vota* were concerned about the functioning of pyramid-like structures that showed only theoretical respect for episcopal collegiality. This was most strongly expressed in the requests submitted by the Eastern Catholic bishops, led by Patriarch Maximos IV. Their diagnoses revealed the systemic problem of identifying the pope and his administrative apparatus with full power in the Church, leading to the erosion of the hierarchs' powers in their local Churches and to the danger of unification of the diverse traditions.

Bishops from India, Congo, France, Scandinavia, and England observed that excessive centralization harmed the Church's mission and aroused distrust among members of other faiths. Paradoxically, in this way centralization posed a threat to unity.

Certain specific issues were equally important. Curial officials, unfamiliar with the local realities and tasked with resolving problems of local communities, made decisions based on superficial information, which in some cases was not helpful, but even could be harmful. In this context, a solution could be the establishment of continental tribunals or the delegation of greater powers to bishops.

It should be emphasized that the strength of these voices resulted not only from their number, but also from their geographic and cultural diversity. They did not express the protest of the peripheral areas against the center—they were calls of the entire Church for a more synodal, more evangelical, and more responsible structure of the Roman Curia.

⁶ A similar sentiment was expressed by Bishop Laurent Morin (Canada), who emphasized that those wishing to enter into mixed marriages often did so in the presence of non-Catholic ministers due to the excessive waiting time for dispensations. Greater power for the ordinaries would resolve these issues (*CVE* Pars VI, 71–72).

Conclusions

The research efforts undertaken have aimed to uncover and analyze the contributions submitted during the preparatory period of the Second Vatican Council; they revealed problems with the functioning of the Roman Curia and suggested directions for their resolution. Based on this, several fundamental conclusions can be drawn.

First, the reform of the Roman Curia was perceived not as one of many topics for consideration, but as a condition for the possibility of a broader renewal of the Church. In the eyes of many bishops, the Curia reached a critical juncture, and its real impact on the lives of the faithful was increasingly inadequate to the challenges it faced. At the same time, many diagnosed that this was not merely a matter of procedural changes, but a shift toward a reaffirmation of the ecclesiology of *communio*.

Second, the submitted *vota* can allow us to see a triple intuition: the Roman Curia should become more efficient, more catholic in the sense of universality, and more collegial. The reforms proposed would serve to reshape procedures so that the administrative center of the Church would no longer be a bureaucratic bottleneck, but a tool for efficient decision-making in a spirit of service to the peripheral areas. This would be achieved through both openness to the diverse languages in the exchange of information and the international experience of officials working in Rome.

Third, the voices under analysis show no connection between criticizing the Roman Curia and undermining papal primacy. Neither the role of the pope nor the position of Rome was questioned, but only postulates for a better organization of the administrative apparatus were expressed.

It seems that although over sixty years have passed since the process described, many of the voices cited have not lost their relevance. Questions about the relationship between the center and the periphery, the place of the particular Churches in the decision-making process, the mode of governance, and the credibility of institutions in the eyes of other Christians and the contemporary world are still being asked and should be posed in the future.

In this respect, the study of the *vota* has not only been a reconstruction of the history of theology, but can become a starting point for contemporary reflections on changes in the Roman Curia so that this institution would serve the pope and at the same time constitute the center of ecclesial communion, being not only a governing body.

Translated by Maria Kantor

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Latin and Vernacular: *Vota* of Polish Bishops to the Second Vatican Council

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Abstract: This article seeks to answer the question of what language-related requests Polish bishops made to the Vatican in their *vota* to the Second Vatican Council. In inductive research, documents submitted by ordinaries and auxiliary bishops, collected in the “Polonia” and “Gedanum” sections, will be subjected to a content analysis. This will allow us to demonstrate the extent to which language issue were important to the local Church and, after sorting out emerging themes, detail the expected changes. The arguments justifying these requests will then be discussed, and, in the final section, a case study will present the most comprehensive proposal by Lucjan Bernacki, auxiliary bishop of Gniezno. The thesis, which stems from the research, assumes that the change in the language of liturgy permitted by the Second Vatican Council was not a exerted pressure on the Church in Poland but was highly anticipated by both the faithful and the bishops.

Keywords: Second Vatican Council, *vota* of Polish bishops, language of liturgy, Latin, vernacular

The changes that took place in Rome and around the world in the 20th century were among the main reasons John XXIII convened both a local synod and an ecumenical council.¹ The pope admitted this when, on January 25, 1959, after the liturgy of the feast of the conversion of Paul the Apostle, he publicly shared with the cardinals for the first time his plans for the future (Ioannes XXIII 1959c, 65–69; 1960c, 3–6). He echoed this idea in an apostolic letter published a year later. In it, he stated that the purpose of gathering the world’s bishops in the Vatican should be to better adapt Church discipline to the needs and conditions of the present time (Ioannes XXIII 1960b, 434). He entrusted the coordination of activities preceding the event, which he called “as if a new Pentecost” (*nova quaedam Pentecoste*) (Ioannes XXIII 1959b, 316; 1960d, 21; 1959a, 420), to the Antepreparatory Commission (*Commissio Antepreparatoria*), placing Cardinal Domenico Tardini, Secretary of State of the Holy See, at its head (Ioannes XXIII 1960a, 22–23). The team’s first priority was to establish contacts with bishops in various nations (Ioannes XXIII 1960a, 23). A letter was sent to them scattered around the world just a month after the team was established, on June 18, 1959, asking on behalf of the pope for opinions, advice,

¹ The circumstances of the convening of the Second Vatican Council and the *antepreparatoria* phase are presented in Alberigo 1993, 21–24; 1999, 27–61; Fouilloux 1997, 114–27; Schelkens 2010, 9–13; Cortesi and Giovannoni 2022, 57–75.

and postulates that were to become the starting point for the development of the matter that the future council was to deal with (Tardini 1960, x). Cardinal Tardini, proposing a reflection on various spheres of life for the community of believers, listed among them doctrine, the discipline of the clergy and laity, ecclesial activity, and the initiatives that Christians should undertake in the present era. Finally, he used a broad quantifier for possible questions, noting that they could concern anything that the recipient of the letter deems requiring clarification and consideration (Tardini 1960, x). The final recommendations asked that comments be sent by September 1 and that the text be prepared in Latin (Tardini 1960, xi). According to Alberto Melloni, 1,998 letters were received in response from 2,593 bishops, religious superiors, and university centers (Melloni 2012, 426).² Dirk Claes, in turn, reported that a total of 2,812 letters were sent and that by June 5, 1960, when the Antepreparatory Commission ceased its activities, 2,150 replies had been received, which constitutes 77 percent of the addressees (Claes 2003, 652).

The focus of this study is precisely the *vota*, or responses submitted by Polish bishops, in which they raise the issue of language.³ Analyzing the problems submitted to the Vatican will help us understand the social climate in which decisions on the place of Latin in the liturgy and other spheres of Church life were made. It will also provide a “voice from the past” in today’s discussion about the role of the Second Vatican Council, which is blamed for the fact that—as Paweł Milcarek puts it—“the ancient language of the Church disappeared from our churches.” (Milcarek 2009, 10)

1. *Vota* Letters Sent from Poland

The responses to the Vatican invitation constitute the most important part of the collection of *Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando* [Acts and Preparatory Documents for the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council], in the “pre-preparatory” (*antepreparatoria*) part. The correspondence is grouped according to continental origin. The second part of the second volume contains the requests

² The methodology for analyzing the submitted *vota* letters was presented in Melloni 1990, 556–76; 2012, 426–27.

³ For more about the *vota* of Polish bishops, see Kłoczowski 1989, 165–77. For studies on the proposals of bishops from other regions of the world, see Aiello 1984, 95–103; Dayras 1989, 139–53; Hilaire 1989, 101–17; Rocca della Morozzo 1989, 119–37; Jacobs 1991, 323–40; Wittstadt 1992, 24–37; Komonchak 1994, 313–71; Fahey 1997, 61–72; Lamberigts and Pulikkan 1997, 61–79; Routhier 1997, 25–60; Claes 2003, 651–72; Schelkens 2010, 13–24.

of 43 Polish bishops (“Polonia” 1960, 643–776).⁴ This group included 13 ordinaries and 30 bishops of other dignity. Auxiliary bishops predominated among the latter, but there are also actual, though not state-approved, diocesan administrators. The “Polonia” section also included Eugeniusz Baziak, a Latin-rite bishop in Lviv, even though the city was no longer Polish territory after World War II (“Polonia” 1960, 653–57). Taking into account the current Church reality, to the analyses in this study following three bishops of Gdańsk were added, i.e., ordinary Karol M. Splet and auxiliary bishops Edmund Nowicki and Lech Kaczmarek, whose opinions, due to the ambiguous status of the city after the war, were placed in a separate place in the collection (“Gedanum” 1960, 545–57).

Following Cardinal Tardini’s guidance, all bishops presented various proposals that, in their opinion, should be addressed by the Council. Some of these concerned the doctrine of the faith and—notably—were raised by a larger number of people. This group included, e.g., a request to dogmatize the belief that the Blessed Virgin Mary is the mediatrix of all graces. A significant number of bishops also advocated discussing the mystery of the Church as the mystical Body of Christ. They also requested a response to contemporary intellectual and philosophical errors, especially materialism, naturalism, and communism. They devoted considerable attention to clerical discipline. They unanimously supported the maintenance of celibacy, and even its extension to Eastern-rite clergy. They pointed to the need to simplify monastic attire and regulate the responsibilities of communities of consecrated persons in diocesan pastoral care. Particular attention was devoted throughout the collection to the laity. The conviction that they should be given a new place and more responsibilities in the ministry of the Church was repeatedly expressed.

A significant number of proposals sent to the Vatican concerned Latin. Among the ordinaries, only three ignored the issue of language: Kazimierz Józef Kowalski of Chełmno (“Polonia” 1960, 643–44), Michał Klepacz of Łódź (650–651), and Ignacy Świrski of Siedlce (672–73). Interestingly, the auxiliary bishops of Łódź and Siedlce, Marian Jankowski (702–3), Jan Fondaliński (705–6), and Kazimierz Tomczak (758–60), also did not express any expectations regarding the application and role of Latin. Meanwhile, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński devoted considerable attention to this issue. As the Warsaw Ordinary, he presented the results of a special commission’s work, which, as he himself informs, was established to develop the *desiderata* for the

⁴ The Polish bishops included the following: Casimirus I. Kowalski, Zdzislaw Golinski, Ceslaus Kaczmarek, Michael Klepacz, Ceslaus Falkowski, Eugenius Baziak, Taddaeus Zakrzewski, Antonius Baraniak, Franciscus Barda, Ioannes K. Lorek, Ignatius Swirski, Stephanus Card. Wyszyński, Antonius Pawlowski, Petrus Dudziec, Stanislaus Czajka, Venceslaus Wicisk, Georgius Modzelewski, Franciscus Jop, Marianus Jankowski, Alexander Mościcki, Ioannes Fondalinski, Venceslaus Majewski, Vladimirus B. Jasiński, Adalbertus Tomaka, Ioannes Czerniak, Henricus Strakowski, Michael Blecharczyk, Ioannes Jaroszewicz, Ioannes Bucko, Franciscus Jedwabski, Lucianus Bernacki, Carolus Vojtyla, Franciscus Korszynski, Petrus Golembowski, Sigismundus Choromanski, Thomas Wilczyński, Casimirus Tomczak, Iosephus Drzazga, Ladislaus Suszynski, Stanislaus Jakiel, Carolus Pękala, Boleslaus Kominek, and Andreas Wronka.

Council (“Polonia” 1960, 673). This document was accompanied by a more personal letter in which he, as Metropolitan of Gniezno, presented his own observations (679–86). Ultimately, 35 of the 43 documents included in the “Polonia” section mentioned Latin, representing over 81 percent of the submissions. Including the bishops of Gdańsk, this figure reaches over 82.5 percent. Taking this into account, it must be said that language was not a niche issue for the bishops but an important one they wanted to address during the Council.

Among the many issues raised by the bishops in their requests to the Vatican, only one sought to expand the use of Latin. In the opening section of the document sent from Warsaw, dated September 15, 1959, and titled “Generalia,” the first point included a request that, just as the acts of the Holy See are promulgated in Latin, the regulations of individual congregations should be disseminated in a similar manner. The document concluded with a statement by Cardinal Wyszyński that such a solution could greatly facilitate a better knowledge of the Latin language, which “should be of concern to the Church” (*quod Ecclesiae cordi esse debeat*) (“Polonia” 1960, 673).

2. Catalog of Requests Regarding the Language of Liturgy

In the document sent from Warsaw, in the section on the liturgy, there are encouragements to introduce the native language into the Mass, especially at the beginning of the rites. It is clearly stated, however, that the celebration after the Offertory, and especially the Canon of the Mass, should be recited in Latin (“Polonia” 1960, 677). Similar requests were also made by many other bishops. For example, auxiliary bishop of Lublin, Henryk Strakowski (721), requested that the Mass of the Catechumens be celebrated in the native language. Franciszek Korszyński of Wrocław (748) expressed the same conviction, pointing out that Polish could appear in the variable parts of the Mass liturgy. Tomasz Wilczyński (755–56) was in favor of people praying aloud (*clara voce*) and of allowing the native language in celebrations, except for sacramental formulas. Similar opinions were expressed by Stanisław Jakiel of Przemyśl (766), Zdzisław Goliński of Częstochowa (645), Franciszek Barda of Przemyśl (667), Waclaw Majewski of Warsaw (706), and Jan Czerniak of Gniezno (718). Piotr Dudziec (690) and Stanisław Czajka (693) postulated that greater freedom should be granted in admitting local songs to the liturgy. The latter, the auxiliary bishop of Częstochowa, however, believed that the use of Latin should be retained when celebrating Holy Mass (693).

Bishops advocated for the wider use of vernacular languages in other liturgical celebrations as well. Among the ordinaries, Antoni Pawłowski of Wrocław (“Polonia” 1960, 688) put this quite succinctly, stating that a wider use (*amolior usus*) of the vernacular and local chants should be introduced in public celebrations, in the

administration of the sacraments, and—as already noted—in the celebration of Holy Mass. Cardinal Wyszyński expressed the same conviction, seeing a place for the vernacular in the administration of all sacraments in those parts recited by the faithful, as well as in selected texts of the liturgy of the consecration of a church and in the liturgy of the renewal of baptismal promises during the Easter Vigil. Wyszyński also expressed the view that—except for the episcopal liturgy—the texts of all sacramentals should be recited by the faithful only (*tantummodo*) in the vernacular (“Polonia” 1960, 678, 682). This last theme was also taken up by Bishop Jan K. Lorek of Sandomierz, who called for simplifying the liturgy for the consecration of a church and its altar. He believed that the invocations of the Litany of the Saints contained in these rites should be spoken in the native language. Like the bishops mentioned earlier, he saw its place in the celebration of sacraments and sacramentals. Furthermore, Lorek pointed out that the younger generation of clergy expected the breviary to be recited in their own language (“Polonia” 1960, 670–671). Interestingly, he did not request changes to the liturgy other than those related to language. The same themes can be found in documents prepared by Archbishop Antoni Baraniak of Poznań (665–66), Goliński of Częstochowa (645), Czesław Kaczmarek of Kielce (648–49), Czesław Falkowski of Łomża (652), Baziak of Lviv (657), and Tadeusz Paweł Zakrzewski of Płock (659).

Auxiliary bishops also made very similar requests. Ultimately, most of their demands revolved primarily around the liturgy. A separate request came from Majewski of Warsaw (“Polonia” 1960, 707), who called for theology to be studied in the vernacular in seminaries. It is worth adding that, in the case of this hierarch, all six of his *vota* addresses to the Council concerned limiting the role of Latin (706–7). Franciszek Jop of Opole, in turn, encouraged the translation of Vatican documents, especially papal encyclicals, into the native languages as soon as possible and their dissemination in that version. He also expected that the Latin versions of the documents would use simple, understandable language (“Polonia” 1960, 701). While the last two requests are quite unique in that they do not concern the liturgy, which is the focus of all other bishops, the texts are quite similar in their form. All *vota* were formulated affirmatively. None suggested limiting the use of Latin but proposed to expand the use of the vernacular, employing phrases like “should be introduced more broadly” (*introducenda in ampliori ambitu*)—Bolesław Kominek (“Polonia” 1960, 774), “should be permitted more broadly” (*latius admittenda*)—Andrzej Wronka (776), and “wider use of the vernacular” (*amplior usus linguae vernaculae*)—Pawłowski (688). The way the bishops formulated their *vota* clearly indicates that they did not intend to completely abandon the use of Latin in the liturgy. This was explicitly stated in his letter by Bishop Czajka (“Polonia” 1960, 693), who—when requesting the introduction of certain parts of liturgical texts into Polish—clearly stated that Latin should be preserved in the Eucharistic celebration. The auxiliary bishop of Kraków, later pope and saint, Karol Wojtyła, also addressed this issue. He postulated that the vernacular

be permitted in the celebration of sacraments and sacramentals. However, Wojtyła emphasized that this should be done “always prudently” (*semper prudens*) (“Polonia” 1960, 747). Finally—and most importantly—he rejected “total nationalization” of the liturgy (*sine totali nationalisatione rituum*) (747). This last statement seems significant because it indicates that introducing the national language should not be done *ad extremum*. It is worth emphasizing because, as Gabriel Richi Alberti states, the bishop of Kraków was guided by pastoral considerations in all his postulates (Alberti 2013, 139). He therefore allowed changes, but not to such an extent that they would completely devalue the role of Latin in the liturgy.

3. Arguments for Using the Vernacular

Bishops did not always justify their language-related proposals for the Council. However, they sometimes pointed to the expected effects of introducing the vernacular into the liturgy, as well as the reasons for their demands to limit the role of Latin. Following Bishop Czajka and Zygmunt Choromański, all the presented justifications can be described as “pastoral reasons” (*rationes curam animarum spectantes*) (“Polonia” 1960, 693, 752). For example, the aforementioned Bishop Czerniak (718) stated that Latin was practically unknown to the faithful. Even if they knew some Latin, they were unable to understand all the phrases used in the Eucharistic celebration. Majewski (707) also drew attention to the lack of appropriate skills in this area among nuns and even among candidates for the priesthood. It is therefore not surprising that, according to Lorek (671), young priests made urgent requests to be allowed to recite the breviary in their native language. Michał Blecharczyk (725), auxiliary bishop of Tarnów, cited the situation of laypeople. He stated that they were increasingly interested in the liturgy and wanted to understand both ceremonies and sacred texts. Unfortunately, Latin, due to its lack of similarity with Polish, posed a significant obstacle to their fascination.⁵

Barda (“Polonia” 1960, 667) and Wojciech Tomaka of Przemyśl (712) noted that the schismatic Polish National Church has abandoned Latin and is therefore gaining followers. Korszynski of Wrocław (748) took up this idea and added that Protestant denominations are also popular thanks to the use of a universally understandable language. Czajka (693) added that allowing the national language in the Catholic Church would eliminate the critical arguments of the separated Churches. Therefore, introducing more Polish in the liturgy would be a response to the desires of

⁵ The thesis expressed by the bishop is in opposition to the statement made by Jop during the 18th General Assembly of the Second Vatican Council on November 13, 1962, in which he pointed to the special role of Latin in the history of the Polish nation (see Jop 1970, 653).

the faithful, in accordance with the suggestion of Bishop Zakrzewski of Płock (659). The argument most often cited by bishops for expanding the importance of the native language was the benefit of the faithful, as Majewski put it quite concisely, “for the greater benefit of priests and the faithful” (*ad maiorem utilitatem sacerdotum et fidelium*) (707). The hierarchs Baziak (657), Barda (667), Czajka (693), Majewski (706–7), Czerniak (716), Karol Pękala (771), and Kominek (774) draw attention primarily to the fact that the change would result in a deeper and, above all, more active participation of the faithful in the liturgy, especially in the celebration of Holy Mass. These arguments are also supported by documents sent by Cardinal Wyszyński. He sees the reform of the liturgy as a contribution to the faithful leading a deeper religious life and becoming more connected to the Church (682). A similar belief was expressed by Pawłowski, who saw in the changes he advocated an opportunity for the liturgy to become a school of prayer (*schola orationis*) and Catholic thinking (*sensus catholicus*) (688). Tomaka (712) hoped to increase the number of faithful attending the liturgy.

4. Letter from Bishop Lucjan Bernacki

The opinions of the bishops, generally expressed very concisely, were discussed more broadly in a letter dated October 25, 1959, sent to the Council by the auxiliary bishop of Gniezno, Lucjan Bernacki (“Polonia” 1960, 733). Like others, he advocated introducing the national language into the liturgy. Moved—as he himself wrote—by the global situation, he argued his position with a broader argument than others (736–39). He stated that, for practical reasons, the introduction of national languages into the liturgy should be considered. Given that Latin was little known, he believed it was simply incomprehensible (*incomprehensibilis*) to many people. He was also convinced that this ignorance affected not only the lay faithful but, to a large extent, the clergy as well, not only in Poland but also in France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, England, Scotland, and Germany. Since such a situation occurred in regions historically influenced by Latin culture, this incomprehensibility affected nations even more distant from its influence, he concluded (“Polonia” 1960, 736–37). To support this view, the bishop draws on his personal experience. He explained that during World War II, he traveled through France, Spain, Portugal, and England. He spent extended periods in each region. Latin, he points out, did not help him establish contacts, as few people understood the language, and even if they did, it was only to a limited extent. This led Bishop Bernacki to conclude that Latin was only minimally useful as a tool for expressing thought, prayer, and the transmission of faith in the liturgy. He was therefore convinced that the faithful assisted in liturgical actions but did not live them or participate in what the celebrant was doing, which ultimately brought them

spiritual harm. He continued that the use of “prayers books for the laity” in their native language did not change this situation. While the faithful read the texts, the hierarch emphasized, “they are not nourished by the liturgy.” (“Polonia” 1960, 737) These observations led Bishop Bernacki to a powerful thesis. He stated that liturgical piety has weakened among many of the faithful due to the language barrier. Moreover, churches were becoming empty in France, Spain, Portugal, and even Poland precisely because of Latin (737). A little further on, he added that the reason for apostasy, or at least distance from participating in celebrations, was the language of the liturgy (737). To confirm this, the hierarch first referred to the realities of Church life in Poland. He reported that after introducing vespers in Latin in place of those previously sung in the vernacular, almost no one came to church, and the liturgy was celebrated only by the parish priest and organist. In places where the custom of singing in Polish was maintained, churches were filled with the faithful. The bishop also cited events in France. He wrote that he noticed that some priests celebrated baptisms in their native language, and this practice, he emphasized, brought “great benefit to the participants” (*magno cum fructu astantium*). Meanwhile, in Spain, where he served as a vicar, the liturgy was celebrated in Latin, and the faithful repeated phrases without understanding them. He therefore assumed that the Latin liturgy does not appeal to the faithful and was “exotic” to them. Referring to the realities of missionary work, Bernacki emphasized that the low evangelization effectiveness in China, e.g., stems from the same causes, that is, the use of Latin (737).

Bishop Bernacki also devoted some attention to the place of language in the life and liturgy of the Church. He began with the observation that the descent of the Holy Spirit and the gift of tongues that was revealed at that time indirectly point to the possibility of using vernacular languages in the Church. He admitted that Latin had always been the language of the liturgy, highlighting—without elaborating on the subject—that this need not always be the case. To support his unstated thesis, he cited Christ the Lord as an example, who, as he described, used his native Aramaic, abandoning Hebrew, which, while it was the language of religious rites, was no longer understood by the people. The Church, the bishop continued, following the Savior’s example, first abandoned Aramaic in favor of Greek and later Greek in favor of Latin. The hierarch also recalled that in the 9th century, the Holy See permitted Saints Cyril and Methodius to use the Slavic language in the liturgy. Pope Paul V granted similar permission for China, allowing the liturgical books to be translated into the local languages. Bishop Bernacki concluded this argument by stating that approximately 14 liturgical languages were in use by the Catholic Church (“Polonia” 1960, 736).

In the further course of his argument, Bernacki referred to the unity of the Church, a sign of which had always been the use of Latin as a recognizable symbol of the Catholic liturgy (“Polonia” 1960, 738). As one might expect, at this point he referred to the idea expressed only 12 years earlier by Pius XII in the encyclical *Mediator Dei*, in which the pope called Latin “a sign of unity” (*unitatis signum*)

(Pius XII 1947, 545). The bishop of Gniezno believed that allowing the use of the native language would not harm the unity of the Church. This unity is based primarily on the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and the infallibility of the Church, as well as on the offering of the same Sacrifice of the Mass and the administration of the sacraments. He concluded that Latin contributes little to maintaining unity in the Church. To support his views, he again drew on life experience and mentioned Polish emigrants in France, who in their new surroundings quickly abandoned the Church and succumbed to the ideas of communism. In their homeland, they maintained their faith thanks to local tradition and family. In exile, they quickly abandoned the Church because the liturgy offered them no support in either Poland or France. Finally, the bishop proposed that, to maintain unity, the gestures and melodies in the liturgy be standardized. He also added that the Church should not fear language changes. He also admits that the use of national languages contributes to the popularization of Protestant ideas and the views of non-Catholic religious movements. Bishop Bernacki therefore expressed his belief that abandoning Latin in favor of national languages would not only not harm the Church but, on the contrary, would bring many benefits (“Polonia” 1960, 738).

Conclusion

Some scholars describe the changes in liturgical language at the Second Vatican Council with phrases “replacing Latin with the vernacular languages,” “the abandonment of Latin,” and “marginalization of Latin” (Hancock 2014, 39; Ryan 2012, 39; Panvini 2017, 110; Ponzo 2019, 48). Such statements may create the impression that the Council exerted some pressure on local Churches to abandon the use of Latin, especially in the liturgy, and introduce their native language instead. The realities of other countries require a separate study, but—as Colleen McDannell points out—the issue of language was a significant problem for the Council, if only because of communication problems among participants during its duration (McDannell 2011). The words of the Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV Seigh of Antioch also went down in history. He was convinced that it was incomprehensible why the faithful should pray in a language they did not understand. He argued that the language of the Church must be a living language, because it concerns people, not angels (Wiltgen 1967, 26–27). On the other hand, as Antonius Pelosi notes, Latin has many undeniable advantages that constitute a significant value for the Church (Pelosi 2000, 194–97).

The analyses undertaken in this article demonstrate that there was no unwanted interference with regard to the Catholic Church in Poland. On the contrary, the number of requests sent to the Vatican on language of liturgy clearly indicates that the introduction of Polish into the liturgy was eagerly anticipated. By formulating

demands for the Council, the hierarchs expressed this conviction. Presumably, they also expressed the expectations of the faithful and—as they clearly indicated—those involved in the celebrations and eager to learn about the liturgy. The bishops demonstrated a far-reaching intuition, as most of their demands aligned with the decisions later included in the Council documents. As indicated in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (nos. 36 and 54), they did not want to abandon Latin but saw a need for a broader use of the vernacular, especially in that part of the Mass formerly called the Mass of the Catechumens and now the Liturgy of the Word (SC 36, 54, 109–10, 114–15). However, they advocated retaining the sacramental formulas in the traditional version, especially the text of transubstantiation and the accompanying Canon. Bishop Wojtyła was the only one to warn against the complete nationalization of the liturgy of the Mass, which eventually became a reality. The complete abandonment of Latin was primarily manifest in parish celebrations, but it also found expression in *Mszal rzymski dla diecezji polskich* [Roman Missal for Polish Dioceses]. The liturgical book does contain an appendix in its final section with the Mass texts and prayers allowing for the celebration of the liturgy in Latin, titled “For Priests Who Cannot Choose Another Mass” (*MSDP 3**–58***). The rest of the collection does not provide alternative versions of the antiphons, chants, or other texts, including the formula of consecration, that would allow for their proclamation in Latin. Only the acclamations *Kyrie eleison*, *Christe eleison* were retained, but these—as is well known—are Latinized versions of the Greek text.

The arguments for introducing Polish into the liturgy was more frequently provided by auxiliary bishops than by ordinaries. This may have stemmed from the fact that their ministry was more pastoral than administrative, and they more frequently met with various kinds of faithful in parishes. It is possible that they also represented the younger generation of Polish hierarchs. Unlike, e.g., in German circles, where Karl Rahner reflected on the very nature of the Church’s language (Ponzo 2019, 48), the demands of Polish bishops in general, and auxiliary bishops in particular, stemmed from pastoral needs, a prime example of which were the proposals presented by Bernacki, who described the reasons that prompted him to vote for the wider use of the native language. He was also most critical of Latin, arguing that it was precisely because of the language that the faithful failed to understand and experience the liturgy, refrained from participating in ceremonies, and even committed apostasy. The most frequently cited reason for introducing Polish more widely into ceremonies was the activation of the faithful. For this reason, the language issue was usually discussed in those sections of the documents that addressed the liturgy. It is worth emphasizing that no Polish hierarch had advocated for expanding the use of Latin in any area other than administration. Aware of the lack of Latin skills among nuns, candidates for the priesthood, and young clergy, they submitted no proposals for changing this situation through education or other forms of teaching, beyond recommending abandoning Latin in favor of the national language. All of this led

to the already expressed belief that the Second Vatican Council did not force the Church in Poland to introduce the native language, but merely sanctioned requests expressing *vox populi* in the bishops' *vota*.

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Dialogue *Ad Intra*: The Relevance of *Lumen Gentium* and *Christus Dominus* for a Synodal Church

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Abstract: In order to outline the Council's understanding of the "dialogue *ad intra*," the article will first provide a brief introduction to the concept of dialogue within the Church as set out in selected conciliar documents. To illustrate the Council's ecclesiological framework for promoting dialogue, an outline of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* will follow. As documents such as *Lumen gentium* and *Christus Dominus* were the result of compromises between opposing theological factions at the Council, they sometimes offer inconsistent ecclesiological concepts, which affect later understanding of dialogue within the Church. Therefore, the ecclesiological concepts of "apostolicity" and "true equality" of all the baptised will be examined in terms of their implications for ecclesial counselling, decision-making, and accountability procedures. The final passage will present a proposal for resolving the tensions between opposing concepts of dialogue within the Church, in light of the Church's understanding of itself as a "complex reality." (LG 8)

Keywords: dialogue *ad intra*, synodality, counselling, accountability, Church as "complex reality," *Lumen gentium*, *Christus Dominus*

Reflecting on the Second Vatican Council's teaching on "dialogue within the Church" primarily involves referring to its ecclesiology, as presented in *Lumen gentium*. In contrast to *Gaudium et spes*, which addresses the "dialogue *ad extra*" by dealing with the "Church in the Modern World," *Lumen gentium* addresses pivotal dimensions of the ecclesial "dialogue *ad intra*."

This basic distinction regarding the Church's ways of doing dialogue was inspired by Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens, archbishop of Mechelen, Belgium. In a letter addressed to Pope John XXIII in April 1962, Suenens argued that a council preoccupied with internal Church affairs would disappoint the expectations of the world (cf. Suenens 1991, 72–78). Suenens did not mean that questions such as collegiality and ecumenism were unimportant. However, he wanted to distinguish between the inner life of the Church (*ad intra*) and the Church's relationship with the outside world (*ad extra*).

This distinction had a lasting impact on the Council's subsequent work. Most of the documents adopted by the Conciliar Fathers can be categorised accordingly. *Christus Dominus* for instance, the Council's decree on the ministry of bishops, could be considered a kind of "implementation regulation" or "application manual"

for Chapter III of *Lumen gentium*, which focuses on the college of bishops and its pastoral office.

To outline the Council's understanding of the "dialogue *ad intra*," it might be helpful to start with a brief introduction to the concept of dialogue within the Church, as set out in selected conciliar documents. To illustrate the Council's ecclesiological framework for promoting "dialogue within," an outline of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* will follow. As documents such as *Lumen gentium* and *Christus Dominus* were the result of compromises between opposing theological factions at the Council, they sometimes offer inconsistent ecclesiological concepts, affecting later understanding of dialogue within the Church. Therefore, the ecclesiological concepts of "apostolicity" and "true equality" of all the baptised will be examined in terms of their implications for ecclesial counselling, decision-making, and accountability procedures. Finally, in light of the Church's understanding of itself as a "complex reality" (LG 8), a proposal for resolving the tensions between opposing concepts of dialogue within the Church will be presented.

1. "Dialogue *Ad Intra*" in the Second Vatican Council's Documents *Lumen Gentium* and *Christus Dominus*

There is good reason to suggest that "dialogue" is a key concept for understanding the Second Vatican Council. In his famous speech at the opening of the Council on October 11, 1962, Pope John XXIII encouraged the conciliar fathers to "look at the present, at the new conditions and forms of life introduced in today's world, which have opened new paths for the Catholic apostolate." (John XXIII 1962, 4) From its very beginning, the term "dialogue" seems to appropriately describe the Council's efforts to engage with the modern world, other religions, cultures, and lived realities and contexts.

The progression of the Council's work until its closure in December 1965, which was carried out in preparatory groups, theological commissions, plenary sessions, and private circles, provides an impressive example of the Church's dialogues both *ad extra* and *ad intra*. Nevertheless, one might ask whether this practice is somehow reflected in the Council's documents.

In the *Lumen gentium*, which was adopted on November 21, 1964, the term "dialogue" appears only once, in referencing the "dialogue between the laity and their spiritual leaders." (LG 37) In the English translation of *Christus Dominus*, which was adopted on October 28, 1965, the term "dialogue" appears twice. The first instance refers to the bishops' duty to engage in dialogue with representatives of human society (CD 13). The second instance encourages bishops to maintain good dialogue with the priests of their diocese (CD 28).

In *Christus Dominus* (nos. 13 and 28), the term “dialogue” translates the Latin term *colloquium*, whereas in *Lumen gentium* (no. 37) it translates *commercium*. While the term *colloquium* may be understood as an oral talk on ideas, *commercium* may refer to an intellectual exchange of ideas or opinions. Such an understanding aligns with that of ordinary language (Merriam-Webster 1993, s.v. “dialogue”; Fowler and Sykes 1976, s.v. “dialogue”).

The relevance of the Council’s decree *Christus Dominus* to the topic of “dialogue within the Church” lies in its efforts to concretise the more general statements in *Lumen gentium* on the ministry of the bishops. The decree sets out the specific decision-making processes to be followed in a particular diocese to adopt a dialogical approach to administration. Consequently, the decree stipulates the establishment of councils at all levels of the Church to support bishops in their decision-making processes (CD 25–27). On the level of the global Church, the decree recommends establishing regular encounters between the bishops in synods and bishops-conferences (CD 36–38). The aim of such meetings is to engage in dialogue on topics that are of importance across dioceses.

However, for the Council, dialogue is more than a tool to achieve consent on a specific topic or a cultural asset of humanity that the Church must appreciate and adopt. The Council provides a thorough theological rationale for the Church’s engagement in dialogue, arguing that a Church that does not engage in dialogue is contrary to the will of God. The reason for that is the structure of God’s revelation. In this respect, *Dei verbum*, the Council’s declaration on divine revelation, says: “The invisible God ... out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends ... and lives among them..., so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself.” (DV 2) *Gaudium et spes* explains that when God engages in dialogue with us, he not only speaks but also waits for our free consent and obedience (cf. GS 17).

In revelation, God engages in dialogue with humanity to foster communion, both with God himself and among humanity. God’s engagement in dialogue is rooted in his internal life. Through the dialogical nature of his revelation, the Triune God communicates Himself, because he is a dialogical community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Council’s decree on Ecumenism is able to state that the Triune God is the “highest exemplar and source” both of the dialogue within the Church and its unity (UR 2).

If God acts in this way, the consequences for the community of believers are obvious: the Church must engage in dialogue. This has an impact on its relationships with other religions and with society, as well as on internal issues. *Gaudium et spes* states that within the Church, dialogue is an expression of the Catholic and ecumenical community:

[T]he Church stands forth as a sign of that brotherhood which allows honest dialogue and gives it vigour.

Such a mission requires in the first place that we foster within the Church herself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, through the full recognition of lawful diversity. Thus, all those who compose the one People of God, both pastors and the general faithful, can engage in dialogue with ever abounding fruitfulness. For the bonds which unite the faithful are mightier than anything dividing them. (GS 92)

To be a “sign of brotherhood” requires cultivating mutual respect, reverence and harmony within the Church. This involves recognising plurality and legitimate differences in practising the Catholic faith. The aim is to initiate an increasingly fruitful dialogue between all members of the one People of God—both clergy and laity—in order to deepen the understanding of God’s revelation and encourage Christian practice. The act of engaging in dialogue on the shared faith proves that the bond uniting believers is stronger than the issues that divide them: “Let there be unity in what is necessary; freedom in what is unsettled, and charity in any case.” (GS 92)

The invitation to dialogue has certainly had an effect within the Church during the decades since the closure of the Council, as evidenced by the numerous changes that have taken place in ecclesial practices. In response to traditional decision-making processes, awareness of shared responsibility among the faithful has grown. This has fostered a growing sense of community among many laypeople and clergy, enabling them to interpret the Council’s message about the Church as the People of God as being relevant to their own lives. In this perspective, dialogue between all members of the Church today appears to be without any alternative.

To better understand the meaning of “dialogue” in the historical context of the Council’s documents, it may be helpful to consult an important ecclesiastical document on “dialogue,” which was issued while the Second Vatican Council was still in progress.

2. “Dialogue” According to Pope Paul VI’s Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*

On August 6, 1964, Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (cf. Ernesti 2014, 3–20). This document is almost entirely devoted to the topic of “dialogue.” In it, the Pope states that dialogue “must be readily conducted with all men of good will both inside and outside the Church.” (ES 93) In fact, however, *Ecclesiam suam* is largely devoted to dialogue *ad extra*, i.e. with the “modern world.” Dialogue is addressed to ideologies, non-Christian religions, and non-Catholic denominations. Nevertheless, the dialogue *ad intra* is not missing and covers the last passages of the encyclical (ES 113–15).

The Pope sees dialogue rooted in the relationship between God and humanity. “It finds its expression in prayer; and prayer is a dialogue. Revelation, too, that

supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue. In the Incarnation and in the Gospel, it is God's Word that speaks to us." (ES 70) The Pope continues: "[T]he whole history of man's salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvellously begins with God and which He prolongs with men in so many different ways." (ES 70) Accordingly, dialogue within the Church is based on the idea that divine revelation is dialogical in nature: God addresses human beings and requests their affirmative response.

Immediately after having expressed his desire for dialogue within the Church, however, the Pope reminds readers of the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church. The sacramental authority of the ordained ministry, he stresses, requires faithful obedience. "By obedience We mean the observance of canonical regulations and respect for the government of lawful superiors, but an observance and respect readily and serenely given, as is only to be expected from free and loving children." (ES 115) A spirit of criticism, in turn, contradicts the spirit of fellowship, harmony, and peace in the Church, the Pope states. "It completely vitiates dialogue." (ES 115)

While the Council was still in progress, Pope Paul VI expressed that he was quite at ease with the status of dialogue in the Church: "We rejoice and find great consolation in the fact that this dialogue, both inside and outside the Church, has already begun. The Church today is more alive than ever before." (ES 117) Consequently, he encourages all the faithful to engage in dialogue: "We bless and encourage all who, under the guidance of competent authority, take part in the Church's vital, health-giving dialogue." (ES 116)

More than a year before the Council closed, the Pope clearly understood dialogue to be an essential aspect of the Church's identity. The practice of dialogue is not just a method, but a vital way of being Church and of witnessing to the Triune God. Dialogue binds together individual experiences and the shared knowledge of humanity with Christian doctrine and tradition of faith. It aims at an ever deeper understanding and a more appropriate practice of God's will for humankind.

Overall, the encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* provides a useful key to understanding the Council's ecclesiology, encouraging the Church to engage in dialogue both *ad extra*, as addressed particularly in *Gaudium et spes*, and *ad intra*, as set out in *Lumen gentium*, *Christus Dominus*, and other documents of the Council.

3. Opposing Ecclesiological Concepts Within Conciliar Documents

Regarding Pope Paul VI's emphasis on the hierarchical structure of the Church in *Ecclesiam suam*, one might ask: While "dialogue" in ordinary language is generally understood to presuppose equality between partners, any "vertical" dialogue within the Church is fundamentally called into question due to its hierarchical structure.

This tension requires a more in-depth theological reflection on the respective roles of ministers and laypeople within the Church.

To be comprehensive, such reflection would have to encompass the theological concept of sacramental ordination and its implications for the relationship between clergy and laypeople. The following preliminary remarks must suffice for this purpose.

When considered as “ekklesia,” the Christian Church can be seen as a community of people who have faithfully responded to the call of the Triune God. As the “people of God,” the Church is not the result of human organisation, but of divine initiative (cf. *LG* 2–4; *GS* 32; *AG* 5).

This basic understanding of being Church should have consequences for its organizational structures. According to *Lumen gentium* and subsequent documents, God’s initiative is effectively represented by the ordained ministry (cf. *LG* 28; *PO* 12). The college of bishops continues the vocation and mission of the apostles in a visible, permanent, and effective way (cf. *LG* 18–27).

This hierarchical concept is constitutive for the Catholic Church. Obviously, it raises the question of where dialogue fits within the Church. Although spiritual dialogue can occur anywhere within the Church, matters relating to ecclesiastical administration and decision-making appear to be confined to specific estates within the Church. “Horizontal” dialogue on decision-making may occur within these estates, e.g., among bishops, priests, and laypeople. But what about “vertical” dialogue?

Clearly, two ecclesiological concepts are in opposition here. On the one hand, we have the idea that all Christians are equal. This equality is rooted in baptism. On the other hand, we have the concept of the ecclesial ministry, which represents Christ as the founder of the Church and its counterpart until the end of history (cf. *LG* 28). Insofar as Christ is the ultimate source of authority and power in the Church, his primacy is effectively represented by the ordained ministry. As the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are both distinct forms of participation in Christ’s priesthood, they differ “in essence, not merely in degree,” as the Council states (*LG* 10).

This statement by the Council has sparked much debate in the post-conciliar era. What is the exact meaning of the Latin term *essentialis differentia*? This debate cannot be summarised here (cf. Drilling 1987, 81–99; Coffey 1997, 209–36; Guarino 2013, 559–76). However, in light of recent events—and in particular regarding the cases of sexual and spiritual abuse within the Church that have been uncovered during the last few years—one aspect of the theology of sacramental ordination should be highlighted. Although, according to Christian faith, Christ alone is free from sin, his representatives are not immune to failure. Nor does sacramental ordination prevent one from sinning. This should be borne in mind when establishing offices and performing ecclesial functions. Any ideal image of ecclesiastical ministry must recognise that those who hold office will not always live up to it. How, then,

can procedures of accountability be introduced in the Church and decision-making methods be enhanced in accordance with the Gospel?

4. Dialogue and Decision-Making in the Church as Challenges for Ecclesiology

Regarding *Lumen gentium* and *Christus Dominus*, one might conclude that the Council's ecclesiology legitimises dialogue and decision-making that extend beyond the horizontal level. In particular, a “vertical” type of dialogue could help to bridge the gap between the clergy and the laity. But which forms of dialogue should be pursued? What should their purpose be? Is the aim merely to consult, or to make the Church more accountable and efficient in its decision-making? Does the ecclesiological concept of “synodality,” as it was promoted by Pope Francis and continued by Pope Leo XVI, contribute to answering such questions?

The concept of “synodality” encompasses a variety of aspects of the life of the Church, ranging from a particular style of being Christian to specific decision-making processes within the Church (cf. International Theological Commission 2018, no. 70). In its document on *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, the International Theological Commission put forward a proposal to recognise both the hierarchical structure of the Church and the possible fallibility of its ministers. The International Theological Commission's document outlines the various stages of decision-making within the Church, ranging from listening and consultation to dialogue and counsel.

The responsibility for decision-making ultimately lies with the bishops, the document affirms:

The synodal process must take place at the heart of a hierarchically structured community. In a diocese, for example, it is necessary to distinguish between the process of *decision-making* through a joint exercise of discernment, consultation and co-operation, and *decision-taking*, which is within the competence of the bishop, the guarantor of apostolicity and Catholicity. Working things out is a synodal task; decision is a ministerial responsibility. (International Theological Commission 2018, no. 69)

In this way, we face a three-stage process: everyone should be heard, some should discuss the matter and draw up a draft resolution, and in the end, the superior makes the decision.

This procedure of decision-making within the Church was affirmed in the final document of the Synod on Synodality, adopted on October 26, 2024. The document, which is entitled “Communion, Participation, Mission,” was promulgated by Pope

Francis as part of his ordinary magisterium. While acknowledging the bishops' responsibility in decision-making, this document emphasises the importance of dialogue within the Church. It promises:

A wider distribution of tasks and responsibilities and a more courageous discernment of what properly belongs to the ordained ministry and what can and must be delegated to others will enable each ministry to be exercised in a more spiritually sound and pastorally dynamic manner. This perspective will surely have an impact on decision-making processes, enabling them to have a more clearly synodal character. (CPM 74)

According to the Synod, “synodality” is not so much a decision-making procedure in the Church, but rather an experience to be lived and a shared process of discernment.¹ The communion and unity of the Church require a discernment process carried out by the faithful as a community. This process is supported by the presence of the *sensus fidei* in each member of the community as it is rooted in baptism. Despite differences in their understanding of the Christian faith, the *sensus fidei* preserves the unity of the Church. The reason for that is that “the *sensus fidei* aims to reaching a consensus of the faithful (*consensus fidelium*).” (CPM 22) Arguing in this way, the Synod references a document of the International Theological Commission, issued in 2014, according to which such consensus constitutes “a sure criterion for determining whether a particular doctrine or practice belongs to the apostolic faith.” (International Theological Commission 2014, no. 3)

The *sensus fidei fidelium*—a kind of spiritual perception, intuition and discernment—is the fruit of the presence of the Holy Spirit in each baptised believer, a presence that enables them to recognise what is an authentic echo of the voice of Christ in the teaching of the community. The Holy Spirit enables the Christian faithful to identify what is, or is not, in accordance with the truth of the Gospel. The expression of the *sensus fidei* through all the members of the Church is an essential element of the discernment, reception and practice of the Christian faith at a given time (cf. Theobald 2016, 207–36; Famerée 2016, 167–85).

By involving people with a variety of experiences and perspectives, including believers and non-believers,² clergy and laity, those who are responsible in the Church can deepen their understanding of God's revelation to humanity. Furthermore, in

¹ In this regard, the meaning of “synodality” is similar to that of “communio” in ecclesial contexts. Having stated that “the ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents,” the “The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod” goes on to say that: “[T]he ecclesiology of communion cannot be reduced to purely organizational questions or to problems which simply relate to powers. Still, the ecclesiology of communion is also the foundation for order in the Church, and especially for a correct relationship between unity and pluriformity in the Church.” (Second Extraordinary General Assembly 1985, part C.1)

² According to the Christian faith, the effectiveness of the Holy Spirit is not confined to the Church but extends to all of humanity (cf. NA 2; GS 42).

order to strengthen the Church's mission, ecclesial practices and decision-making processes can be critically assessed in light of secular experiences. These practices and processes can then be modified, if necessary, to promote the Church's credibility.

Such discernment should always be performed with respect for the Church's tradition, in order to preserve its continuity with the apostolic tradition and to benefit from the rich experiences of the past. At the same time, the Church should consider adopting effective decision-making and accountability practices from the secular world, provided they serve its mission and enhance its credibility. In light of the concept of synodality and a renewed understanding of apostolicity, the Church will not find such adoption alien to her nature.

5. Dialogue Within the Church Based on "True Equality" and a Renewed Concept of Apostolicity

One of the most significant contributions of the Second Vatican Council to ecclesiology was its rediscovery of the collegial nature of the Church. Collegiality primarily affects the office of the bishops as successors of the apostles (cf. *CD* 2). In the long term, however, collegiality has inspired the Church as a whole to become more synodal. While synodality is not new to the Church, going back to the earliest centuries of its history, today's reflections on synodality invite the Church to embrace a new way of being.

The synodal approach to understand the nature of the Church sheds new light on the importance of dialogue within the Church. It is undeniable that "synodality" is different from deliberative procedures in democracies. As it is anchored within the collegiality of the bishops, the concept of synodality is deeply shaped by the hierarchical structure of the Church.

Nevertheless, synodality is also about participating in spiritual authority, which is rooted in baptism. Being baptised makes every Christian a full and equal member of the Church, a child of the same God the Father and a brother or sister of Jesus Christ, inspired by the same Holy Spirit (cf. *SC* 6; *LG* 7; *UR* 22; *AA* 3). Synodality—"walking together," as Pope Francis put it—is possible when there is mutual respect, listening, and dialogue between all Christians.

Regardless of their role or position, all baptised individuals are equal in dignity and in their participation in the threefold office of Jesus as king, priest, and prophet (*LG* 13, 34–36; *AG* 2, 15; cf. *CIC* can. 204 § 1; de Mey 2018, 155–80). Based on this doctrine, the Council's decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* puts forward a new understanding of the apostolic nature of the Church. The opening paragraphs of the decree emphasise that all Christians fulfil an apostolic ministry by virtue of their baptism. Stating that "the apostolate of the laity derives from their Christian vocation," (*AA* 1)

the decree rejects the idea that laypeople only participate in the clergy's apostolate. Rather, their vocation derives directly from Christ.

This ecclesiological concept broadens the traditional concept of apostolicity within the Church. Apostolicity is not confined exclusively to the ministry of bishops. Rather, it encompasses every individual member of the Church.

In *Lumen gentium* and *Ad gentes*, the Council acknowledges the participation of all baptized persons in Christ's threefold ministry as king, priest, and prophet (cf. *LG* 12, 34; *AG* 2, 15). Their participation is not delegated by the clergy. Participating in Christ's threefold office gives every baptised person a spiritual authority. Such authority obliges their fellow Christians to listen to their understanding of the Christian faith. Moreover, *Lumen gentium* states that the laity, "by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, [are] permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church." (*LG* 37)

Because baptism puts all Christians on an equal level (*vera aequalitas*: cf. *LG* 32; *CIC* can. 208), dialogue within the Church appears not only to be legitimised, but also to be demanded when it comes to fostering the mission of the Church, to improve its organisational structures—and also to counter failures in administration or in the exercise of spiritual care. Accordingly, the recent abuse crisis required interventions from responsible clerics and laity, without arousing suspicion that the ecclesial hierarchy was being undermined.³ Instead, the knowledge and experience of laypeople could help to reveal the psychological and systemic origins of failures within the Church.

6. Dialogue and Counselling in a Church Conceived as a "Complex Reality" (*LG* 8)

Could dialogue between laypeople and clergy help prevent failures or the abuse of power within the Catholic Church? Could intensified dialogue within the Church, between those in positions of authority and those affected by their decisions, lead to more appropriate decision-making in administrative and financial affairs?

Again, the Council's decree *Christus Dominus* comes into play (cf. Tavard 2008, 361–81). At the diocesan level, *Christus Dominus* recommends that every bishop initiate "dialogues" (*colloquia*: *CD* 13, 28) and seek *unanimous consensus* (*unanima consensus*: *CD* 25) with the auxiliary bishops, his vicar general, and his advisers. These individuals and institutions support the bishop within the episcopal curia in the exercise of his office. In addition, *Christus Dominus* provides for the establishment of

³ Regarding the cooperation between the episcopacy and the laity in Germany, see Ansoerge 2025, 183–96.

pastoral councils in each diocese. These councils should examine, deliberate on, and draw practical conclusions about all matters concerning pastoral work (CD 27).

Clearly, such councils do not function as a control mechanism for how a bishop exercises his office. Instead, their purpose is to support and advise the bishop in his decision-making. *Christus Dominus* specifically emphasises the autonomy of bishops in appointing persons to ecclesiastical offices (CD 28).

Regarding such prescriptions, one might ask what impact “dialogue” has on decision-making when it is conditioned by the hierarchical structures of the Church? Does counselling have any binding force in the execution of episcopal power? Respecting *Codex Iuris Canonici*, it seems that this is only the case in financial matters (cf. CIC can. 1277, 1292 § 2) and regarding a vote of the college of consultors (CIC can. 382 § 3). In all other matters, the bishop has the authority to make decisions alone.

Furthermore, it must be considered that the fact that diocesan bodies and council members are appointed by the bishop raises the question of how independent they can be, or whether they can maintain a critical distance from the bishop.

Thus, one might ask: to whom is a bishop accountable at a diocesan level when administering the episcopal office? According to canon law (CIC can. 381 § 1), every bishop holds almost unrestricted rights and powers within his diocese. But what would happen if a bishop failed to administer his diocese properly? Clearly, the relevant Roman dicasteries are overwhelmed by the task of reviewing bishops’ ministries worldwide whenever a complaint is submitted to them. Could structures of accountability then be introduced within the local Church, i.e. at a diocesan level? (cf. Wijlens 2022, 413–39)

This question touches on a fundamental issue of ecclesiology: the possibility of separating powers within the Church. The theological challenge consists of nothing less than justifying the introduction of secular ways of administration in the Church while preserving its spiritual character.

A helpful text could be *Lumen gentium*, which describes the Church as a “complex reality” (*realitas complexa*) composed of heavenly and earthly elements:

[T]he society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element. (LG 8)

The text continues by introducing an analogy:

For this reason, by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature inseparably united to Him, serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the visible social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it, in the building up of the body. (LG 8)

From a Christological perspective, the reference to the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ means that neither nature competes with the other. It would be wrong to say that the more Jesus is God, the less he is human—and vice versa. The truth is that the human individual Jesus and the way he lives are identical with his divine nature as the eternal Father's Son: Jesus' manhood is his deity (cf. Pannenberg 1968, 335). Pope Leo the Great expressed this in his letter to Flavian, Patriarch of Constantinople, on June 28, 449, writing that the human and divine natures in Christ "each do what is proper to them in unity with each other." (Denzinger 2012, no. 294)

Regarding the Church, one might conclude: Provided that the institutional structures of the Church serve its divine mission, there is no fundamental conflict or competition between its divine and human dimensions. Consequently, the use of sociological tools to analyse the Church's visible reality is permitted without, as some fear, reducing it to a purely worldly institution.

Furthermore, one might argue that the Council's ecclesiological reference to the hypostatic union of human and divine natures allows for the establishment of proven structures for decision-making, accountability, and control within ecclesiastical structures. Secular ways of procedure that promote the welfare of people do not contradict the Gospel, one might argue; rather, they correspond to the divine will to save all human beings, as revealed by Jesus. Consequently, proven ways of decision-making in secular societies should be taken into serious consideration when they serve the spreading of the Gospel. In any case, these procedures do not contradict the sacramental nature of the Church as set out in *Lumen gentium*.

It should be noted that the rich history of religious orders provides compelling examples of shared decision-making and accountability within the Church. These models could be applied throughout the Church, rather than uncritically adopting secular administrative procedures (cf. Moulin 1953, 106–48; 1965, 25–54; Sweeney 2002, 171–80; Roest 2019, 37–55).

Introducing ways of shared decision-making and accountability in the Church should always respect the cultural framework that conditions the way in which church procedures may be structured. The final document of the Synod on Synodality recognises and appreciates the particularity of the context of each local Church, along with its history and tradition, and admits a great variety of ecclesial structures. This respect may result in different paces of adoption: "A synodal style allows local Churches to move at different paces. Differences in pace can be valued as an expression of legitimate diversity and as an opportunity for sharing gifts and mutual enrichment." (CPM 124)

7. Conclusion: Dialogue as “Exchange of Gifts” in the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality

For Pope Francis, the ecclesiological concept of “synodality,” i.e. “walking together,” means listening to the perceptions of Christians who live in different cultures and contribute their specific experiences in practising their faith to the global Church. The Pope understands “dialogue” as “conversation in the Spirit,” which involves a mutual “exchange of gifts.”

Accordingly, the term “dialogue” is used frequently in the final document “Communion, Participation, Mission” of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to describe the process of “listening” and “exchange of gifts.” In this understanding, the term encompasses both “dialogue *ad extra*” and “dialogue *ad intra*.”

Three ways of “listening” are suggested throughout the final document for practising dialogue within the Church: listening to the Word of God, listening to the world, and listening to fellow Christians. It is clear, therefore, that “dialogue within” is an integral dimension of the Church. Nevertheless, the question arises as to the purpose of dialogue. And what does “synodality” mean in this context? Does it affect the decision-making process in any way? Or is this process left exclusively to the clergy?

The third part of the final document describes and outlines the three phases of the synodal process: first, ecclesial discernment; secondly, care for decision-making processes; and thirdly, commitment to accountability and evaluation of decisions (CPM 79). This pneumatological approach to synodality provides a framework for communication and dialogue, leading to the “exchange of gifts” in the fourth part of the final document (CPM 109, 120–123). The Synod maintains that practising this dialogical style can be understood as an expression of the prophetic ministry of the people of God in a world that is increasingly shaped by mistrust and violence (cf. CPM 47–48).

While such a statement may be convincing, one might ask what the long-term outcome of listening to the Word of God and exchanging perceptions and experiences might be. This question is particularly pertinent when it comes to decision-making within the Church on issues that some consider to be of extraordinary urgency. I only mention the acknowledgement of the wide range of sexual orientations among human beings in ecclesial doctrine and practice, or the equality of the sexes with regard to admission to sacramental ordination.

When the delegates to the Amazon—Synod in October 2019 expressed the need to ordain married men in order to ensure the regular celebration of the Eucharist in the Amazon region (cf. Amazon Synod 2019, no. 111), Pope Francis disregarded this appeal. It seems that, to him, the celibacy of priests was more important than the Christian communities’ desire to celebrate the Eucharist regularly.

So, what does “conversation in the Spirit” ultimately mean when it translates into “dialogue within the Church”? Does it have any effect on decision making in the Church?

To this day, the tension between the opposing ecclesiological concepts set out in the Council’s documents remains unresolved. Further study and theological reflection are required, particularly with regard to *Lumen gentium* (Part III) and *Christus Dominus*. Such studies should aim to develop an ecclesiology that recognises the significance of revelation in opening dialogue between God and humanity.

At the same time, theological reflection should outline how the Church can be organised to effectively promote the spread of the Gospel in today’s multifaceted societies. In a globalised Church, dialogue must respect cultural diversity while remaining faithful to the apostolic tradition, which forms the basis of the Church’s unity. In my view, a proper understanding of *Lumen gentium* (no. 8) could help to foster dialogue between all baptised people and encourage new approaches to decision-making within the Church, helping it to better serve the spread of the Gospel.

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Dialogue *Ad Extra*: The Relevance of *Unitatis Redintegratio* and *Nostra Aetate*

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Abstract: This article addresses the issue of dialogue *ad extra* based on the documents of the Second Vatican Council, especially the decree on ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* and the declaration *Nostra aetate* on interreligious dialogue, grounding the analysis on paragraph 8 of the constitution *Lumen gentium* in particular. To this end, we use the conciliar texts, with references to the history of the drafting of the documents, as well as to the problems that arose during the period of reception of the Council, and how some documents on ecumenical and interreligious dialogue have addressed them. We develop this question by first elaborating on religious pluralism, to which the Council attempts to respond. Secondly, we study the ecclesiological background that made the opening to dialogue possible, taking into account particularly ecumenical dialogue and interreligious dialogue. The study allows us to affirm that *Unitatis redintegratio* and *Nostra aetate* are concretizations and extensions of the constitution *Lumen gentium*. Therefore, without the ecclesiological background proposed by the constitution, dialogue *ad extra* as proposed by the Council and developed in the postconciliar period would not have been possible.

Keywords: ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, ecclesiology, *Lumen gentium*, *Unitatis redintegratio*, *Nostra aetate*, dialogue *ad extra*

One of the main items of the Second Vatican Council was the dialogue *ad extra* of the Roman Catholic Church: with all the men and women of the world, but in a special way with other Christian denominations and with non-Christian religions. In this article, we explore the importance of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in the face of religious pluralism, to which the Second Vatican Council sought to respond. With this purpose, we develop the idea of dialogue as a “sign of the times” and examine the situation of religious pluralism, to which the Church must continue to respond today. Nowadays, the Church continues the evangelization mission in a religiously plural world, and we should look to the main principles of dialogue of the Second Vatican Council. Our reflection focuses on the ecclesiological shift, particularly stemming from paragraph 8 of *Lumen gentium*, which led to the opening of ecumenical dialogue in *Unitatis redintegratio* and interreligious dialogue in *Nostra aetate*. This ecclesiological shift is also useful today to avoid some risks of dialogue: fundamentalism and relativism. We analyze some aspects of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, in particular *Lumen gentium*, *Unitatis redintegratio*, and *Nostra aetate*, with significant references to the discussion of the Council Fathers during the Council but also to the theological discussions in the postconciliar

period. Nowadays, we find some evolution in the way of dialogue begun during the Second Vatican Council, which is why this article tries to show how these theological insights offered by the Council continue to illuminate the current situation and that the path of dialogue is irreversible.

1. Religious Pluralism as a “Sign of the Times”

During the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church entered into a dialogue with modernity and with one of its most enduring fruits: religious pluralism. Pluralism had previously been condemned by the Church, but, after the Council, relations with other Christians, with Judaism and Islam, as well as with other religions and non-believers, were redefined in a pastoral and respectful spirit.

Entering into dialogue with modernity does not mean that the Church “became modern.” The Church did not adopt the theses of modernity, but rather she updated herself, or, to use the classic term, underwent an *aggiornamento* or renewal. The Church entered into dialogue with modernity and, in the light of the Gospel, discerned modernity (Poupard 2001, 70). The content of the message remained faithful, but the language changed, as John XXIII proposed in his opening address to the Council: The same doctrine as always, but with a new language, in order to engage in dialogue with modern man (Ioannes XXIII 1962, 790–791), following the logic of the incarnation that governs the economy of salvation. Indeed, dialogue cannot lead to relativizing the identity of the Church in a process of “adaptationism,” but neither can it limit the doctrine of the Church to the “forms” of a past that no longer responds to today’s reality. This “formalism” leads to fundamentalist positions that do not correspond to reality (Houtepen 2002, 213).

During the Second Vatican Council, the Church was able to listen before speaking, which is very important for any good dialogue. Both ecumenism and interreligious dialogue are considered as “signs of the times” through which the Spirit spoke to the Church from “outside.”

It is important to note that ecumenism, as it is understood today, did not arise within the Catholic Church, but rather within Protestantism. The World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh (1910) is considered to be the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement, which was later developed in the Life and Work Movement, Faith and Order Movement, and the World Council of Churches (1948). It was later, in the Second Vatican Council, that the Catholic Church joined the ecumenical movement. *Unitatis redintegratio* states:

in many parts of the world, under the inspiring grace of the Holy Spirit, many efforts are being made in prayer, word and action to attain that fullness of unity which Jesus Christ

desires. The Sacred Council exhorts all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism. (UR 4)

It is noteworthy that the modification of the first chapter title of *Unitatis redintegratio*, suggested in the discussions of the second session of the Council: The Council Fathers said that it should not be entitled “Principles of Catholic Ecumenism” but “Catholic Principles on Ecumenism.” This change was very significant, since the Church did not want to create a parallel ecumenism but to join the ecumenical movement, enriching it with the Catholic perspective (Vázquez Jiménez 2024, 153–55).

Similarly, the Church discovered the “signs of the times” in interreligious dialogue. The opening up to interreligious dialogue had its immediate antecedent in the Catholic Church’s awareness of the ethnic and religious persecutions motivated by racial, economic, social, and religious issues against Jews in European countries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Messori 2006, 151–56; Sutton 1976; Sombart 1923), which would later be referred to as “anti-Semitism.”¹ The Catholic Church wondered whether a Christian-inspired anti-Judaism would have been promoted inside the Church, which could have justified the anti-Semitism theologically. One of the most important moments that contributed to this awareness was the 1947 Seelisberg Congress (Switzerland), convened by the International Council of Christians and Jews, which brought together 65 leaders from 17 countries, most of them European, of whom almost half were Jewish, 40% Protestant, and the rest Catholic.

The *Ten Points of Seelisberg* was a formal proposal to prevent hatred against Jews motivated by inaccurate and inappropriate presentations in the teaching of Christian doctrine. It pointed to the Jewish background of Christianity, as well as a deeper study of the biblical and postbiblical history of the Jewish people. It suggested the need for correction of any type of publication that could induce anti-Semitism, such as the presentation of the passion of Christ, provoking contempt for the Jewish people for the murder of Jesus, or the idea that the Jewish people were reprobated and cursed. The Seelisberg Conference had a great influence on Catholic documents referring to Jews and on the preparation of the declaration *Nostra aetate* (Stofenmacher 2015, 176–87). The meeting between the French historian Jules Isaac, of Jewish origin, and John XXIII is famous, as it led to the drafting of a document entitled *De Iudaeis*, entrusted to Cardinal Augustin Bea. Based on this document, dialogue would also be opened to other religions.

As Dominican Yves Congar stated in an article written after John XXIII announced his intention to convene a new ecumenical council, the Church had to

¹ “Anti-Semitism” is a neologism that began to be used in Germany in the late 19th century, even though it is not entirely accurate, since Arabs are also Semites, so the term “anti-Jewish” would be more appropriate. However, it has become established in its meaning of racism against the Jewish people and is also used in *Nostra aetate* (no. 4) (Lovsky 1955, 11–23).

“become aware of the existence of ‘others’ and take an interest in them.” (Congar 1959, 75)² This time, the Church should look at “others,” not as adversaries or competitors, as opponents, heretics, or dissidents, not as objects of mission and conversion, but by discovering in these “others” elements of truth and holiness that build the Church herself and broaden the frontiers of catholicity. The Protestant theologian André Birmelé noted that this opening to “others” marked the beginning of a new era in the life of the Church as “a transition from an attitude of monologue to an attitude of dialogue, while maintaining the traditional foundations of Catholicism.” (Birmelé 2000, 223)

2. Religious Pluralism Present in Our Days

Religious pluralism, to which the Second Vatican Council responded, is still present in our reality and is essential to understanding the current situation. Although many had predicted the end of religions in the 1960s—as affirmed by the sociologist and Lutheran theologian Peter L. Berger—the reality is quite the opposite. In the late 1990s, Berger recanted his earlier words:

The idea that we live in a secularised world is false. Today’s world, with a few exceptions, is as fiercely religious as it has always been; in some places, it is even more so. This means that a body of work labelled by historians and sociologists as the “theory of secularisation” is, in essence, wrong. (Berger 2001, 22)

This idea was formulated in other works, as in *The Desecularization of the World* (Berger 1999) and repeated by other authors (Beckford 2012).

Multiple and multilateral economic and political relations, migratory movements, the media, social networks, and the growing mobilization of masses have brought peoples, races, and cultures into proximity and into a forced coexistence that was previously unknown. The historical delimitation of Protestant or Catholic countries, or of Islamic, Christian, Buddhist cultures, etc., has gradually been diluted and become irreversible. Now, in the global village, the diversity of cultures and religions is present in every corner of the world, where they coexist with greater or lesser friction. Today, Catholic Christians live their faith in dialogue and confrontation with other salvific alternatives. They are challenged by religious narratives that are not those of their own tradition. Christians coexist with other proposals of truth and salvation that lead them to question the salvific universality of their own tradition.

² All translations are the author’s own.

Pluralism can even be further nuanced. Today, religion is not only pluralistic but also diffuse. The New Age movement, which presented itself as a critical alternative to official religions and institutionalized religious practice, has led to the formation of syncretic neo-pagan religious identities with multiple religious affiliations, inhabiting various sacred spaces, resulting in religious, spiritual, and moral relativism (Houtepen 2002, 210). Cardinal Karl Lehman described this new religious paradigm as “a ‘theoplasm,’ a kind of religious plasticine from which each person moulds their own gods and religious beliefs to their liking.” (Lehman 1999, 640)

Generation Y and Generation Z (born between 1981 and 2012) lack a structured and personalized religious belief system. Many religious elements, previously anchored in a particular religion or philosophical system, appear now uprooted: a mix of mindfulness, tantra, and yoga, reincarnation, karma, chakras, and other types of beliefs in cosmic energies. The spirituality of this generation is shaped by what Berger has called “islands of meaning.” While in the early stages these “islands” fit into a basic belief pattern, they now appear scattered, lacking a basic structure of meaning that gives them coherence (Berger 2016). In this situation, it is difficult to find a broad horizon of meaning, and the youngest generation turns into “postmodern castaways.” (Bergoglio 2006, 10)

In this new context of religious pluralism, the Council continues to be a compass for the Church of the 21st century and for the new face of religious pluralism.

3. Ecclesiological Background for Dialogue

This dialogue *ad extra* would not have been possible without a reflection *ad intra*, that is, an interior renewal of the Church understood as a *ressourcement*, or a return to the sources of the Word of God and Tradition, in order to be more faithful to her own identity. From this source, *aggiornamento*, or reform of the Church, was to flow. This introspective view of herself was needed to develop the dialogical ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. Therefore, it is not possible to speak of the dialogue *ad extra* of the decree *Unitatis redintegratio* and the declaration *Nostra aetate* without reference to the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium*, in which the Council Fathers consider the nature and mission of the Church.

The ecclesiological hermeneutical key that opened the Church to dialogue was paragraph 8 of *Lumen gentium*: “This Church ... subsists in the Catholic Church ... although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.” (LG 8) It is therefore that Gérard Philips, one of the main editors of *Lumen gentium*, stated in his commentary on the constitution that “the *subsistit in* contains the heart of the entire ecumenical problem.” (Philips 1968, 105)

Indeed, it was precisely the formulation of *subsistit in* that opened the Church to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. This formulation allows us to acknowledge that elements of truth and holiness proper to the Church of Christ can be found outside the Roman Catholic Church. However, this recognition does not deny the historical concreteness of the Church of Christ in the Catholic Church, led by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him. Thanks to this, the “other” ceases to be a stranger and becomes a brother.

In *Lumen gentium*'s first draft, the text established the identity (using the verb *est* instead of *subsistit in*) between the Mystical Body of Christ, that is, the Church of Christ, and the Roman Catholic Church. This identification was based on the encyclicals *Mystici Corporis* (1943) and *Humani generis* (1950). In the second draft, the text continued to state that “this Church ... is (*est*) the Catholic Church, governed by the Roman Pontiff and by the bishops in communion with him,” but it was added: “outside its entire structure, many elements can be found which belong to the Church of Christ.” (AS II.1, 220) It was important to recognize that these “elements” of sanctification existing outside the Catholic Church are authentic ecclesial elements. With regard to the third draft, the Theological Commission put an important question: How to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable double thesis, namely, that the Church of Christ is the Catholic Church and that there are elements of holiness and truth outside of the Catholic Church? The solution was to change *est* to *subsistit in*. In this draft, the most significant aspect seems to be the search for a balance to identify, on the one hand, the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church and, on the other hand, to emphasize that such identification is not total or exclusive (Madrigal 2023, 572–74).

3.1. Ecumenical Dialogue

The formulation *subsistit in* was further developed in the decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, as follows: “For it is only through Christ’s Catholic Church, which is ‘the all-embracing means of salvation,’ that they can benefit fully from the means of salvation,” (UR 3) but the sacred actions (of other Churches and ecclesial Communities) can truly produce the life of grace, and must be considered capable of opening access to the communion of salvation “though we believe them to be deficient in some respects, have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation.” (UR 3) This is what later led John Paul II to state in the encyclical *Ut unum sint*:

It is not that beyond the boundaries of the Catholic community there is an ecclesial vacuum. Many elements of great value (*eximia*), which in the Catholic Church are part of the fullness of the means of salvation and of the gifts of grace which make up the Church, are also found in the other Christian Communities. (UUS 13)

These elements had already been listed in paragraph 15 of *Lumen gentium* (Sacred Scripture, the doctrine of the Triune God, baptism and some sacraments, the episcopate, the life of prayer, etc.). Through them, the Catholic Church is linked in many ways with those who are called Christian. Paragraph 3 of *Unitatis redintegratio* uses the concept of *communio* (perfect or imperfect) to indicate the relationship with other Christian Churches or Ecclesial Communities. This represents a great ecumenical advance because it makes it possible to affirm the existence of a gradual nature of *communio* and to overcome an understanding of “belonging” to the Church that would necessarily lead to exclusion. As Walter Kasper states, “the new and fundamental ecumenical evidence is this: among the baptized there already exists a fundamental unity, or *communio*, so that the difference is not between a perfect unity and a completely nonexistent *communio*, but between a complete *communio* and an incomplete one.” (Kasper 2008, 86)

However, the fullness of the means of salvation is not a guarantee of being saved. Referring to Christians fully incorporated into the Church, *Lumen gentium* states: “He is not saved, however, who, though part of the body of the Church, does not persevere in charity. He remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but, as it were, only in a ‘bodily’ manner and not ‘in his heart.’” (LG 14) That is why the Church needs continuing reform and conversion. The “other,” in whom the Holy Spirit also acts and in whom these gifts are also found, enriches our identity through exchange. The Reformation helped the Roman Catholic Church to rediscover, among other things, the importance of the Word of God in the life of the Church, or the common priesthood, just as Orthodoxy helped the Roman Catholic Church to discover the importance of the Holy Spirit, the eschatological dimension of ecclesiology, or synodality in recent times. This meant a complete change in the way of understanding the unity of the Church: the call for dissidents to “return” to the true fold of Christ, which was the Catholic Church, was abandoned in favor of a much “more Catholic” experience of catholicity. That means that the Roman Catholic Church, in dialogue with other Churches and ecclesial Communities, becomes “more catholic” in the full sense of the term.

We note the debate established during the Council on the consideration of the ecclesiality of the Protestant Communities. Indeed, the third chapter of *Unitatis redintegratio* makes a distinction between “Churches” and “ecclesial Communities,” thus establishing different degrees of communion between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches and between the Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches. Cardinal Franz König’s intervention was decisive in this regard, arguing that there was an essential difference based on the existence of apostolic succession in relation to the validity of the episcopate, as well as the recognition of the seven sacraments (AS II.5, 554).

In the postconciliar period, theologian Leonardo Boff opened the debate on ecclesiality and the theological significance of non-Catholic Churches through an open

interpretation of *subsistit in* refuted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. According to the theologian,

the Catholic Church..., on the one hand, is the Church of Christ and, on the other, it is not. It is the Church of Christ because it appears in the world through its concrete mediation. But it is not, because it cannot be identified exclusively with the Church of Christ, given that the Church can also subsist in other Christian Churches. (Boff 1982, 142)³

The Congregation would respond to this by saying:

But the Council had chosen the word *subsistit*—subsists—exactly in order to make clear that one sole “subsistence” of the true Church exists, whereas outside her visible structure only *elementa Ecclesiae*—elements of Church—exist; these—being elements of the same Church—tend and conduct toward the Catholic Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 8). (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 1985)

The same position was reaffirmed by the Congregation in another document, *Dominus Iesus* (2000). In this way, the Congregation intended to avoid a relativization of the Church and the consideration of the Church as an invisible entity without a specific historical reality.

Regarding this interpretation of the formula *subsistit in*, Kasper says:

That statement is only superficially a radicalization of what the Council affirms. In reality, it can be interpreted as a balanced response. Logically, it means that although the Church of Jesus Christ may not be fully realised outside the Catholic Church, there is at least an imperfect realisation. Therefore, there is no ecclesial vacuum outside the Catholic Church. There, “the” Church is not present, but there is ecclesial reality. (Kasper 2008, 106)

As theologian Avery Dulles defended, we cannot forget that the Council’s orientation with the formula *subsistit in* was that of an inclusive identity of the Church as opposed to an exclusivist substantialism: “The Council interpreted this doctrine inclusively, rather than exclusively, so as to allow that other Christian communities authentically participate in the reality of the Church of Christ.” (Dulles 1972, 233)

³ In the same line, we can also consider Hans Küng and Jürgen Werbick, among others (Morales 1998, 753–77).

3.2. Interreligious Dialogue

In a similar way and as an extension of paragraph 8 of *Lumen gentium*, the declaration *Nostra aetate* states with reference to relations with other religions:

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. (NA 2)

The truth and holiness present in other religions allow us not only to build bonds of unity but also to stop treating the members of other religions as “targets” to be converted.

By appreciating the action of God not only in the faithful of other religions but also in their rites, teachings, or commandments, Catholics are called to appreciate the action of God in other religions. This new attitude also meant a change in the understanding of the mission *ad gentes*, as Mauro Velati observes (Velati 2005). Interreligious dialogue allows us to discover the “seeds of the Incarnate Word” present in other religions and cultures, or the “rays” of that Truth which enlightens all—Jesus Christ.

This led to abandoning the “ecclesiological exclusivism,” based on an erroneous and decontextualized interpretation of the statement *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, attributed to Cyprian of Carthage.⁴ As the International Theological Commission stated:

Exclusivist ecclesiocentrism—the fruit of a specific theological system or of a mistaken understanding of the phrase *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*—is no longer defended by Catholic theologians after the clear statements of Pius XII and Vatican Council II on the possibility of salvation for those who do not belong visibly to the Church. (International Theological Commission 1997, no. 10)

The shift to a “Christocentric inclusivism,” that is, the Second Vatican Council proposal for theology of religions, was made thanks to its preparation in the theology of “fulfillment” elaborated by Jean Daniélou and Henri de Lubac, among others, and the theology of the “inclusive presence of Christ” in the various religious traditions of Karl Rahner and Raimon Pannikar, among others. The “theory of fulfillment” considers that the various religions represent the innate desire of human beings to

⁴ The famous adage *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, attributed to Cyprian of Carthage, appears not exactly like that formulated in his Letter 73, no. 21, but as *salus extra ecclesiam non est* (CSEL 3/2, 795). He uses this statement in his fight against schism and heresy in order to reinforce the unity of the Church. We do not find a fundamental difference between the two formulations, but wish to mention the original sentence.

unite with the divine, incarnated in various expressions specific to each culture and geographical area of the world. Jesus Christ and Christianity would provide a personal response to this universal human aspiration and, hence, fulfillment. Religions, therefore, according to the theory of history of the Church Father Eusebius of Caesarea, have a preparatory value in the face of the absolute novelty of Christianity. On the other hand, the position of those who considered the “inclusive presence of Christ” recognizes in other religions an evangelical *preparatio* by virtue of the active, hidden, and unknown presence of the mystery of Christ in them, thus appealing to the doctrine of the *logos spermatikos* or *semina verbi* of the Church Father Justin Martyr (Vázquez Jiménez 2024, 627–30).

In the conciliar discussions, it was the French bishops who, referring to the members of other religions that appeared in the schema *De Ecclesia*, asked to recognize all that was good and true in them (AS II.1, 299). The Archbishop of Zaragoza, Spain, Casimiro Morcillo González, asked that the Council explicitly declare “the relation and connection of not a few religious truths and moral precepts with the doctrine and moral law preached and promulgated by Christ.” (AS II.1, 350) According to his thought, if there is anything good, true, or beautiful in non-Christian religions, it comes from God. Happily, it culminates in the religion preached by Jesus Christ, Redeemer of all. In this way, a christological foundation was given to the relations of the Catholic Church with non-Christian religions.

The document *Dialogue and Proclamation* from the Congregation for Interreligious Dialogue, on the 25th anniversary of the promulgation of the declaration *Nostra aetate*, highlighted not only the christological aspect but also the pneumatological aspect of interreligious dialogue in different conciliar documents. As we can see, the recognition of the presence of positive values is not only in members of other religions but in religions as such:

Nostra Aetate speaks of the presence in these traditions of “a ray of that Truth which enlightens all” (NA 2). *Ad Gentes* recognizes the presence of “seeds of the word,” and points to “the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations” (AG 11). Again, *Lumen Gentium* refers to the good which is “found sown” not only “in minds and hearts,” but also “in the rites and customs of peoples” (LG 17).

These few references suffice to show that the Council has openly acknowledged the presence of positive values not only in the religious life of individual believers of other religious traditions, but also in the religious traditions to which they belong. It attributed these values to the active presence of God through his Word, pointing also to the universal action of the Spirit. (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 1991, nos. 16–17)

This means a new way of understanding the missionary activity of the Church: Dialogue becomes an essential part of the Church’s missionary activity. Dialogue allows us to appreciate and discover all the good that God has sown in the hearts of

men and in their rites and cultures. The missionaries are people of dialogue who, before proclaiming, listen. They welcome, value, and discern in the light of the Gospel. They approach other religions and cultures with the utmost respect and delicacy. They become aware that the ground on which they stand is sacred ground already inhabited by God.

In the postconciliar period, the theology of religions defended “religious pluralism” or “pluralistic theocentrism,” proposed, among others, by John Hick, Paul Knitter, and Jacques Dupuis. This line of thought criticized “inclusive Christocentrism” because it considered that it did not value other religions in terms of their own truth but rather from Christianity’s interpretation of them. Religions, therefore, were valued as imperfect forms of truth so that otherness could hardly be considered as such. Taken to its extreme, the paradigm of religious pluralism led to a relativization of the truth of religions and a denial of the *unicum* of the incarnation and universal mediation of Christ. Parallel to what had occurred in ecumenism, in interreligious dialogue, the historical concreteness of salvation in one religion, Christianity, was denied in order to affirm that the great religions are “alternative soteriological spaces.” (Hick 1985, 36)

Several documents of the papal magisterium responded by affirming the salvific uniqueness of Christ, including the controversial *Dominus Iesus* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It was a way of affirming the need to be faithful to one’s own identity in all dialogue; one cannot enter into dialogue without allowing each person to show themselves as they are and the body of doctrine that defines their identity. Benedict XVI stated:

While always uniting our hearts and minds in the call for peace, we must also listen attentively to the voice of truth. In this way, our dialogue will not stop at identifying a common set of values, but go on to probe their ultimate foundation. We have no reason to fear, for the truth unveils for us the essential relationship between the world and God. (Benedict XVI 2008)

It is important to recognize the value of the proposal of religious pluralism theology as a new approach to non-Christian religions in a receptive way (Vázquez Jiménez 2025). John Paul II did not close the reflection of the theology of religions; he explained that *Dominus Iesus* just clarified the basic principles for an authentic dialogue with non-Christian religions: “The document clarifies the essential Christian elements, which do not hinder dialogue but show its bases, because a dialogue without foundations would be destined to degenerate into empty verbosity.” (John Paul II 2000, no. 1)

Conclusion

Unitatis redintegratio and *Nostra aetate* are a development and clarification of the ecclesiology of *Lumen gentium*, which, through an *ad intra* reflection, inspires a reform of relationships *ad extra*. The second chapter of *Lumen gentium*, in describing who belongs to the people of God, first speaks of the Catholic faithful, whom it states are “fully incorporated.” (LG 14) It also notes that “the Church recognizes that in many ways she is linked with those who, being baptized, are honored with the name of Christian” (LG 15); and finally it adds that “those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God.” (LG 16) As we can see, *Unitatis redintegratio* elaborates on *Lumen gentium* (no. 15), and *Nostra aetate* elaborates on *Lumen gentium* (no. 16). In each of these parts, *Lumen gentium* indicates the elements of communion that exist between them, which makes dialogue necessary, understood not as an exchange of ideas but as an “exchange of gifts,” as John Paul II put it in the encyclical *Ut unum sint* (no. 28).

The documents of the Second Vatican Council led to a complete transformation of the Church’s attitude toward other Christian Churches and communities, as well as toward non-Christian religions. These have borne abundant fruit in the postconciliar period—more visible in ecumenical dialogue than interreligious dialogue, though significant in both. One could say, echoing Paul VI’s encyclical *Ecclesiam suam*, that during the Council, “the Church became dialogue, the Church became conversation” (Paulus VI 1964, 639)⁵—and the path begun then is now so deeply rooted as to be irreversible.

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Freedom and the Dilemma of “Autonomy – Theonomy”: On a Possible Reading of *Gaudium et Spes*

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to consider a particular issue present in the constitution *Gaudium et spes* of the Second Vatican Council. The anthropological discourse employed in this constitution reveals a significant interest in the issue of autonomy. The present study explores the contemporary issue of the tension between autonomy and theonomy, a tension which has characterized both the teaching of the Church and modern thought and culture. The analysis outlines how the Council transcends historical conflicts in this domain, thereby establishing a forum for dialogue without relinquishing its position regarding the primacy of God in the context of human freedom. Following the presentation of the problem and the modern context, the main section of the article provides an analysis of selected passages from *Gaudium et spes* that are considered to be pertinent in providing an answer to the aforementioned question. This is followed by an interpretation of the results of that analysis. It has been demonstrated that the Council deviates from the confrontational presentation of theonomy against autonomy. The approach employed here is to direct attention towards the concept of concrete freedom, which is characterized by its ambivalence and limitations. This, in turn, engenders an openness to the recognition of its foundation in God. The study concludes with a summary, which also draws attention to the topicality of the issue.

Keywords: *Gaudium et spes*, theological anthropology, Second Vatican Council, autonomy, freedom

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, is presented as the mature fruit of the Second Vatican Council. The importance of including a basic anthropological lecture at the beginning of the document has been emphasized many times. In addition to the detailed analyses contained therein (Kasper 2019b; Bosschaert 2017, 2019; Bujak 2011; Xavier 2010), the question of the legitimacy of including such a lecture at the beginning of a document on the Church's relationship with today's world could not be overlooked. The initial answer seems as simple as it is significant. The document describes the Church's relationship with the world as a relationship with man in his own environment, which encompasses the family, culture, economy, and politics. Therefore, it first describes the human condition as it is understood and proclaimed based on the Revelation. The issue of human freedom plays an important role in this presentation. This is what we will focus on. The subject of freedom always attracts attention. It is also the hallmark of the modern times. We consider it in the context of the conciliar document because,

it seems, its reception 60 years later is still linked to the reception of the answer that the Council gave to the question of freedom. In other words, the attitude towards freedom in the sphere of the life of faith is important for understanding and accepting the conciliar constitution.

1. The Modern Context of the Council's Question About Freedom

The time gap between our times and the Council allows us to take a step back and ask questions about the contexts in which this teaching on man and the Church in the modern world was proclaimed. One of these contexts was the long-standing debate on the relationship between theology and modernity, i.e., the developing ideas that seemed to be increasingly in conflict with the image of man and the world presented by Christianity (Schelkshorn 2012, 62–63). The result of this difficult history was a critical isolationist ecclesiastical-theological view of the world as an area outside the Church, straying as a result of the rejection of the existence of God or His absolute primacy, nourished by the idea of autonomy, which is characteristic of atheistic humanism. By positioning the Church as a universal sacrament of salvation living in the world, the Council rejected this defensive ecclesiastical isolationism. It sought to diffuse the accumulated tensions, i.e., to use the diagnoses already developed or to suggest its own, in order to address questions important to contemporary man and to point out the value of the answers offered by the Christian faith.

The question of human freedom was among the most important issues highlighting the tension between modern ideas and the teachings of the Catholic Church (Wąsek and Zieliński 2025). The identity of modern times can be understood in the light of the emergence of the idea of autonomy. At first, it was linked to trust in the reliability of universal reason, which could replace the authority of religious truth. This shift can be described in much more radical terms: the absolute authority of God was replaced by the absolute authority of reason. This substitution was based on the idea that reason discovers God's laws and therefore does not need religion and its revelatory foundation. In this way, the conflict between modernity and the religious worldview emerged.

The conflict was not alleviated by the progressive erosion of the original modern conception of universal reason. The awakened need for autonomy slowly came to terms with the crisis of the idea of strong reason. Moreover, the need for autonomy grew even more intense as the bonds of subordination to objectified reason loosened. The conflict with religion remained. It was no longer fueled by the opposition of reason to God, but by the opposition of human freedom to God's freedom. It can be expressed by the opposition of "autonomy vs. theonomy." The idea of autonomy, shaped in various ways, was profiled by opposition to theonomy, i.e., to the recognition of

the measure of man in God and His law. Among the mature trends diagnosing such an antinomy, we should mention the 19th-century critique of religion, in which the very foundation of Christianity is subjected to strong criticism from various positions. It is about freedom from religion as a condition for human emancipation.

Echoes of those disputes did not die out in the Church in the mid-20th century, when the Council was held. The reason for the fascination with this issue seems simple. The Promethean or Nietzschean idea of liberating man from the power of God (or gods) is in itself an extremely attractive proposition. As such, it demands thorough exploration. It was therefore eagerly taken up by many thinkers and became increasingly prevalent in the lives of many people in Europe. In 20th-century Europe, after the Second World War, modern reflection on the autonomy of the subject split into two camps. In the circle of “Western” culture, it continued to develop, while the “East” at that time experienced existential immunity to such a debate, caused by the systemic aggression of state Marxism. In conditions of systemic enslavement, the autonomy of a subject free from religion appeared to be a cynical intellectual construct fabricated by ideologues. On the other hand, the Catholic Church, strongly affected by a dispute with modern ideas in its institutional and intellectual path, and only just emerging from the defensive stance it had maintained, especially during the period of anti-modernism, did not have ready-made solutions that would allow it to address the issue of human freedom in a substantive manner. It was difficult not to immediately fall into the trap of polemics marked by the poles of “autonomy” versus “theonomy,” into an “all or nothing” dilemma with regard to the theological vision of man. These dilemmas are highlighted, among others, by Henri de Lubac’s (1995) research on “atheistic humanism.”

We propose to look at the Second Vatican Council from this perspective, even though the theme of freedom is not equally emphasized in all the documents of this Council (Hilpert 2013, 427f). The constitution *Gaudium et spes* made just such a conciliatory attempt: to describe man as a “being of freedom,” an attempt that avoided an extremely confrontational interpretation. This description does not begin with a rejection of the “worldly” vision, which refers to intuitions related to autonomy, but first evokes and appreciates this vision. It then points to its limitations and ambivalences, finally pointing to the core of Christian thought about man and his freedom—centered on the line of thought “creation in the image of God—discovery of the truth about man in the light of the Incarnation—eschatological perspective.”

These are familiar themes from the constitution *Gaudium et spes*. They are related to the concept of human dignity, which is central to this document: human dignity is not only not diminished by faith in God but finds its unquestionable foundation in the recognition of God. In this study, we analyze these themes exclusively from the perspective of one question: how was it possible to overcome the opposition between “autonomy” and “theonomy” in the description of human freedom? This breakthrough was of fundamental importance for abandoning the Church’s

unilaterally confrontational course in its encounter with modernity and strengthening its position of dialogue. We are, of course, talking about a breakthrough in terms of intellectual proposals. Alongside this, work remained to be done on removing resentments—work which, it seems, has still largely not been done on both sides of this long-standing dispute.

The above question remains important even 60 years after the Council. It is impossible to outline the broad context of the current situation in a short article devoted to the history of the issue. Let this brief opinion suffice as a hypothesis supporting the value of revisiting the issue of freedom presented in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church, isolated from the context of other important documents.

2. The Council's Presentation and Assessment of Autonomy

The terms “autonomy” and “autonomous” appear 14 times in *Gaudium et spes* (in the Latin version). This is a significant number, indicating the authors' interest not so much in the term itself as in the issue behind it.

Examining the successive occurrences of this term in the document, one can see a certain characteristic structure of the conciliar statement. It first appears in the description of the reasons for choosing atheism as a worldview and attitude towards life. It fills the entire point 20 of the document (the official English version available on vatican.va uses the term “independence” here). The term is then used in a general discussion of “human activity in the world” to declare its “rightful autonomy.” However, it is important to note the specific nature of English translation, which does not use the expression “rightful autonomy” in this context. The title of the paragraph 36 in the original Latin version is *De iusta rerum terrenarum autonomia*. And at the same point the Latin expression *legitima scientiae autonomia* is translated into English as “the rightful independence of science.”

2.1. A Differentiated Criticism of the Atheistic Concept of Autonomy in *Gaudium et Spes* (nos. 20–22)

In the first passage mentioned, we find the most important presentation of the idea of autonomy, which cannot be accepted from the point of view of the Christian faith. It states that belief in God negates human autonomy. This is a model case in which the thesis that autonomy is incompatible with theonomy applies. It was this idea of autonomy that was at the root of the deep conflict between the teachings of the Church and the philosophical trends of modernity. The second part of this statement is merely an extension of the first. It seems that it can be justified, e.g., by the presence of aggressive atheistic propaganda derived from Marxism in countries where

communist regimes seized power. In this way, however, a connection is established between theoretical, Feuerbachian or Nietzschean atheism based on the postulate of human autonomy, and ideological atheism, harnessed in the service of building a “new world” according to the political visions of state communism.

The Council does not share this understanding of human autonomy, just as it firmly rejects atheism. However, the Council’s statement does not end with criticism. The Council invites dialogue with those who reject God, including those who adhere to the understanding of human autonomy outlined above. It wants to seriously consider the arguments of atheists as well as to present its own explanations. It is interested in the concrete human being, that is, the practical anchoring of the abstract idea of atheistic autonomy in the history of an individual’s life. On this occasion, in the following sentences, it provides an initial framework explanation of why rejecting the concept of complete human autonomy and recognizing dependence on God does not threaten man. It reads as follows:

The Church holds that the recognition of God is in no way hostile to man’s dignity, since this dignity is rooted and perfected in God. For man was made an intelligent and free member of society by God Who created him, but even more important, he is called as a son to commune with God and share in His happiness. She further teaches that a hope related to the end of time does not diminish the importance of intervening duties but rather undergirds the acquittal of them with fresh incentives. By contrast, when a divine instruction and the hope of life eternal are wanting, man’s dignity is most grievously lacerated, as current events often attest; riddles of life and death, of guilt and of grief go unsolved with the frequent result that men succumb to despair.

Meanwhile, every man remains an unsolved puzzle to himself, however obscurely he may perceive it. For on certain occasions, no one can entirely escape the kind of self-questioning mentioned earlier, especially when life’s major events take place. To this questioning, only God fully and most certainly provides an answer as He summons man to higher knowledge and humbler probing. (GS 21)

As can be seen, the Council is not focused on criticizing the idea of autonomy, but on emphasizing human dignity. This dignity will not suffer from the recognition of God, but, on the contrary, will find its foundation in Him: in the fact of being created in His image and in the calling to eternal communion with Him. The Council supplements this justification, anchored in the beginning (creation) and the eschatological goal, in the next point with a famous reference to the mystery of Christ: “The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light.” (GS 22) Let us note that the Council’s argument for human dignity, encompassing the theological triad of “creation—the Incarnation of Christ—eschatological fulfilment,” was formulated as a response to the expectations of “systematized atheism,” which emphasizes the value of human autonomy.

Human dignity is founded in God, not in autonomy, treated as a primary reality, not derivable from anything other than itself. With this statement, the Council seems to be revisiting the aforementioned conflict of the modern era. In such a situation, the other side could easily return to its classic thesis that the rejection of God is a fundamental condition for finding and consolidating one's own autonomy. However, the impression of a simple return to the old dispute is misleading, because it results from an analysis of the most polemical moment, namely the criticism of atheism. And yet, even this criticism by the Council is marked by the balanced wording of paragraphs 21 and 22 of *Gaudium et spes*. Even more importantly, this polemical lecture, contained in the section on atheism, is a summary of a much broader statement found at the beginning of the constitution. There, the positive tone of the diagnosis of human experience that flows from the expression of freedom and its aspirations is striking. Admittedly, this diagnosis of aspirations is accompanied by an acknowledgment of the ambivalence of the results achieved (GS 4–10) and, thus, their criticism. However, this is not a criticism that questions autonomous aspirations from the outset, but rather an observation of their validity as a manifestation of human dignity. This “Introductory statement,” called “The situation of men in the modern world,” thus takes on an important function. It does not reject the aspirations resulting from autonomous efforts to develop culture, science, and technology, but rather emphasizes their positive significance for the good of humanity. Only in the second step does it point to the ambiguity of these achievements. In this way, it becomes possible to present its message about man (GS 12–22). The desire for freedom, revealing the depth of humanity, once its drama and ambivalence are discovered, leads to the mystery of God, and certainly should not repel us from Him.

2.2. “The Rightful Autonomy of Earthly Affairs” (GS 36)

The second important passage devoted to autonomy refers to the analysis of “human activity in the world.” (GS 33–39, especially 36) It evokes the same concern related to the alleged opposition between “autonomy” and “theonomy”: “Now many of our contemporaries seem to fear that a closer bond between human activity and religion will work against the independence of men, of societies, or of the sciences.” (GS 36) Instead of abstract reflection on the acceptance or rejection of God, there are various questions here about the value of human activity in the world (Losinger 1989, 127–62). Several perspectives are combined here (“of men, of societies, or of the sciences”). This does not make it easier to answer whether the autonomy of scientific methodologies in the study of “created things and human communities” in relation to the religious order, respect for the independence of the public order, or the basic spiritual attitude of the individual comes to the fore here. The Council emphasizes various activities, but clearly stresses the importance of scientific knowledge of reality and technical control over it. It argues that the fear of limiting the autonomy of

activity (“of men, of societies, or of the sciences”) is unjustified, because it concerns created realities that have their own “created” order. And this order requires scientific study. The only limit is the recognition of dependence on the Creator. This final declaration is understandable to a religious audience. However, for a scientist, it raises the question: how can science, which uses autonomous research methodology, recognize the dependence of creation on the Creator? After all, maintaining such a postulate goes beyond the limits of scientific knowledge and the assumptions made at the outset. It seems that science can only remain silent on this issue.

This teaching on autonomy in scientific inquiry can be understood not only as a methodological problem, but as a continuation of the reflection on human autonomy. In this sense, it also concerns social and cultural activity. The Council suggests that human activity directed outward also shapes the interior of the human person (GS 35). The Council continues to focus on the human person—in this case, as the author of social and scientific activity. In this light, the postulate of recognizing the dependence of creation on the Creator can be understood differently. It can be assumed that it concerns the person practising science, and not science treated as an impersonal cognitive procedure. It is the human person who, e.g., conducts scientific research using methods appropriate to the autonomous sciences, who does not forget that he or she is still dealing with reality created by God and directed towards Him. Therefore, in the realm of autonomous sciences, this declaration remains “inactive,” while a believing scientist can and should continue to recognize, in his personal relationship with the reality he is studying, that it is created by God. Moreover, this principle should be invoked in such an extreme case as the scientific reference to scientific knowledge as an argument against the existence of God. After all, this reveals a methodological error, a forgetting of the accepted research perspective, which does not deal with the existence of God. Finally, this warning of the Council against forgetting the Creator can and should be invoked when making ethical decisions, and therefore especially in the field of the technical use of cognitive achievements.

Let us summarize both statements on autonomy (GS 20, 36) in their mutual relationship. The common point of the Council’s teaching is the conviction that theonomy does not threaten “rightful” autonomy. But the latter must be properly understood, that is, its limits must be acknowledged. It does not mean independence from God, because man (in his subjective experience) and all created reality depend on God: He is their Creator and their goal. This has numerous consequences related to the recognition of the laws governing created reality, and therefore to submission to the truth of reality, which has both a physical and a moral dimension (it is a field of theoretical and practical reason).

In such a situation, the question arises as to whether autonomy, which is “relative” and which accepts self-limitation by recognizing dependence on God, is still worthy of the name “autonomy.” Is the above-mentioned solution, which calls autonomy “relative,” not in fact a source of renewed conflict?

3. Freedom Beyond the Dilemma of “Autonomy” Versus “Theonomy”

As long as we use the term “autonomy” inherited from the post-enlightenment discourse, we will not resolve the dilemma, and it will be difficult to characterize the theological solution offered by the Council. It seems that the terms “autonomy” and “theonomy” are mutually exclusive. It does not allow us to find a satisfactory solution to the question of man before God, seen from the perspective of modern sensitivity to the autonomy of the subject. Let us discuss an approach to answering this question that was presented by Walter Kasper.

He suggests that we need to refer to the term “freedom,” which directs the discussion towards the real experience of man. This is the experience where one accepts the numerous conditions of existence that determine one in an insurmountable way. The abstract concept of autonomy is transformed into the concept of freedom, which corresponds to the lived experience. Using this concept, and describing it further in certain passages, we will indicate a proposal for understanding, in its light, the message of freedom contained in *Gaudium et spes*. To this end, we will take two formally distinct steps: from (1) the classical solution, prior to modern criticism, to (2) a proposal referring to the anthropological turn. Both of these layers can be found in the conciliar document.

In the first step, it is easy to see the traditional interpretative figure employed by *Gaudium et spes* to show the truth about man. It is the already mentioned triad of Creation—Incarnation—Eschaton. These three stages manifest that God is the transcendent foundation of the inalienable dignity of man. At the same time, they express a conviction about the nature of freedom. Accordingly, thanks to the mystery of creation, we believe that God is not a rival to human freedom, but its foundation. As the Creator, He cannot be a rival to His creation. Thanks to the Incarnation, we believe that created freedom reaches perfection through full union with God. Union with God in the mystery of Christ does not bring about a limitation of humanity, but its fullness. This also applies to freedom. Thanks to our conviction about the eschatological goal of man, we recognize that freedom has a purpose and is therefore closely linked to the world of values, which have their own objective order, imposed by God who is the goal of everything.

This type of argument is well-known and has been recognized as convincing for centuries. It belongs to the classical apparatus explaining the nature of man and his freedom. In this light, freedom appears to be founded by God the Creator. Its highest expression is the voluntary search for revealed truth and the choice of good. Ultimately, it is a choice of God. In this view, human freedom is always theonomic. If, within this framework, one can speak of the autonomy of the subject, it is always seen from the perspective of the goal set by the Creator. However, such determination cannot be treated as “heteronomous” for man. Man can and should be able to interpret it as consistent with his nature and thus consistent with his deepest desires for good.

However, the early modern anthropological turn rejects this message. Man experiences himself first and foremost as a free and freedom-seeking subject, rather than as a particle of the cosmos governed by laws established by the Creator. This primacy of subjective experience turns the argument based on the recognition of objective “creative facts” on its head. Immanuel Kant’s critique of pure reason closes the door to metaphysical (*a priori*) objective knowledge about God, who creates human freedom and determines its content. Hence, we speak of the early modern anthropological turn. Therefore, it is first necessary to analyze freedom from the subject’s perspective. Following Kasper, it is an analysis of concrete freedom, not autonomy. The latter is an abstract postulate.

The second step in Kasper’s thinking on freedom presented here refers precisely to the situation after the modern anthropological turn. Kasper is a prominent thinker who tirelessly advocates for the appreciation of the value of European (early) modern philosophical thought in theology and for its critical reception. He notes that the experience of freedom is inextricably linked to its contingency (Kasper 2019a, 42–44). Human beings must constantly face the determinants of their lives. At the peak is the finiteness of life, in other words, the boundary of death. Therefore, the first condition for manifesting freedom is the acceptance of its indelible limitations. In this way, while accepting the pursuit of freedom itself, the modern understanding of freedom, which presents it as its own basis and goal, is criticized as overly optimistic. The manifold limitations on the subject’s freedom to shape its own existence show that it is necessary to refer to the basis of freedom outside the human subject itself. Only in this way can its meaning (sense) be revealed. Of course, such a thesis about the external definition of freedom—more precisely, about its transcendent, divine foundation—will bring back the modern fear of its complete determination, and thus ultimately its abolition.

Kasper therefore proposes to emphasize “concrete freedom” as the acceptance of the laws of reality and the freedom of other people. In this way, he links it to responsibility. Only responsible freedom is experienced as autonomous in concrete life. That is, it is not “at the mercy of particular interests, moods, passions.” If we recognize this, we also recognize that there is a certain order or meaning that is not our own creation but is given to us. At the same time, the experience of freedom opens up transcendence: man discovers his striving for “more” in every instance. In this light, we must accept that God exists as complete and creative freedom.

Kasper’s reflection, summarized here, is a proposal for how it is possible to reflect on man, starting from the subjective experience of freedom, which can be considered consistent with the modern perception of autonomy, and which at the same time allows us to refer to the need to recognize God as the foundation and goal of freedom. The tension between autonomy and theonomy does not disappear completely in this reflection. However, it is not antagonistic in nature. The opposite of autonomy would be heteronomy (Höver 1993, 1296). As the presentation shows, theonomy should

not be associated with heteronomy. Theonomy can be discovered as a transcendent condition for the possibility of human freedom, which is always concrete freedom.

In his summary, Kasper himself warns that Christian reflection on freedom attentive to the trends of modern thought, needs a “new theonomy,” that is, the recognition of the primacy of God as Creator, goal, and guarantor of created freedom. Kasper’s intuition helps us understand how *Gaudium et spes*, while seeking a positive assessment of the modern turn towards the subject and his freedom, at the same time tries to show the necessity of recognizing God—and thus theonomy—through a reflection on “concrete freedom.”

Let us then return to the text of *Gaudium et spes*. It is easy to find in it a reference to a “concrete freedom” that reveals the need for God. An important lecture on freedom can be found in the first chapter, which presents the theological teaching on human dignity. After appreciating the manifestations of the pursuit of freedom observed throughout history, the Council states:

For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man remain “under the control of his own decisions,” so that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him. Hence man’s dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure. Man achieves such dignity when, emancipating himself from all captivity to passion, he pursues his goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself through effective and skilful action, apt helps to that end. Since man’s freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the aid of God’s grace can he bring such a relationship with God into full flower. Before the judgement seat of God each man must render an account of his own life, whether he has done good or evil. (GS 17)

We can see how the description of freedom transcends the opposition between “autonomy” and “theonomy.” At first, it seems to be emphasized unconditionally. Man is dependent on God, which is expressed by reference to the act of creation, and thus to the dependence of all created things on the Creator. Therefore, there is no room for “autonomy,” understood as the rejection of this dependence. The “theonomy” resulting from the fact of creation cannot be rejected, even if in practice it can be opposed. At the same time, in the same place, the aforementioned dilemma is transcended by the fact that freedom is presented as founded by the Creator. God, who is the author of freedom, cannot be its opponent. The idea of conflict over freedom is reversed: the dependence on the Creator resulting from the fact of creation entails the protection of created freedom. Man has the right to use freedom. This right requires protection. If he is to achieve the goal intended by the Creator, it is only possible if he chooses it freely.

This line of argument may still seem to be a pre-modern, classical interpretation. However, it contains all the above-mentioned elements of reflection on “concrete freedom” and its experience. From this experiential moment, which emphasizes the ambivalence of freedom, sensitivity to the mystery of God as the transcendent basis of human aspirations is derived. The concrete freedom invoked by the Council faces various determinants, above all, moral choices. In this way, its connection with responsibility is revealed. Responsibility is its measure. This reflection is complemented by a characteristic passage:

But human freedom is often crippled when a man encounters extreme poverty just as it withers when he indulges in too many of life’s comforts and imprisons himself in a kind of splendid isolation. Freedom acquires new strength, by contrast, when a man consents to the unavoidable requirements of social life, takes on the manifold demands of human partnership, and commits himself to the service of the human community. (GS 31)

This text puts an end to the idea of unconditional autonomy as an ideal. It rejects the very desire for it, showing that in this case, freedom and autonomy become almost opposite concepts. Thus, it professes that freedom needs to be guided by values that are discovered, not self-generated. It is precisely the world of values, which comes to the fore when one recognizes the specific position of the subject in the world, that forces us to abandon the idea of unconditional autonomy, which serves itself and rejects theonomy as the main threat.

Conclusions

We have seen that the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, in its anthropological exposition, refers to the modern struggle for the recognition of human freedom as a fundamental feature of human nature. In the face of the long-standing controversy between the demands for recognition of autonomy and the necessity of accepting theonomy, it takes a position that is not surprising, namely, defending theonomy—the primacy of God in human life. At the same time, it conducts this reflection in such a way as to point to the value of freedom as a gift from God and as an internal power that is not threatened by the freedom of the Creator. Above all, by virtue of its numerous references to existential strivings and desires, it presents itself as a reflection originating in everyday experience, only subsequently subjecting it to an interpretation that opens onto the “absolute horizon”—the mystery of transcendence as an internal postulate emerging from these experiences.

Is this interpretation still convincing today? Undoubtedly, it remains a witness to an era that elevated to the level of church teaching a thought seeking an

expression appropriate for the early modern anthropological turn. The elements of transcendental-theological analysis intersecting with reflection, which, after the anti-modernist crisis, had already assimilated the connection between the natural and supernatural orders, remain an indelible witness to the era. All this is significant today, as it strengthens theological reflection practiced in the context of contemporary theoretical questions and practical challenges, as non-confrontational but critical of the surrounding phenomena of the “world.”

The ambivalence of human freedom in times of technological revolution and the profound social changes associated with it is taking on a new depth today. Even if the catalogue of examples given in *Gaudium et spes* needs to be supplemented, their structure remains unchanged: thanks to autonomous exploration, humanity has developed tremendously. At the same time, the threats created directly or indirectly by humanity’s autonomous pursuits and actions have increased dramatically too. However, diagnosing the situation by referring to one God in a pastoral sense seems much more difficult today. Despite technological advances in communication, the impression of growing barriers between people is increasing. The universalizing language of the Second Vatican Council, which refers to common human experiences and uses transcendental analysis, may encounter much greater difficulties today in being accepted, i.e., in accepting the message of faith expressed in such language. There remains a chance that the question of freedom is one of the most universal dilemmas, and that the pursuit of freedom and the awareness of insurmountable limitations in its realization is a common experience. To this extent, the message of the constitution *Gaudium et spes* retains its ability to inspire the acceptance of the Gospel as a message of freedom.

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The Notion of “Religion” in *Nostra Aetate*: Said, Unsaid, and Still to Say

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Abstract: This article examines the understanding of “religion” in Vatican II’s declaration *Nostra aetate*, arguing that it reflects an intellectual climate characteristic of mid-20th-century theological reflection. The study is divided into three sections. First, it outlines what *Nostra aetate* explicitly *said* about non-Christian religions within the broader conciliar teaching, particularly in relation to fulfillment theology, *praeparatio evangelica*, and *semina Verbi*. Second, it identifies what remained *unsaid*—the tacit, implied assumptions about religion in *Nostra aetate*, which align with phenomenological and historical approaches prevalent among the Council experts. Finally, it considers what there is *still to say*, exploring how the interpretation of religion may shift if the historical-phenomenological framework is complemented by recent approaches that view religion as a human, evolutionary phenomenon. This third part proposes (1) a theological engagement with such naturalistic accounts of religiosity, (2) an expanded theological reflection that also includes “non-religion,” and (3) an alternative approach to patristic insights into human religiousness. The study is based on the analysis and interpretation of selected themes in *Nostra aetate*, in dialogue with relevant sources in religious studies. It concludes by stressing the contextual character of the Council’s approach and opening space for further multi-perspective inquiry.

Keywords: religion, *Nostra aetate*, Second Vatican Council, theology of religion, human religiosity

During the Second Vatican Council, Cardinal Augustin Bea, president of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (SPCU), compared the draft of the document on non-Christian religions to a mustard seed that “has almost become a tree, in which many birds now find their nest” because “at least in some way, all non-Christian religions have their own place.” (AS IV.4, 649) Indeed, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* was not originally included in the Council’s agenda. In the *vota* sent to the Council, the topic of non-Christian religions appeared rather sporadically, usually in the context of missions.¹ Prior to the Council, Pope John XXIII had tasked the newly established SPCU with drafting

The content of this article is based on the development and synthesis of several selected themes outlined in the monograph: *Nostra aetate: Sobór Watykański II o religiach niechrześcijańskich* (Wąsek, Gilski, and Huspeková 2025), which is one of the outcomes of the project: “The Church as a Space for Dialogue: The Second Vatican Council Read Anew,” carried out by the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow as part of the “Science for Society II” program of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

¹ For related content in the *vota* submitted to the Council, see Wąsek, Gilski, and Huspeková 2025, 135–62.

a brief text on relations with Jews; however, the idea of a separate document was not initially considered. Only after a series of developments was the outline expanded to address other religions, ultimately resulting in a distinct declaration devoted to non-Christian religions.² The metaphor of a tiny, sprouting mustard seed is therefore particularly apt in this context.

Following the publication of *Nostra aetate*, some commentators voiced their dissatisfaction with its content. The first general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Willem Visser't Hooft, e.g., called the declaration “a disappointing document without much content, terming it not much more than a couple of courteous remarks about non-Christian religions.” (van der Merwe 2017, 18) However, given the turbulent history of *Nostra aetate*'s drafting, it can be considered a success for the SPCU that the text was produced at all and that the document passed the vote in the conciliar hall. The genesis of the declaration was shaped by many non-theological factors and by complex negotiations between what the experts sought to say and what the majority of the Council Fathers could agree on. Therefore, it can be assumed that the teaching of *Nostra aetate* contains aspects that are more permanent and universal, as well as those closely related to the specific historical context.

These circumstances constitute the starting point for this article, which focuses on a particular perspective on the notion of religion in *Nostra aetate* and on selected themes arising from this approach. In hermeneutic practice, scholars sometimes refer to the search for “the unsaid in the said.” On this basis, it examines what has been *said* in the declaration (i.e., what has been explicitly expressed in the text), what has been left *unsaid* (i.e., what has been omitted or only hinted at), and what there is *still to say* (i.e., what prompts further reflection or reevaluation today). Therefore, this article aims to highlight the specific approach to the notion of religion underlying the teaching of *Nostra aetate*, which, as argued here, is context-dependent, and to identify several issues that could be developed in alternative directions today.

Accordingly, this paper will first outline the key aspects of the Council's teachings on religion. Subsequently, it will try to show its convergence with tendencies in certain currents of religious studies. Finally, it will present three examples of themes that result from an alternative approach to the issues raised in *Nostra aetate*: (1) reflection on the possibility of applying theories that view religion as an evolutionary human phenomenon; (2) a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between religion and “non-religion”; and (3) the use of patristic sources. As a preliminary study, this article outlines the aforementioned topics rather than presenting them in detail.

² The context and primary impetus for the discussion of relations with Jews were the events of the Shoah and the Second World War; hence, the “heart” of the declaration is *Nostra aetate* (no. 4), which is dedicated to Jews. However, this article focuses on the significance of the declaration for reflection on non-Christian religions in general (for the genesis of the declaration, see Wąsek, Gilski, and Huspekova 2025, 124–55; cf. Tulej 2019).

1. What Was Said: Religions and the Second Vatican Council

First, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of what the Council said and intended to say about the Catholic Church's approach to non-Christian religions. Although the key document on this subject is the declaration *Nostra aetate*, its concise and practical nature indicates that it can only be properly understood when considered alongside relevant passages from other documents. Accordingly, this section outlines the main themes and inspirations of the Second Vatican Council on religion in general.

The key text shaping the Catholic Church's view of non-Christians is *Lumen gentium* (no. 16), which concerns people "related (*ordinantur*) in various ways to the people of God." (LG 16) The constitution directly refers to Thomas Aquinas, who viewed the unbaptized as potentially belonging to the Church by virtue of the power of Christ and human free will (*ST* III, q. 8, a. 3, ad 1), and indirectly to Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*, according to which non-Catholics can be related (*ordinantur*) to the People of God through "unconscious desire." (MCC 103) However, unlike *Mystici Corporis*, *Lumen gentium* reserves this *ordinantur* only for the unbaptized, while non-Catholic Christians are treated as "linked" to the Church through baptism (LG 15). *Lumen gentium* lists several categories of non-Christians, assuring that those who seek God and strive to do his will by following the voice of their conscience can attain salvation, and that Divine Providence does not deprive those who have not yet come to an explicit knowledge of God of help on the path to salvation. The constitution emphasizes that all the good or truth found amongst non-Christians "is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel." (LG 16)

However, *Lumen gentium* (no. 16) does not refer to religions themselves, but to non-Christians as individuals. The constitution views them as candidates for the Gospel and potential members of the Church. Accordingly, if Christians acknowledge valuable elements in non-Christian religions, they may, following *Lumen gentium* (no. 16), regard these religions as *praeparatio evangelica*, or environments in which their followers can prepare to accept Christ's grace. Nevertheless, this approach does not consider the role of religions in the salvation of their followers, nor does it address what constitutes a "religion." This "good and truth" refers to non-Christians in general, without specifying their attitude to religiosity.

Another important document is the decree *Ad gentes* on the mission activity of the Church. As expected, this text also treats non-Christians as potential followers of the Gospel. However, unlike previous eras, it does not view them as being deprived of God's grace but rather as individuals in whom the secret presence of God and the "seeds of the Word" are already evident (see AG 9, 11). The decree states that "whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted,

and perfected for the glory of God.” (AG 9) This sentence is significant because it refers not only to non-Christians as individuals but also to their “rites and cultures,” and because it reveals a perspective sometimes referred to as fulfillment theology. According to this framework, non-Christian religions are not considered valuable in themselves but rather contain scattered elements of truth and goodness that may prepare their followers for the Gospel, which is fully realized only in Christ.

Also noteworthy is the teaching of the declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, which emphasizes the importance of freedom of conscience while also stating that “true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church.” (DH 1; cf. DH 3) The constitution *Gaudium et spes*, in turn, highlights the significance of Christ’s redemptive work, affirming that “the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.” (GS 22) It can therefore be concluded that, while Vatican II adopts a benevolent view toward non-Christians, their religions are viewed only as settings in which those who do not know Christ may encounter his hidden grace, and which can be interpreted as a preparation for the Gospel.

Against this background, the teaching of *Nostra aetate* on non-Christian religions appears to align precisely with the perspective of fulfillment theology. Although it does not explicitly mention the “seeds of the Word,” *Nostra aetate* emphasizes that the Catholic Church “rejects nothing that is *true and holy* in these religions” (italics mine) and that their teachings and ways of conduct “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.” (NA 2) This leads to an exhortation for members of the Church to “recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.” (NA 2) While the purpose of *Nostra aetate* was to define a practical attitude toward non-Christian religions, rather than to present a systematic teaching on religion, the declaration nevertheless contains several strictly doctrinal themes. Firstly, it recognizes the existence of “true and holy” elements in religions (i.e., not only among non-Christians themselves). Secondly, it views these valuable elements within these religions as reflecting the rays of Christ the Truth, offered to every human being. Thirdly, the declaration emphasizes that the spiritual, moral, and sociocultural goods found among followers of other religions should be protected and supported, thereby recognizing their significance. Thus, despite some ambiguity, the declaration seems to value not only the “seeds” of goodness and truth present in non-Christians as individuals but also the religions themselves as sociocultural phenomena.

During the postconciliar period, the question was sometimes raised as to whether the Second Vatican Council had offered a theological evaluation of religions. According to theologians such as Karl Rahner, the Council affirmed the possibility of salvation for non-Christians but left open the role of non-Christian religions in the salvation of their followers. This would imply that the Council’s teaching also includes the perspective that, as sociocultural phenomena, religions can be seen as

de jure means desired by God for the salvation of their followers (cf. Rahner 1983, 290–291). This interpretation is supported by the fact that none of the conciliar documents set out to resolve this issue and that religions as such are addressed only in *Nostra aetate*, which takes a practical and pastoral approach. However, theologians such as Gavin D’Costa maintain that the Council’s “silence” was deliberate and that there was no intention to recognize religions as God-ordained paths to salvation (see D’Costa 2000, 102–9).³ From this perspective, defining religion in terms of *semina Verbi* and *praeparatio evangelica* would not only be a consequence of the pastoral nature of the Council’s teaching but also an intentional approach that is still valid today.

In the following section, however, this paper will argue that the way we think about the meaning of non-Christian religions—and consequently how we interpret them—is closely related to our understanding of the phenomenon of religion itself. Therefore, it will try to bring out the understanding of religion that underlies the teaching of *Nostra aetate*. Consequently, we will consider not only what has been said explicitly but also what has merely been implied.

2. Unsaid Within the Said: *Nostra Aetate* and the Phenomenon of Religion

When describing the concept of religion as set out in *Nostra aetate*, it is important to bear in mind that treating religion and religions as distinct, easily defined entities is problematic. For religious studies scholars, the contemporary concept of “religion” is an ambiguous category that poses many difficulties, particularly in an intercultural context. Religious pluralism is an important factor in the globalized reality of the 21st century, influencing political affairs and social life. Consequently, religion and religions are widely discussed in the public sphere, and anyone with some knowledge of Western culture has at least a general understanding of the concept of “religion” and how it is used.

At the same time, religious scholars have been struggling for decades with the problem of defining “religion” and the multifaceted nature of their field of study (see Idinopulos and Wilson 1998). It would likely be easier to obtain a quick answer to the question about the nature of religion from a random passerby than from a religious studies scholar. While there are many theories about religion and its origins, most researchers agree that the category of “religion” is a construct that evolved within Western culture.⁴ While certain scholars have called for the complete abandonment

³ However, D’Costa’s approach is specific and does not fit into conventional patterns, as the author attempts to go beyond the traditional divisions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

⁴ On the discussion of the category of religion, see, e.g., Schilbrack 2012.

of the concept of “religion,” such an outcome appears improbable. It is therefore worthwhile to engage with the term reflectively and critically. One must be aware that behind every reflection on religion there is a theory, and that the adoption of a particular theory of religion in turn results in specific ideas about what is—and what is not—religion.

These observations can also be applied to the Second Vatican Council’s teachings on religion. Christian tradition has not developed any indigenous trend of religious reflection. Throughout history, theologians have rarely addressed non-Christian religions, except perhaps in connection with soteriological issues.⁵ Systematic theological reflection on religions and the phenomenon of human religiosity only began in the period preceding the Second Vatican Council.⁶ Some of the Council Fathers, particularly those from Japan, India, South Asia, and Africa, had personal experience of encountering the world of non-Christian religions and their followers. Nevertheless, the perspective of most Catholic theologians of that period was shaped by the theological formation of the time and the corresponding philosophical approach typical of Christian intellectuals with a Western education. This was also reflected in the wording of *Nostra aetate*.

The *Nostra aetate* declaration focuses on relations with non-Christian religions, and its key objective is to build peace and unity among people of different traditions (see NA 1a, 5b).⁷ This is evident, for instance, in the commission’s remark on the rejection of an amendment to the draft, which proposed the wording “[people] expect from religion (*a religione*) answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition” instead of “expect from the various religions (*a variis religionibus*).” The commission pointed out that the purpose of the document is not to engage in the philosophy of religion but to reflect on the “multiform religious phenomenon of the human race.” (AS IV.4, 699) However, in order to be able to describe this “multiform religious phenomenon,” one must have some idea of what the religions mentioned in *Nostra aetate* actually are; therefore, the authors of the declaration’s language must have been guided by a specific theory of religion on which its teaching was based. Certain features of this approach can be discerned “between the lines” of the declaration.

To begin with, it is worth noting that *Nostra aetate* addresses the attitude toward non-Christian religions; religions are therefore treated as autonomous entities toward which one can take a stance (see NA 1a). Paragraph of *Nostra aetate* (no. 1c) contains a phenomenological description of issues that the declaration presents as

⁵ On the development of approaches to non-Christian religions in the history of Catholic doctrine and theology, see Wąsek, Gilski, and Huspeková 2025, 23–134; cf. Kubacki 2005.

⁶ For more on the history of the development of reflection on religion in Christian theology, see Huspeková 2022, 36–55.

⁷ For greater precision, I refer to the declaration in its standard form (NA 1), indicating the paragraph of the relevant section (NA 1a, 5b, etc.) in which the discussed content appears, following the form used in recent commentaries on the Council documents (see, e.g., Vázquez Jiménez 2024).

characteristic of religious traditions. According to the passage already quoted, people expect religions to provide "answers to the unsolved riddles (*aenigmatibus*) of the human condition." (NA 1c) The declaration emphasizes that religions address matters concerning human existence. The commission rejected an amendment to replace *aenigmatibus* (riddles) with *quaestionibus* (questions), as the former sounded too intellectual and did not sufficiently express the connection with human life (see AS IV.4, 699). Nevertheless, these "riddles" are presented as questions addressing issues such as the meaning and purpose of human life, morality, and the problem of suffering and death. Thus, religions are primarily defined by areas of existential and philosophical reflection typical of major doctrinal religious traditions.

The list of existential questions concludes with the issue of the "ultimate and ineffable mystery which enfolds our existence, from which we come and to which we are going." (NA 1c)⁸ This wording seems to presume that human religious quests always involve an intuition of the mystery of God (the idea that God is both the origin and the goal of the human race appears a few sentences earlier in NA 1b). This theme is echoed in the next paragraph, which refers to the religious experience of humanity:

From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power (*perceptio illius arcanae virtutis*) 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 (*sensu religioso*). (NA 2a)

As with the previous point, this is a phenomenological account of religion throughout human history. However, the passage suggests that the awareness of "power" is closely linked to religious experience, which is the source of *sensus religiosus*. The next sentence notes that religions address these existential questions through increasingly subtle concepts, employing the term *quaestiones* rather than *aenigmata*. Despite the initial intention, the emphasis thus shifts to the content and doctrine—religions are portrayed as expressions of a primal experience of "power" that imbues human life with a "religious sense," chiefly by offering ideas that respond to fundamental existential questions.

A detailed analysis of the authors' background would be necessary to determine the sources of inspiration for this passage from *Nostra aetate*, but this is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it is possible to outline at least the essential features of the intellectual climate in which the text was written. Paragraphs of *Nostra aetate* (nos. 1–2) were mainly compiled during the work on the third draft, which was presented in the conciliar hall on November 20, 1964. A group of experts

⁸ The translation used is from the edition by Neuner and Jacques Dupuis (1981), which is more precise than the official version.

appointed by Cardinal Franz König, a specialist in religious studies and later president of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, was entrusted with preparing the text. This group comprised Charles Moeller, Yves Congar, Paul Pfister, and Joseph Neuner (see Borelli 2017, 19). Paragraph of *Nostra aetate* (no. 2), which contains passages on Hinduism and Buddhism, primarily comes from Neuner, who attended the Council as a *peritus* with the bishops from India, and Pfister, who accompanied the bishops from Japan (see Congar 2012, 649). The core content of *Nostra aetate* (no. 1), which includes the aforementioned list of “existential questions,” was drafted by Moeller, a Belgian theologian and literary scholar who had a significant impact on the discussion of *Gaudium et spes* at the Council (see Borelli 2021, 24).

Based on this information, it is possible to gain an overall picture of religion and religions present in the environment of the Council’s *periti* and trace their sources of inspiration. As early as 1951–1956, König edited the pioneering three-volume work, *Christus und die Religionen der Erde*, which is devoted to reflections on religion and religions from theological and philosophical perspectives. His preliminary study shows that König had extensive knowledge of various trends in religious studies, including the history and phenomenology of religion, as well as the works of authors such as Émile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud (see König 1951). However, he considered the latter to be too naturalistic, favoring approaches that we would today describe as comparative, historical, and non-reductive. These preferences are also evident in König’s recommended reading list for general religious studies research. He refers almost exclusively to historical–comparative religious studies or theological reflection with an apologetic focus, citing authors such as Cornelis Tiele, Nathan Söderblom, Henri Pinard de la Boullaye, and Alfred Bertholet, as well as those associated with the phenomenology of religion, including Rudolf Otto, Friedrich Heiler, Gerardus van der Leeuw, or Mircea Eliade (cf. König 1951, 15–16; 1956, 734).

König defines religion as a relationship between humans and a superhuman force in which they place their belief and feel a sense of dependence, or as a belief in the advent of a new, completely different reality into human life. According to König, religion consists precisely of belief in this “superhuman force” and the resulting order of life, whereby, in König’s view, this “force” is personal in nature (König 1951, 39).⁹ In his concluding study, König attempts to demonstrate through a comparison of various religious traditions that the world’s major religions with a founder emerged through human initiative, whereas only Christianity has divine origins; according to König, “other religions are steps of the journey towards this goal, [but] only the path [of Christ] leads to the goal.” (König 1956, 776) Thus, it appears that König’s vision of human religiosity was primarily influenced by historical–phenomenological trends

⁹ König refers here to the Protestant theologians Söderblom and Johann P. Steffes, using their definitions of religion as a starting point for his own reflections.

in religious studies and that he viewed non-Christian religions as imperfect manifestations of humanity’s religious intuitions, which were fulfilled in Christ.

Moeller adopted a similar stance on religion, emphasizing the continuity of humanity’s religious development and presenting religions as a preparation for the coming of Christ. In the first volume of his 1957 work *Littérature du XX siècle et christianisme*, e.g., he writes that “if the revealed Word takes up and crowns the best of non-Christian religions, it does so by correcting and, above all, *transfiguring* them” and that in Christianity there is a “promotion, *transfiguration* of the human, through supernatural revelation.” (Moeller 1957, 18) For Moeller, religions thus represent a manifestation of human endeavor, stemming from the desire for happiness and meaning. This view corresponds to the aforementioned approach known as fulfillment theology, according to which non-Christian religions reflect human quests while containing elements of truth that can only be recovered through the Gospel.

To gain an insight into the intellectual atmosphere among the periti, the writings of Jean Daniélou are also worth consulting. Although he was not part of the team working on *Nostra aetate* (nos. 1–2), he was one of the most active experts at the Council and participated in many discussions during the drafting process. In the introduction to the monograph *Introduction to the Great Religions*, Daniélou surveys various trends in religious studies. He remarks, however, that, in his opinion, the most noteworthy historians of religion are Otto, van der Leeuw, and Eliade—authors who influenced the development of the phenomenology of religion (with Daniélou drawing most heavily on Eliade’s approach) (see Daniélou 1967a, 12 [1964]). This also aligns with Daniélou’s theological perspective on religions:

Christianity, through Christian wisdom, completes and fulfils the imperfect truths which exist in the pagan religions. It takes up the natural values of the religious man, it recovers them in order to consecrate them. (Daniélou 1967b, 159 [1964])

Therefore, according to Daniélou, the doctrines of “pagan religions” contain imperfect, hidden truths that are yet to be revealed, fulfilled, and recovered by Christianity.¹⁰

These examples suggest that the fundamental inspirations for the Council experts’ image of human religiosity came from the history and phenomenology of religion. Meanwhile, the theological perspective was part of the “theology of

¹⁰ Apart from the introduction to the monograph *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, I have not been able to find any texts by Neuner that describe his general approach to religion. In this introduction, Neuner briefly addresses the difficulties of applying the concept of religion to non-Western traditions, arguing that non-Christian religions should be treated as “pre-Christian,” with their followers viewed as entering the path of Christ. Neuner’s approach therefore seems close to the *praeparatio evangelica* perspective (see Neuner 1967, 13–18). However, I have not found any published works by Pfister concerning his approach to the phenomenon of religion.

fulfillment” approach. The themes described earlier in *Nostra aetate* (nos. 1–2) do indeed correspond to the concepts of phenomenologists and historians and comparatists of religion; Otto emphasized the *sensus numinis* of man and the experience of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, while van der Leeuw considered the category of “power” to be the key issue in the description of religious experience (cf. Otto 1924 [1917]; van der Leeuw 1938 [1933]). Eliade, in turn, viewed the diversity of religions as historical manifestations of the intuition of *sacrum*, and man as *homo religiosus*—essentially a religious being.¹¹ It is worth noting that some of Eliade’s key works, including *The Sacred and the Profane* and *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, were published shortly before the Council and were widely regarded at the time as seminal contributions to religious studies (Eliade 1958 [1949], 1959 [1957]; cf. Saliba 1976). The idea that Christianity is the highest, most exceptional of religions, and that this can be inferred from comparing different religious traditions, can be traced back, e.g., to Tiele (1897–99).

In this view, religions are primarily understood in internal, doctrinal, or affective terms, emphasizing the search for truth or answers to existential questions. The external expressions of human religiosity are regarded more as the outcomes of these primary intuitions. Consequently, more “mundane” aspects, such as the function of religion in human societies, rituals, or the relationship between religion and human survival in the natural environment, were considered peripheral to the concept of religion (however, anthropologists conducting field research often report that these aspects play a more significant role than content-related issues). This approach to religion also informs the theological perspective and vice versa. The view of religion as historical manifestations of reference to a “mysterious force” aligns with the theological vision in which Christianity reveals the true “identity” of this Mystery. In turn, the theological vision embraced by scholars shapes their attitude to religion and leads them to prefer phenomenological and historical approaches to religious studies.

Given this, it can be assumed that the conciliar documents reflect the intellectual preferences of the experts and the Council Fathers regarding the concept of religion. Of particular significance is the harmony between the conciliar teaching’s pastoral and missionary orientation and the historical–phenomenological trend in religious studies. The former views the history of non-Christian religions as “preparation for the Gospel,” while the latter perceives religions as historical manifestations of the universal human search for transcendence, or, as Eliade put it, as part of the “morphology of the sacred.” From this perspective, however, the way the Council’s experts engage with the phenomenon of religion can indeed be regarded as contextual.

The preferences adopted by theologians of the conciliar era come as no surprise, particularly in light of the period’s theological discussions concerning approaches

¹¹ It is worth noting that the phrase “*homo ens religiosum appellari possit*” (emphasis original) was later even included in the *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae* (see CCE 28).

deemed reductionist by Christian theologians and philosophers. In the decades preceding the Second Vatican Council, works by authors such as Bronislaw Malinowski emerged, who viewed religion as a practical coping mechanism resulting from the psychophysical needs of the individual (cf. Malinowski 1925), Freud, who described religion as the wishful fulfillment of human desires and the equivalent of collective neurosis (cf. Freud 1927), and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, who considered religion a system of practices and beliefs that serve to maintain the integrity of the social order (cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1945). Such authors frequently sought to explain away religion in purely natural or psychological terms, which, from the perspective of those aligned with the Christian worldview, was regarded as provocative and overly naturalistic.

However, significant developments have occurred in both theological reflection and religious studies since then. After the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church began to address interreligious dialogue and the possible directions for a theological approach to religious pluralism in various ways. John Paul II's teachings, while remaining within the perspective of the theology of the "seeds of the Word," placed greater emphasis on the action of the Holy Spirit in all human reality, including the cultures and religions of the world (see, e.g., *RM* 28). During the latter half of the 20th century, the role of non-Christian religions in the salvation of their followers was widely debated among Catholic theologians, although interest in this subject declined somewhat following the publication of the declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000) by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which was accompanied by disciplinary measures against several Catholic theologians.¹² However, despite these events, the whole issue of the reception of Vatican II's teaching on non-Christian religions is not considered closed. Also, Pope Francis's position is perceived as unclear by certain groups, as evidenced by the recent controversy surrounding his statements on religion, which some have interpreted as a departure from Catholic orthodoxy (cf. *Pope Francis Stirs Controversy* 2024). Therefore, the question of how far the teachings on religion outlined at the Council can be interpreted remains relevant.

Concurrently, in recent decades, religious studies have increasingly converged with anthropology and other disciplines. Multi-method, multifaceted approaches have become predominant, while extreme, reductionist trends have declined (cf. Bennett 1996). Non-reductive religious studies has been criticized by anthropologists and field researchers, who have subsequently forced it to revise its assumptions, particularly in light of challenges related to the comparative method and the philosophical premise of religion's irreducibility (cf. Idinopulos and Yonan 1994). Naturalistic approaches, such as the Cognitive Science of Religion, which have at times been employed in a highly reductionist manner by "new atheists" like Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, have been criticized for their methodological

¹² On the debate concerning the declaration *Dominus Iesus* and later notifications of Dupuis, Jon Sobrino, and Roger Haight, see Tan 2013.

limitations in accounting for the phenomenon of religion, as well as for their lack of “epistemic humility” regarding the truth claims of various belief systems (cf. Barrett and Church 2013). Today, extremely reductionist approaches that completely ignore the perspectives of religious communities are rare, while “non-reductionist” approaches cannot ignore research in neurobiology, evolutionary theory, and other “harder” sciences.

In the current situation, theologians are free to choose an appropriate concept of religion, provided their approach does not explicitly contradict the fundamental principles of theology, such as the existence of God or the authenticity of religious experience. This is also the case in point when studying religiosity as a human phenomenon; it should be noted that describing, for instance, certain religious ideas as the product of specific cognitive patterns does not necessarily imply a denial of the reality of these beliefs. Contemporary religious studies offer theologians a wide variety of approaches; therefore, the next section is limited to one example.

3. Still to Say: “Religion” as a Human Phenomenon

Vatican II led to a significant period of theological reflection on religion and inter-religious dialogue, during which various approaches were experimented with. These included interreligious monastic dialogue and the dialogue of experience (see, e.g., the work of Raimon Panikkar and the activities of the organization Dialogue Inter-religieux Monastique / Monastic Interreligious Dialogue [DIMMID, n.d.]), as well as the practice of comparative theology (see Clooney 2010) and proposals emerging from postcolonial perspectives on the theology of religions (see Daggers 2013). Furthermore, certain issues discussed by the Council but not directly addressed in *Nostra aetate*, such as the situation of African religions, were addressed in official documents and in theological reflection. In systematic theology, the focus also shifted in various ways. Some authors developed the approach to non-Christian religions outlined during Vatican II in terms of Trinitarian theology (see, e.g., D’Costa 2000; or for interreligious dialogue, Barnes 2002, 205–29). Others attempted to ground their theology in the concept of revelation. This can be seen in the work of evangelical authors such as Daniel Strange (2014) and his theory of “remnantal revelation,” and in Catholic circles, for instance, in the theory of the “revelatory origin of religion” presented by theologians from the Catholic University of Lublin (see, e.g., Ledwoń 2006; cf. Rusecki 2007). Recently, there have also been attempts to engage theology in dialogue with the Cognitive Science of Religion (see Gornandt 2023), as well as attempts to apply naturalistic approaches to religion within theological reflection (see Henriksen 2023). These largely stem from non-Catholic thinkers. All such attempts offer inspiration for seeking alternative perspectives on religion, addressing what

remained *unsaid* during the Council period, and what there is *still to say* in contemporary discussions on non-Christian religions.

Building on the previous discussion of applying naturalistic theories of religion to theology, I offer a brief sketch of an alternative approach to the concept of religion in theological reflection, suggesting three directions for its development. As we have seen, the background to *Nostra aetate* and conciliar teaching on religion in general reveals a perspective that views religion as an irreducible phenomenon arising from the experience of a "mysterious power" and as an expression of the human search for God. I have attempted to demonstrate that this perspective is contextual. Consequently, we may consider what a theological narrative of human religiosity might entail if we were to replace the phenomenological–historical approach with an alternative vision—one that treats religion as a *human* phenomenon reducible to cultural factors and emerging through the evolution of the human species.

This approach is akin to explanations of the origins of religion as proposed, for instance, by evolutionary psychology. This field of study assumes that the brain, like any other organ, has evolved over time and can therefore be examined from an evolutionary perspective, which means the brain's outputs are also subject to evolutionary analysis (Liddle and Shackelford 2021, 2). The focus is therefore on evolved psychological mechanisms in which elements of religion, such as images, ideas, behaviors, social structures, and rituals, are rooted. According to this view, elements of religion arose in the human species in the context of changes related to the evolution of the human brain (either as a by-product or as an adaptation; this is a matter of debate among scholars). From this perspective, the notion of an "irreducible essence" of religion becomes irrelevant. Instead, what we encounter is a set of ideas, beliefs, and practices shaped by specific cognitive mechanisms that generate the phenomena collectively referred to as religiosity. In this way, religion can be studied as a phenomenon whose foundations are deeply embedded in our mental and physical structures, containing elements present not only in humans but also in animals (notably ritualization and behaviors indicating some form of mourning for deceased members of the species).

Such naturalistic approaches allow for more nuanced descriptions of religion, taking into account the complexity of human religiosity and phenomena that are sometimes referred to as pseudo-religious or crypto-religious. An example of a corresponding perspective of religion is provided by Christian Smith, who defines religion as a "complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers ... which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realising human goods and avoiding things bad." (Smith 2017, 22) This approach emphasizes the importance of practices rather than religious doctrines and ideas alone; here, religion is understood as a set of practices that may be linked to particular beliefs, together creating a highly dynamic picture of human religiosity. According to Smith,

“clusters of religious practices are always diverse, converging, and diverging, [t]he boundaries of religious traditions are porous,” hence the temporal continuities of religious traditions are relative (Smith 2017, 48). This means that “religious cultures and institutions are always located somewhere in the middle range of a spectrum between the extremes of absolute flux and permanent changelessness.” (Smith 2017, 48) Living, real religions are therefore not coherent, abstract systems of belief but rather complex matrices of elements that typically appear in religious contexts, yet may also emerge in secular settings.

When viewed from a theological perspective, these theories of religion may be employed to emphasize the anthropological aspect of human religiosity, viewing humanity as an “evolved image of God” (cf. Henriksen 2023). Against the background of conciliar teaching, which regards non-Christian religions as (merely) manifestations of natural human endeavor that must be perfected through supernatural revelation, this approach emphasizes that the world has been filled with God’s grace from the very beginning. Elements of what we call religion developed alongside the evolution of humankind as a species, and this entire process occurred in God’s presence and in relation to the work of the Holy Spirit. If we take seriously the belief that human beings are created in the image of God—or, according to the theology of some Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa or Irenaeus of Lyons, in the image of Christ who is the true image of God—we must also recognize that the creatures becoming human through the process of evolution were shaped from the beginning in such a way as to reveal in themselves the image of the Son of God who was to become incarnate.

From this point of view, it is meaningless to determine at what moment—or whether it was a single moment—the elements that constitute religion became a means of communication between humans and God and among humans themselves. Nor does it seem reasonable to decide whether these “religions” were willed and established by God *de jure*, or whether religious pluralism exists only *de facto*, under God’s permissive will. If all of created reality is touched by grace, and the mechanisms that generate religion are inscribed in human cognitive mechanisms, bodily existence, social structures, and specific patterns of religious thought, then it is difficult to treat them merely as an “accident at work” (the more pressing issue is the problem of human nature being wounded by sin; however, this topic requires a separate discussion).

In this regard, various forms of the theology of religion following “Rahner’s line” appear to offer an appropriate theological framework. From this perspective, the turning point in the history of salvation for Christians is not an abstract supernatural revelation, but the coming of Christ. His advent is understood as the culmination of God’s self-giving and the enduring reality of the hypostatic union (cf. Rahner 1982, 157–58). The central category in this approach to the theology of religion is incarnation, not revelation. If we profess that, in the incarnation, the Son of God truly became man, we must recognize that, by expressing himself through the

human nature of Jesus of Nazareth, he also took on all the imperfect, "messy," evolutionarily developed human tendencies and mechanisms that constitute the human condition. Furthermore, by incarnating at a specific point in history, the Word embraced all the human phenomena that shaped religion within that context, thereby initiating the tradition we now call Christianity. Firstly, this approach allows theologians to view Christianity in the same way as other religions and to draw on insights from non-theological disciplines to illuminate the human, "mundane" aspects of ecclesial life that might otherwise go unnoticed. Secondly, this seemingly naturalistic approach to religion paves the way for theological reflection on religions as anthropology. Reflecting on religions in this way means reflecting on human nature, in which various psychophysical mechanisms serve as a medium of communication between God and man.

A second theme that emerges from this naturalistic understanding of religion is the blurring of the sharp distinction between religion and "non-religion." According to this perspective, non-Christian religions are no longer considered distinct, irreducible entities, separate from unbelief and atheism. Instead, they are seen as one possible manifestation of the human mechanisms that generate religious practices and worldviews, which are also present in non-religious settings. Consequently, the question of the Church's relationship to non-Christian religions becomes, more broadly, a question of its relationship to the realm of human religiosity, which encompasses not only traditional religions but also diffused religion, secular religions, "non-religions," and atheism.¹³

Even during the Second Vatican Council's discussions on the draft concerning non-Christian religions, some Council Fathers suggested considering the situation of non-Christians who do not profess any religion. For instance, Bishop Walenty Wójcik recommended that the section on non-Christians, initially intended for the decree on ecumenism, also include those raised outside any religion as well as individuals who had abandoned the Christian faith (see AS II.5, 829). However, the issue of atheism was addressed in another draft, which ultimately became part of the *Gaudium et spes* constitution (cf. AS IV.4, 703; see GS 19–22). Despite their ambiguity, religions were regarded as a preparation for the Gospel; by contrast, the world of unbelief was perceived as a threat to Christianity, partly due to the political context of the Eastern Bloc. This approach remained present in the teachings of Paul VI and John Paul II and, in a somewhat modified form, in those of Benedict XVI.

However, contemporary research on religion shows that it is impossible to clearly separate the religious and non-religious worlds, and that the landscape of human religiosity in the first half of the 21st century is becoming increasingly fluid and complex. More attention is being given to phenomena such as multiple religious

¹³ On the discussion concerning the phenomenon of "nonreligiousness," see, e.g., Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016.

affiliations, new religious movements, “nones” (people who do not profess any religion), and various types of “seekers.” The sociology of religion has long demonstrated that a lack of religious affiliation does not necessarily imply irreligiosity. Expanding theological reflection on human religiosity to include these difficult-to-define phenomena draws attention to topics such as the spirituality of seekers and dialogue with “secular spirituality.” It allows them to be seen as integral aspects of the human religious experience.

The third topic, which will only be briefly touched upon here, concerns the use of patristic sources for theological reflection on the phenomenon of religion. The Second Vatican Council’s teaching on religion generally refers only to patristic texts that fit into theologies of “seeds of the Word” and “preparation for the Gospel.” Thus, references are made to Eusebius of Caesarea (LG 16), Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus of Lyon (AG 3).¹⁴ *Nostra aetate* contains no references to patristic texts; the only footnote that referred to Irenaeus of Lyon’s idea of “the Word, who has been always present with the human race, by means indeed of various dispensations” (*Adv. haer.* IV.28.2) was ultimately removed from the draft as ambiguous (AS IV.4, 702). However, as Ireneusz S. Ledwoń notes, because the perspective of fulfillment theology resonated with the Council’s pastoral and missionary orientation, the field of interest was somewhat artificially narrowed to include only those patristic sources that fit within this framework (see Ledwoń 2012, 12). This approach to patristic texts was also linked to the specific attitude to religion noted above: in order to present religions in a positive light in the Council’s teachings, only certain specific themes that related directly to non-Christian religious phenomena were emphasized, above all, the idea of “pagan wisdom,” since pagan cults themselves were generally viewed negatively by the Church Fathers.

Nevertheless, when human religiosity is considered from an anthropological perspective, it opens the possibility of drawing inspiration in different ways. For instance, Ruth Gornandt, in her article on the dialogue between theology and Cognitive Science of Religion, refers to John of Damascus’s notion of knowledge of God as “naturally implanted in man,” as well as to Tertullian’s concept of the “naturally Christian soul.” (Gornandt 2023, 751–52) This inspiration could also extend to other themes, particularly *imago Dei* theology, reflections on the meaning of human corporeality, the relationship between nature and grace, and the creation and deification of human nature. In this context, the anthropology of the Antiochian school, including Irenaeus of Lyon, who sees the image of God in human corporeality, seems particularly inspiring. There have already been attempts to present theological narratives of God’s creation of the world and humanity through evolution, with the authors also

¹⁴ More information on patristic inspiration in the Council’s teaching on non-Christians can be found in footnote 38 to paragraph 10 of the second draft of the *De Ecclesia* schema, which was ultimately deleted. This footnote contains a detailed study of relevant themes from the works of the Church Fathers (see AS II.1, 228).

drawing on patristic sources in their reflections (see Edwards 1999; Haight 2019). Nevertheless, applying such a perspective to religion as an evolutionarily created human phenomenon remains to be explored.

Conclusion

The examples above represent just one way in which the ideas articulated during Vatican II can be developed further today. Examining the Council’s teaching on non-Christian religions reveals that its approach to religion was shaped by the intellectual climate of the time. This was characterized by a distinctive hermeneutics of religion, combining pastoral sensitivity with a philosophical–phenomenological understanding of humanity as *homo religiosus*. From today’s perspective, it can be said that the declaration *Nostra aetate*, together with the teachings on religion contained in other conciliar texts, opened the way and set the course, allowing for further creative theological reflection on religion and religions.

Bringing to light both the *said* and the *unsaid within the said* shows that, even six decades after the Council, there is much *still to say*. Applying contemporary theories of religion to the Council’s perspective opens the way to examine the links between theological and non-theological sciences of religion, the status of religion as a human phenomenon within salvation history, its connection to the world of “non-religion,” and the experiences of seekers. In this sense, reflection on the Council’s approach to the notion of religion is not a closed chapter, but rather a dynamic process in which theology, anthropology, and the empirical sciences can collaborate to develop a new language with which to narrate the story of humanity and the world: created by God, ordered by the Logos, and sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit from the very beginning.

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The Council Fathers' Discussions and Controversies on the Inclusion of References to Islam in the Second Vatican Council Documents

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Abstract: This article presents a detailed account of the evolution of references to Islam during the Second Vatican Council. Analyses reveal systematic changes, beginning with the Council Fathers' narrow perspective at the Council's outset (related to differing interpretations of the principle *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*), continuing through preparations for Vatican II and the changes occurring during individual sessions. The dynamics of this process encompassed the activity of Middle Eastern bishops (especially the Melkite hierarchy) and Pope Paul VI, as well as the evolution of texts on Islam in the documents *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate*. It is significant that the theology of Louis Massignon, developed in the first half of the 20th century, became an acceptable basis for references to Islam in the Council's documents. Nevertheless, the path to the official recognition of the necessity of dialogue with Muslims, from the Council's lack of interest in non-Christian religions to the adoption of references to Islam, was long, difficult, and at the same time fascinating. Finally, in *Nostra aetate*, the passage on Islam (no. 3) is presented before the mention of Judaism (no. 4). The article shows how these concise Council mentions of Islam—due to their official character, their essentially positive content, and the direction of the Church's thought and action—ultimately paved a new path for Catholic communities.

Keywords: Second Vatican Council, Islam, *Lumen gentium*, *Nostra aetate*, Muslims, oriental Christians, Maximos IV, Paul VI

In the 1950s, no one in the Congregation of the Holy Office (*Sanctum Officium*) planned to make positive doctrinal pronouncements on Islam. Just two years before John XXIII (1958–1963) announced the Council, in 1957, Pope Pius XII (1939–1958) spoke critically of Islam in a veiled, descriptive manner in his encyclical *Fidei donum*. While he did not explicitly mention Islam or Muslims, the audience knew the reality he was referring to:

Vobis sane haud ignotae sunt eorum religiosae vitae rationes, qui, quamvis Dei cultum profiteri contendant, multorum tamen animos ad aliam viam facile trahunt et alliciunt, quae Iesu Christi non est, cunctarum gentium Servatoris. Noster communis Patris animus ad cordatos homines universos patet; verumtamen, cum eius in terris vices geramus, qui Via, Veritas ac Vita est, summa cum aegritudine eiusmodi rerum condiciones non considerare non possumus (Of course, you know the religious tenets of those people who, although they are quick to profess that they worship God, nevertheless are easily

attracting and enticing the minds of many into another path which is not that of Jesus Christ, the Savior of all nations. Our heart, which is that of the common Father of all, is open to every man of good will; but We, who are the representative on earth of Him, Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, cannot contemplate such a situation without great sorrow [FD 19]).

We must therefore ask what happened between 1957 and 1965 that, just a few years after the promulgation of *Fidei donum*, the pessimistic tone of this encyclical of Pius XII was overshadowed by the documents *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate*.

1. Reasons for the Absence of Mentions of Islam in the Preparatory Stage and the First Session of the Second Vatican Council

During the preparatory stage (*vota*) and the first session of the Council, no proposals for a new approach to the relationship between the Catholic Church and Islam emerged. Robert Caspar (1923–2007) even suggested that this topic had been explicitly removed from the program proposed to the Council by the *Commissio Antepreparatoria* (Caspar 1976, 1). The legacy of turbulent Christian–Muslim and classical relations was likely still present, despite a certain evolution in the perspective on Islam (Unsworth 2008, 299–316). In the first stages of Vatican II, the thinking of most Council Fathers was marked by the legacy of the theological formulation of the principle *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (“there is no salvation outside the Church”). This is not the place to present the development of the understanding of this idea from Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 30–ca. 107), Irenaeus (ca. 140–ca. 202), Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 212), Origen (ca. 185–ca. 253), and many Church Fathers. It is only worth emphasizing that, from Augustine (354–430) onwards, this principle was gradually made more specific, excluding salvation for those who did not belong to the Church. Until the 20th century, the clergy’s views on Islam were influenced by papal interpretations and the conciliar principle *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (Sullivan 1992, 63; Aydin 2002, 13–16). The canon of such rulings included the statement of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which recognized that

una vero est fidelium universalis ecclesia, extra quam nullus omnino salvatur (there is indeed one universal church of the faithful, outside of which nobody at all is saved [Fourth Lateran Council [1215] 1990, 230]).

Leaving aside the extreme view of Boniface VIII (1294–1303), who in his famous bull *Unam sanctam* (1302) went so far as to state that for salvation it was necessary to be a member of the Church and to recognize papal authority (Boniface VIII 1908, 385–86),

the Council of Florence (1442) expressed a very clear opinion. It had a decisive impact on the formation of the Catholic clergy:

firmiter credit, profitetur et prædicat nullos extra ecclesiam catholicam existentes, non solum pagano nos, sed nec ludeos aut hereticos atque scismaticos eterne vite fieri posse participes ([The Church] firmly believes, professes and preaches that all those who are outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans but also Jews or heretics and schismatics, cannot share in eternal life [Council of Basel–Ferrara–Florence–Rome [1431–1445] 1990, 578]).

Thus, during the preparatory phase and at the opening of the Second Vatican Council, the Church's theological approach to Islam was, in many respects, defined by the dogmatic pronouncements of the *Magisterium Ecclesiae*. Christian prejudices against Islam and erroneous interpretations of this religion, accumulated over centuries, were also significant. It is known that the Church first perceived Islam as a Christian heresy and, over time, as an aggressive religious system that encountered numerous polemics and criticism. Essentially, for centuries, the Catholic Church portrayed Muhammad as a false prophet (Esposito 1998, 14).

Thus, this legacy, along with the multiplying problems of the Catholic Church in a secularizing world, meant that during the preparatory phase of the Council, Church representatives generally did not express a need for specific mentions of Islam in the Council documents. This is evidenced by the so-called *vota* that began arriving after Pope John XXIII announced the need for an ecumenical council on January 25, 1959. Cardinal Domenico Tardini (1888–1961), who chaired the Antepreparatory Commission (*Commissio Antepreparatoria*), sent a letter to all those who, under the law at the time, had the right to be consulted and to propose topics they wished to discuss at the Council. The broad definition of Canon 223 of the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* was applied. As a result, in addition to diocesan and titular bishops, various nonepiscopal clergy, such as abbots, apostolic prefects, and others, were consulted. Furthermore, requests were also sent to every department of the Roman Curia and all Catholic universities and faculties. An analysis of the dozen or so volumes of folio responses contained in the *Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando* (series Antepreparatoria 1), commonly referred to collectively as *vota*, indicates that the need to address Islam was generally not seen. It is clear that at this stage, a Eurocentric model of the Church was clearly dominant. Antepreparatoria comprises three volumes devoted to European responses (ADA II.1–3), while only one volume each is devoted to Asia (ADA II.4), Africa (ADA II.5), North and Central America (ADA II.6), South America (ADA II.7), and religious congregations (ADA II.8). A separate volume presents the responses of the Roman Curia (ADA III), and subsequent volumes present suggestions from Catholic universities (ADA IV.1.1–2; IV.2). Significantly, Islam is not mentioned in

the *vota* from Asia (ADA II.4) and Africa (ADA II.5), where the majority of the Muslim population lives.

These *vota* were harshly assessed by theologians and historians of the Second Vatican Council. In retrospect, they were seen as conformist and unoriginal proposals (Morozzo della Rocca 1989, 122), or even too timid and causing great disappointment (Fouilloux 1995, 121, 132). No bold solutions within the Church were proposed. It is therefore not surprising that the issue of Islam was not taken into account either at the opening of the Second Vatican Council or during the initial deliberations on the drafting of the declaration *Nostra aetate*.

It should be emphasized, however, that the preconciliar period witnessed a significant evolution in the understanding of the principle of *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. Paradoxically, some papal pronouncements from the 19th century weakened the radical understanding of this principle, paving the way for dialogue. For example, the traditional approach was corrected by Pius IX (1846–1878), who strongly emphasized God's mercy toward all people and the lack of responsibility on the part of non-Christians before God for the insurmountable obstacles to the full knowledge of Christianity. In allocution *Singulari quadam*, he emphasized:

Tolga Iddio, Venerabili Fratelli, che Noi osiamo por termini alla misericordia divina che è infinita (Pius IX 2006, 1; “God forbid, Venerable Brethren, that we should dare to set limits to God's mercy, which is infinite” [translation by the author]).

and that

Poiché si deve tener per fede che nessuno può salvarsi fuori della Chiesa Apostolica Romana, questa è l'unica arca di salvezza; chiunque non sia entrato in essa perirà nel diluvio. Ma nel tempo stesso si deve pure tenere per certo che coloro che ignorano la vera religione, quando la loro ignoranza sia invincibile, non sono di ciò colpevoli dinanzi agli occhi del Signore (Pius IX 2006, 2; “It must, of course, be held as of faith that no one can be saved outside the apostolic Roman Church, that the Church is the only ark of salvation, and that whoever does not enter it will perish in the flood. Yet, on the other hand, it must likewise be held as certain that those who are in ignorance of true religion, if this ignorance is invincible, are not subject to any guilt in this matter before the eyes of the Lord” [translation by Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, in *The Christian Faith* 1996, 386]).

It seems that John XXIII, despite his openness to the need for change in the Catholic Church, did not make any references to Islam during the Council. On September 18, 1960, however, he suggested to Cardinal Augustin Bea (1881–1968) that, as part of the preparations for the Council, the secretariat under his leadership, in addition to ecumenical issues, should also develop a framework for a document on the Church's relations with the Jews. The framework, *De Iudaeis* [On the Jews], was

presented to the pope in November 1961. However, it was not presented at the Council's first session (Kubacki 2022, 113). All indications are that Oriental Christians' intervention contributed to this. Four months before the opening of the first session of the Council, the Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV (1878–1967), having learned by word of mouth about the project of referring to Judaism in the Council documents, stated the following in the “Note to the Central Commission,” dated at Damascus, June 5, 1962:

We understand very well the reasons that motivated proposing this “decree.” The Church owes it to itself to acknowledge the glories, the promises, and the mission of the Jewish people. It also owes it to itself to eliminate from its liturgy, from the thoughts and actions of its faithful every trace of spite, vengeance, or racial discrimination against the Jewish people.

We would suggest only that, in order to avoid any confusion tending to be of a political character, the text make a clear distinction between the Jewish people as a religious community—the only aspect which interests the council—and the State of Israel, which must be treated according to the same criteria that govern the relations between the Church and civil societies, without any privilege or special consideration on the part of the Church.

We would equally wish that a similar decree be prepared relative to Islam and other monotheist religions. Christians who have frequent relationships with the followers of these religions would be pleased to know some positive teaching of the Church concerning them, beyond purely and simply rejecting them as “errors.” (Maximos IV 1992b)

The Melkite bishops were particularly sensitive to the complex political situation in the Middle East, which influenced the work of the Second Vatican Council. The Synod of the Melkite Church held at Ayn-Trāz in Lebanon issued a communiqué on August 31, 1962, stating that

In the meeting held by His Beatitude Maximos IV..., and the bishops of the Greek Catholic community ... pointed out the attempts made by members of certain sects or by persons with political aims to stir up trouble among the Christians of Arab lands and induce them to doubt the right that their brothers the Palestinian refugees have to return to their country and to recover their land. (Synode of the Melkite Church in Ain Traz 1992a)

2. Louis Massignon's Theology as a Background to the Mentions of Islam in *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*

Pope John XXIII died on June 3, 1963, between the end of the first session on December 8, 1962, and the beginning of the second session on September 29, 1963.

The new pope, Paul VI (1963–1978), who belonged to the Badaliya community of the Islam scholar, Louis Massignon (1883–1962), began an exciting chapter in the Church's new understanding of Islam (Caspar 1970, 126–47). It is worth examining Massignon, who contributed to the Catholic reinterpretation of Islam, even though for many Catholics this religion seemed to have already been definitively qualified and evaluated by the *Magisterium Ecclesiae*. It was a great paradox that Massignon died on October 31, 1962, during the first session of the Council (October 11 to December 8, 1962) and three years before the issuance of the declaration *Nostra aetate*. Nevertheless, it is believed that his in-depth research largely paved the way for the positive vision of Islam presented by the Council Fathers in *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate* (Caspar 1970, 126–47; Robinson 1991, 182–205; O'Mahony 2008a, 169–82; Krokus 2012, 525; Buck 2017).

Due to his exceptionally prolific output, Massignon was described by François Angelier as *un savant à la production océanique* (“a scholar with an oceanic output”) (Massignon 2009, 2:942). His output encompasses numerous books, articles, conferences, lectures, reviews, forewords, reports, overviews, translations, correspondence, poems, prayers, prints, notes, and maps. A complete bibliography of Massignon's works is contained in the edition of *Écrits mémorables* edited by Angelier, Christian Jambet, and Souâd Ayad (Massignon 2009, 2:942–97).

This article is not the place to discuss Massignon's extensive legacy. However, it is worth capturing his intuitions and suggestions, which were included in the Council documents. First, as a scholar of Sufism, Massignon, in the first two decades of the 20th century, discovered divine inspiration in the work and teachings of the Muslim crucified in Baghdad, Abū l-Muġī al-Ḥusain ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāġ (ca. 858–922). It was these analyses that allowed him to discern a common monotheistic basis and Christian elements in the work of this Sufi mystic. From then on, Massignon became a kind of “mediator,” advocating friendly relations and reconciliation between followers of different religions, especially monotheistic (Abrahamic) ones, i.e., Christians, Jews, and Muslims (Massignon 1922).

Moreover, the entire context of the creation of *La passion de Husayn ibn Mansūr Hallāj* indicates not only the theoretical but also the practical experience of the author. “The Islamic Catholicism of Louis Massignon,” to use Jerrold Seigel's term (Seigel 2016, 115–51), was grounded in a living relationship with the Baghdad Muslim family of al-Alūsī, who saved his life and allowed him to repeatedly experience the Arab hospitality that Massignon praised throughout his life. He studied Islam with members of this family in Iraq, and al-Alūsī also helped him gather sources for his great work on al-Ḥallāġ (Waardenburg 2005, 312–42; O'Mahony 2008a, 176).

Massignon deepened his understanding of the common monotheistic tradition of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam through analyses of Abraham's three prayers in the Book of Genesis (Massignon 1997, 20–150). He addressed these reflections to his friends, eminent thinkers of the era: Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), Jean

Genet (1910–1986), Maurice Blondel (1861–1949), and Paul Claudel (1868–1955). Consequently, these ideas also influenced French thinkers from the circles of Catholic modernism (for more details, see O'Mahony 2006, 151–92). He aroused the interest of Thomas Merton (1915–1968) in his approach, who in 1960 wrote to Jean Danielou (1905–1974): “Louis Massignon strikes me as a grand person. He has been writing about all the causes in which he is interested.” (Merton 1985, 134)

Massignon seems to have seized every opportunity to reinforce the need to revise the traditional approach to Islam. He developed his reflections on divine transcendence and its influence, boldly entering the realm of apophatic theology. He drew inspiration primarily from mystical figures and his studies of Islam. In *Réponse à l'Enquête sur l'idée de Dieu et ses conséquences* [Response to the Survey on the Idea of God and its Consequences], he addressed the impossibility of fully expressing God, because the Creator's transcendence surpasses all human thoughts and concepts. According to Massignon, God's existence stems from the recognition that thought is incapable of comprehending him, because thinking about God is already a limitation of the infinite God (Massignon 2009, 1:5–8). This broader perspective led him to embrace monotheistic transcendence in Islam.

It is worth emphasizing that Massignon, on the advice of an Egyptian feminist and Christian mystic, Maryam Kahil (1889–1979), sometimes referred to as “the great lady of Egypt” (Keryell 2010), and with the consent of Pope Pius XII, adopted the Melkite (Arabic) Greek Catholic rite on February 5, 1949. This act allowed Massignon to better understand both Arab Christians and Muslims (Wilkins 2008, 355–73; O'Mahony 2007, 6–41; 2008b, 269–98). This “passionate friendships of Louis Massignon”—to use Brenna Moore's term—bore more fruit (Moore 2021, 94). Together with Kahil, he founded the Badaliya community, a Christian association of the Eastern Rite, uniting everyone in prayer for dialogue with Muslims (Massignon 2011). The Arabic name *Badaliya* translates to “mystical substitution.” (Dall'Oglio 2008, 329) It derives from the word *badal* (بدل), which literally means “exchange.” Massignon understood it in many ways (Massignon 1987, 387–402), but primarily as “acceptance and bearing the suffering of another person.” (Wilkins 2008, 355) The community was founded in 1934 in a former Anglican church in Garden City, renamed the Church of Our Lady of Peace. The foundation of the Badaliya community was inspired by the life of Jesus, Manṣūr al-Ḥallāḡ, the Trinitarian Fathers (Ordo Sanctissimae Trinitatis), and the Mercedarian Fathers (Ordo Beatae Mariae de Mercede Redemptionis Captivorum). At the same time, the community supported the Organization of Secondary Schools in Egypt and numerous social projects for women (Keryell 2010, 30–154; Moore 2021, 74–113).

Massignon was also influenced spiritually by St. Francis (1181–1226) and Anna Katharina Emmerick (1774–1824), and pursued his vocation in the spirit of Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916). Some scholars consider him the greatest fruit of de Foucauld's singular mission (Didier 2008, 337–53). Massignon was also a friend of

Gandhi (1869–1948) and a proponent of his ideas and values. The eminent orientalist, Henry Corbin (1903–1978), regarded him as a great teacher.

3. Subsequent Sessions of Vatican II: The Development of References to Islam

After the preparatory phase and the first Council session, which did not include any discussion of Islam, the issue arose during the second session (September–December 1963) in rather specific circumstances. The election of Cardinal Giovanni Battista Enrico Antonio Maria Montini (1897–1978) as pope on June 20, 1963, elevated to the apostolic see a cleric who, even as Undersecretary of State, had distinguished himself among the Curia for his interest in Islam. Cardinal Montini advocated prayer meetings aimed at reconciliation and building peace between followers of different religions. From his election, Paul VI advocated a more in-depth look at Islam. His influence was revealed, often discreetly and indirectly, in the drafting of Council texts on Islam (Borrmans 1978, 1–7).

However, it is worth noting all those who, between 1963 and 1965, contacted Pope Paul VI in developing references to Islam. The second session focused on developing frameworks on the Church and ecumenism. This latter framework included, among other things, the chapter “On the Relationship of Catholics to Non-Christians, and Especially to Jews.” The text was drafted at the initiative of Pope John XXIII, who entrusted its development to Cardinal Bea. The first three chapters were the subject of lively discussion. Patriarch Maximos IV pointed out in particular that one cannot speak of Jews without speaking of other religions, especially Islam (Caspar 1966, 1; Borelli 2021, 11–15). This opinion was supported by many bishops of the Middle East (Sabra 2021, 245–64; Griffith 2021, 163–86). The position adopted was that either the issue would not be raised at all or, if it was, Muslims should be mentioned (Ellis 2021, 187–209). Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV was one of those who pushed for the latter position. It is worth emphasizing that the exclusion of non-Christian religions from the ecumenical schema was, among other things, due to the interventions of Melkite Arab bishops (Melkite Patriarchate of Damascus 1992a). In his intervention during the second session of the Council on November 18, 1963, Patriarch Maximos IV even stated that:

We must say very clearly—and this is very important—that Chapter IV of the schema, which has recently been distributed to us, is absolutely extraneous. Ecumenism is an effort for the gathering together of the whole Christian family, that is to say, the consolidation of all those who have been baptized in Christ. It is thus a strictly intimate family affair. Non-Christians are thus not involved. One cannot see what the Jews are going to do in Christian ecumenism, and why they have been introduced into it. (Maximos IV 1992a)

Maximos IV's argument also:

Then, if one speaks of the Jews, it is also necessary to speak of the other non-Christian religions, and above all of the Muslims, who number 400 million, and among whom we live as a minority.

Let us then be just and logical. If we wish to disavow anti-Semitism—and all of us disavow it—a short note condemning both anti-Semitism and racial segregation would be sufficient. It is useless to create harmful agitation in the world. (Maximos IV 1992a)

It is therefore not surprising that Karl Rahner (1904–1984) even wrote about the “Arab lobby,” that is, representatives of the Arabized Oriental Uniate Churches who insisted that the Council address Islam in some distinct way (Rahner and Lapidé 1987, 4). Otherwise, the Council's ecumenical activities would have been perceived as a “Zionist conspiracy.”

A note from the Bulletin de Presse of the Melkite Patriarchate of Damascus, dated December 31, 1964, titled “The Jewish Problem at the Council and Arab Reactions,” strongly emphasized that

The reaction of Arab countries to the conciliar declaration on the Jews surpassed in violence the most pessimistic expectations. Like any popular reaction, it at times went too far, above all because of the public's ignorance of the exact tenor of the conciliar text, which, as we know, was still only a draft. But, even independent of all passionate exaggeration, the reaction of the Arabic peoples, Christian and Muslim, Orthodox, Protestant or Catholic, should be an eye-opener. (Melkite Patriarchate of Damascus 1992b)

Pope Paul VI decided to follow the path recommended by Maximilian IV and therefore established commissions to introduce references to Islam into the Council documents, in *Nostra aetate* and *Lumen gentium*. Intensive work and consultations were undertaken during the recess between the second and third sessions of the Council (i.e., between December 4, 1963, and September 14, 1964). In January 1964, Cardinal Bea informed Cardinal Amleto Giovanni Cicognani (1883–1973), chair of the Council's Coordination Commission, that the Council Fathers wanted the Council to pronounce on the great monotheistic religions, including Islam. Cardinal Bea believed that this topic fell outside the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity's competence. At the Coordination Commission meeting on April 16–17, 1964, Cardinal Cicognani announced that it would be necessary to address the Muslim question and that special commissions would be needed to do so. Two commissions were simultaneously instructed to insert a paragraph on Islam into individual texts. The Commission for the Schema of the Church introduced it in Chapter II, “The People of God,” in paragraph 16, concerning the relationship of “those who have not yet received the Gospel” with the People of God. After four verses

referring to the Jews, the text of *Lumen gentium* continued, “The sons of Ismael are not alien to the Revelation given to the Fathers, who, recognizing Abraham as their father, also believe in the God of Abraham.” A footnote was intended to clarify that the term “sons of Ismael” refers to Muslims. In turn, the Commission for the Ecumenical Schema decided to separate the former Chapter IV from the schema text and transform it into a “Declaration on Jews and Non-Christians,” annexed to the schema along with another declaration on religious freedom. A subcommittee composed of eminent Arab specialists (e.g., Georges Anawati) was tasked with drafting a special section on Islam. The document included the following statement:

Guided by love for our brothers, we treat with great respect those views and doctrines which, though differing from ours in many respects, often reflect a ray of Truth that enlightens every person who comes into this world. This is how we understand Muslims above all, who worship one God, personal and fulfilling, and who are closer to us through religious feeling and the multifaceted exchange of human culture. (Caspar 1966, 2)

The texts were discussed during the third session of the Council, from September 14 to November 21, 1964. The debates during this session were influenced by three important events outside the Council, initiated by Paul VI in 1964, which powerfully drew the world’s attention to the problem of non-Christian religions, particularly Islam. First, from January 4–6, 1964, the pope made a fruitful pilgrimage to the Holy Land, during which he took every opportunity to express his fraternal feelings toward them, including the famous *Le message adressé de Bethléem aux Chrétiens et au monde* (“Message to the World”) from Bethlehem, January 6, 1964 (Paul VI 1964b, 178–82). This statement was essentially a “prototype” of the Council’s references to Islam:

We address this reverent greeting in particular to those who profess monotheism and with us direct their religious workshop to the one true God, most high and living, the God of Abraham.... May these peoples, worshipers of the one God, also welcome our best wishes for peace in justice. (Paul VI 1964c)

Then, on Pentecost 1964, at the pope’s request, the Secretariat for Non-Christians was established, to which the Undersecretariat for Islam was later added (on March 1, 1965). The secretariat drew on the experience of missionaries, the expertise of specialists in Islamic studies, and the opinions of bishops from Asia and Africa (Borelli 2021, 9–34). Finally, on August 6, 1964, the epoch-making encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* was published, in which Paul VI applied his dialogue to non-Christian religions, in particular

... deinde [mentionem scilicet] de iis, qui Deum adorant religionis forma, quae monotheismus dicitur, maxime ea qua Mahometani sunt astricti, quos propter ea quae in

eorum cultu vera sunt et probanda, merito admiramur ... (Then we have those worshipers who adhere to other monotheistic systems of religion, especially the Moslem religion. We do well to admire these people for all that is good and true in their worship of God [ES 107]).

For their part, the Melkites, as representatives of one of the most numerous Eastern Uniate churches, continued to work to place mention of the followers of Judaism in its proper place and “proportion,” while not forgetting Islam. One such action was “A note on the undesirability of making special mention of the Jews in the general declaration on non-Christians.” This note, drawn up by the Melkite Holy Synod, concerns the second draft of the “Declaration on the Jews and Non-Christians,” dated September 3, 1964. It was sent to all the Council Fathers. Its main message is:

In the various interventions at the beginning of the second session of the council, the Eastern patriarchs have particularly insisted on the undesirability of a special mention of the Jews in the general declaration on non-Christians, influenced by the highly excited sensibilities of the Arab states and the Muslims, who could not understand and interpret such a mention except as a political support that the Roman See and the whole council wished to give to Zionist claims against the Arabs. The consequences of such an interpretation would be serious for the Christian minority in the said countries. It is not a matter of promulgating a declaration of a speculative type, but of seeing if it is proper for the Church, at the risk of arousing fifty million Arab Muslims against the Christian minority of five to seven million living scattered in their midst, to make declarations that cannot be understood by the interested parties—Jews, Christians, and Muslims of the East except as expressing pro-Israel political tendencies. (Synod of the Melkite Church 1992b)

Extracts from an intervention at Vatican II by Archbishop Yūsuf 'Ilyās Ṭawīl (1913–1999), Patriarchal Vicar General at Damascus, on September 29, 1964, reveal the sensitivity of Arab Christians from the Middle East in order to present Judaism and Islam in a balanced manner:

This Council has always considered with great diligence the repercussions of its acts and its declarations. Now, does not this declaration of sympathy with the Jews, in spite of all the precautions that have been taken, stir up a burning problem that has not yet been extinguished? Does it not risk the explosion of the powder keg that is unfortunate Palestine, where no less than a million Arabs have been unjustly and violently chased from their lands by those to whom the council makes advances? Doesn't it risk by the same action the alienation of all movement of sympathy by these same peoples to the Catholic Church? And from then on what value would there be in a declaration made by the council on the subject of the Muslims when it will have already lost their friendship? Now, is that what the council is seeking? And hasn't His Eminence Cardinal Bea declared from the

beginning that it is necessary to choose the practice of the open door? And isn't action of this sort closing it? (Tawil 1992)

Fearing political repercussions, the Melkites also proposed additions to *Nostra aetate*, the declaration on the Church's Relationship to Non-Christian Religions. They expressed this in a note presented by the Holy Synod in August 1964 titled "Observations on the Draft of the Declaration 'On the Jews and Non-Christians'":

We do not have any fundamental objection on the theological level in opposing this draft of the declaration. But from a practical viewpoint, we maintain that there should be added to No. 32 a last paragraph, with the following wording:

"This holy council insists on emphasizing that the present declaration—which is a purely religious act inspired only by theological considerations—has no political motive or any political aim. This holy council condemns in advance any tendentious interpretation that would try to give the present declaration any political meaning whatsoever in favor of anyone or against anyone." (Synode of the Melkite Church 1992c)

It is clear that the two texts on Islam presented at the third session (September 1964) elicited numerous, somewhat emotional interventions. The vote on amendments to the schema on the Church, chapter two, containing the section on the "sons of Ismael," met with strong opposition. There were 553 *modi* (proposed changes), of which about 230 favored the section on Muslims (Caspar 1966, 2).

4. The Final Form of References to Islam in *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*

The passage on Islam in the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* aroused emotion and criticism from various quarters. It was questioned whether the expressions used therein prejudged the resolution of difficult and hotly debated issues, such as the historical descent of the Arabs from Ishmael and, in particular, the connection between Islam and biblical revelation. For this reason, numerous *modi* (changes) appeared opposing this text and proposing an alternative formulation, which was incorporated into the final text of the constitution *Lumen gentium* on the Church (Caspar 1966, 3). It was finally approved on November 18, 1964, by the Council Fathers and officially promulgated by Pope Paul VI on November 21 of that same year. The mention of Islam in it reads as follows:

Sed propositum salutis et eos amplectitur, qui Creatorem agnoscunt, inter quos imprimis Musulmanos, qui fidem Abrahae se tenere profitentes, nobiscum Deum adorant unicum,

misericordem, homines die novissimo iudicaturum (But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind [LG 16]).

Thus, alongside the statements of traditional systematic theology, certain “apophatic” accents appeared, similar to the spirit of Massignon’s theology. The passage in *Lumen gentium* following the mention of Islam states that

Neque ab aliis, qui in umbris et imaginibus Deum ignotum quaerunt, ab huiusmodi Deus ipse longe est, cum det omnibus vitam et inspirationem et omnia (cf. Act 17,25–28), et Salvator velit omnes homines salvos fieri (cf. 1Tim 2,4) (Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all men be saved. Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience [LG 16]).

The impossibility of fully presenting and knowing God means that there is no shortage of people *qui in umbris et imaginibus Deum ignotum quaerunt* (“Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God”). On the other hand, the classical principle *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* has gained an officially approved interpretation:

Qui enim Evangelium Christi Eiusque Ecclesiam sine culpa ignorantes, Deum tamen sincero corde quaerunt, Eiusque voluntatem per conscientiae dictamen agnitam, operibus adimplere, sub gratiae influxu, conantur, aeternam salutem consequi possunt (Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life [LG 16]).

Meanwhile, a lively discussion was underway on the new text of the “Declaration on Jews and Non-Christians.” The Subcommittee on Islam reconvened to review numerous interventions and *modi*. A completely new text was produced, entitled “Declaration on the Church’s Relations with Non-Christian Religions.” This fulfilled Maximos IV’s desire for a document independent of the ecumenical framework while remaining under the jurisdiction of the Secretariat of Unity (Cardinal Bea). The section on Muslims was significantly expanded. In 22 verses, it highlights the main features of the Muslim faith and worship and calls for the forgetting of past disputes, dialogue, and cooperation between Christians and Muslims for the common good of humanity. Although it was initially adopted on November 20, 1964,

it was promulgated on October 28, 1965, because several issues required clarification. During the next session, the subcommittee met for the last time in February 1965, and modifications to the text on Islam were introduced. First, formal issues related to terminology were addressed, such as the clarification of *musulmanus* or *muslimus*, *islamicus* or *muslimus*. The supplementary term *misericordem* (“merciful”) was added after *viventem et subsistentem* (“living and subsisting”) in reference to the God worshipped by Muslims. In principle, only the reservations concerning the mention of family morality were taken into account (*vitam familiarem aestimant*). It was agreed to retain the more general formula *vitam moralem aestimant* (“respect for moral life”). The main body of the text remained unchanged. The fourth and final session finally sealed the final stage of this long drafting process. The vote took place on October 14, and the official promulgation of the declaration took place on October 28, 1965, after a final vote of 2,221 in favor and 88 against out of 2,312 (Caspar 1966, 3–4). Finally, in *Nostra aetate*, the passage on Islam (no. 3) is presented before the mention of Judaism (no. 4). The final text of the section of *Nostra aetate* concerning Islam and Muslims reads as follows:

Ecclesia cum aestimatione quoque Muslimos respicit qui unicum Deum adorant, viventem et subsistentem, misericordem et omnipotentem, Creatorem caeli et terrae (5), homines allocutum, cuius occultis etiam decretis toto animo se submittere student, sicut Deo se submitit Abraham ad quem fides islamica libenter sese refert. Iesum, quem quidem ut Deum non agnoscunt, ut prophetam tamen venerantur, matremque eius virginalem honorant Mariam et aliquando eam devote etiam invocant. Diem insuper iudicii expectant cum Deus omnes homines resuscitados remunerabit. Exinde vitam moralem aestimant et Deum maxime in oratione, elemosynis et ieiunio colunt. Quodsi in decursu saeculorum inter Christianos et Muslimos non paucae dissensiones et inimicitiae exortae sint, Sacrosancta Synodus omnes exhortatur, ut, praeterita obliviscentes, se ad comprehensionem mutuum sincere exercent et pro omnibus hominibus iustitiam sociale, bona moralia necnon pacem et libertatem communiter tueantur et promoveant (The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom [NA 3]).

Since its promulgation, *Nostra aetate* has become a point of reference for numerous authors examining Muslim–Christian relations (e.g., Sakowicz 1997, 19, 41, 115). However, it should not be forgotten that Massignon was a key figure, whose profound appreciation of Islam significantly influenced the theological content of the mention of Muslims in the Second Vatican Council's declaration *Nostra aetate*. Massignon's open recognition of Islam as an Abrahamic religion and the acknowledgment that Muslims worship the same God as Christians touch upon Massignon's theological vision, which emphasized a common heritage. He also acknowledged the possibility of the Holy Spirit acting in Islam, which ultimately paved the way for positive Christian–Muslim dialogue.

Massignon's influence in *Nostra aetate* was also reflected in the reference to Mary. This “Massignonian *theologoumenon*” is considered crucial to the development of Christian theology of Islam (George-Tvrtković 2017, 768). We find it in the verse quoted above: *matremque eius virginalem honorant Mariam et aliquando eam devote etiam invocant* (“They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion”) (NA 3). Certainly, the mere mention of the Marian cult in the context of Islam is not solely Massignon's merit. After all, the Council Fathers, such as Maronite Patriarch Moran Mor Naşrallah Buţrus Şufayr (1920–2019) and Archbishop of Izmir (Smirne) Joseph Emmanuel Descuffi (1884–1972), proposed the commemoration of Mary in *Nostra aetate* for doctrinal reasons (D'Costa 2014, 197–200). Researchers see Massignon's influence in *Nostra aetate*'s emphasis on worship rather than doctrine. One can analyze Massignon's texts on the similarities between the Christian cult of Mary and the Muslim cult of Mary and Fatima (George-Tvrtković 2017, 768–69).

Conclusion

The initial program of the Council did not include Islam. However, the second session, in which the so-called “Arab lobby” (i.e., the Oriental Christian lobby) gained a voice, along with the impressive influence of Massignon, led to a breakthrough, enabling the Church to view Islam from a new perspective.

The topic of Islam at the Second Vatican Council evolved from the unanticipated mention of this religion, through debates over the wisdom of including it, to the final inclusion of passages on Islam in the documents *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate* in 1965, and the continuing influence of Massignon's legacy. Massignon was the spiritual father of this approach, and at the Council, these mentions were sought by the Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV, the bishops of the Middle East, and Pope Paul VI. The discussions also contributed to the inclusion of the passage on Islam in *Nostra aetate* (no. 3) before the mention of Judaism (no. 4). The evolution

of the topic of Islam in the work of the Second Vatican Council is illustrated in the Table 1.

Table 1. Stages of introducing the topic of Islam into the discussions of Vatican Secundum

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Stage I: by the end of 1962 | (a) A prevailing lack of interest in Islam: the influence of various interpretations of the principle of <i>extra Ecclesiam nulla salus</i> ; (b) A lack of interest in the <i>Commissio Antepreparatoria/vota</i> of 1959–1962; (c) The activity of Massignon from 1922 to 1962 to break down stereotypes; (d) 1962: the first suggestions from the Melkite Patriarchate |
| Stage II: 1963 to October 1964 | (a) The activity of the “Arab lobby” with the Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV, starting from the second session of the Council; (b) The involvement of Paul VI; (c) The establishment of two commissions to edit references to Islam in the Council documents |
| Stage III: November 1964–1965 | (a) Final editing of the passages on Islam in <i>Lumen gentium</i> and <i>Nostra aetate</i> ; (b) Acceptance of the mentions of Islam in <i>Lumen gentium</i> (no. 16) and <i>Nostra aetate</i> (no. 3) |

Source: author’s own elaboration based on source analysis.

The process described above led to the Church’s first official recognition of Islam as a religion that inherits the common Abrahamic heritage and the worship of one God. The inclusion of passages on Islam in the documents of the Second Vatican Council was facilitated as outlined in the Table 2.

Table 2. Elements facilitating and reasons for the implementation of the Islamic theme in the documents of Vaticanum Secundum

| | |
|-----|--|
| I | Apophatic, Mariological, and moral elements in Massignon’s perception of Islamic theology |
| II | Contexts of dialogue of the lives of Oriental Christians in the Islamic world (including political elements) |
| III | Paul VI’s sensitivity to the status of Jerusalem and the peaceful coexistence of Christians with Muslims in the holy places of Palestine |

Source: author’s own elaboration based on source analysis.

Nostra aetate, originally intended to focus solely on Judaism, also sparked political opposition in Arab countries, fearing the document would be used to support the “Zionist conspiracy.” The decisive voice was the stance of bishops from the Middle East, where many Christians lived as minorities. The Levantine hierarchs firmly emphasized that since the Council discussed Judaism, it must also address Islam.

Pope Paul VI supported this position, seeking to promote dialogue and peace in the Middle East. Regardless of the political context (which, incidentally, accompanied all councils), diplomatic pressure alone did not determine the content of references to Islam in the Council documents. It is significant that Massignon's theology, developed in the first half of the 20th century, became an acceptable basis for mentions of Islam in *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate*. The path traveled from the forerunners of dialogue with Muslims, the beginning of a Council uninterested in non-Christian religions, to the adoption of the references of Islam was immense and fascinating. These concise references, due to their official nature, essentially positive content, and the orientation of the thought and action of the entire Church, paved a new, indisputable path for all Catholic communities.

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De Maria Numquam Satis Vere: The Conciliar Genesis of Stanisław Celestyn Napiórkowski's Mariology in Context

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Abstract: The concept of practicing Mariology in context was developed in 20th-century Polish theology. Its author is Stanisław Celestyn Napiórkowski, an outstanding theologian and a recognized authority in the international community of Mariologists and ecumenists. The origins of his way of practicing Mariology should be sought in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Based on Napiórkowski's legacy, his concept rests on two fundamental principles—the Christological image of God and the image of the Church as communion—and on three methodological ways of practicing it: based on the Word of God and the signs of Christ, on dialogue and the unity of Christians, and on the experience of the Church and in the Church. Napiórkowski's methodological-theological model was built on the conciliar hermeneutic of development and has a distinct contextual dimension. However, it cannot be fully classified as classical contextual theology. Practicing Mariology in context by Napiórkowski significantly modified the popular motto *De Maria numquam satis vere*.

Keywords: Stanisław Celestyn Napiórkowski, Mariology in context, contextual theology, hermeneutics of development, Second Vatican Council

The laureate of the 10th edition of the Pro Ancilla Domini Award in 2007 was Stanisław Celestyn Napiórkowski, a Franciscan. The laudation was delivered by René Laurentin (died in 2017), an eminent theologian and participant and expert at the Second Vatican Council. The award was granted for his significant contribution to the development of Mariology, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, and particularly in Poland. The French theologian, regarded as one of the most outstanding Mariologists, noted that the laureate began his scholarly activity during the great Marian movement and at a time of cultural transition. He represents “an example of the search for a deeper knowledge of Mary, both critical and constructive, intelligent, yet in contact with life.” (Laurentin 2008, 162)

Laurentin referred to Napiórkowski's critique of the so-called maximalist Mariology, as well as to his constructive effort to build Mariology within a Christological and ecclesiological perspective. He highlighted that Napiórkowski based his theological reflection on the Word of God, in close connection with the life and experience of the Church. The laudator was familiar with the article “Ou en est la mariologie” [Where Is Mariology?] by Napiórkowski, published in 1967 in the prestigious journal *Concilium*. This paper was published in seven languages

(Napiórkowski 1967, 52–62). It marked the beginning of the Polish Mariologist's participation in the international debate on Mariology in light of the Council's teaching about the Mother of the Lord.

At the end of his academic and theological career, Napiórkowski once again addressed this question, formulating a methodological and theological guideline: "Mariology should be practiced in context." (Napiórkowski 2004a, 181–91) This postulate also led him to reinterpret the centuries-old motto, dating back to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, which he expanded: *De Maria numquam satis vere* ("Of Mary never enough, but correctly"), indicating the need for a new approach to Mariology within Christian devotion. It is worth adding that he clearly articulated these principles in an extensive interview concerning the conciliar inspiration of Mariology (Napiórkowski 1996b).

Based on this preliminary outline of Napiórkowski's theological work, and in light of the research hypothesis that the postulate of Mariology in context emerges from the theology of the Second Vatican Council, the main research problem can be formulated as follows: which hermeneutic of the Second Vatican Council influenced the formation of a new model of Mariology in Poland and in Central and Eastern Europe? How did Napiórkowski understand the reinterpretation and proper (*vere*) reorientation of the existing doctrine on the Mother of the Lord? In what way does Mariology in context reflect the theological method of the Council, based on dialogue with Scripture, Tradition, and the experience of the Church living in the modern world? And finally, in what sense can Napiórkowski's theological work be regarded as an example of the reception of the Council in the theology of Central and Eastern Europe, bringing an original contribution to the development of postconciliar Mariology?

This study aims to answer the above questions by analyzing Napiórkowski's theological reflection and by identifying the origins and significance of his postulate of practicing Mariology in context.

The source base comprises Napiórkowski's scholarly output, totaling over 1,600 publications, mainly on ecumenism, Mariology, and Franciscan heritage. Of particular importance are his doctoral dissertation on ecumenical Mariology from 1965 (Napiórkowski 1988, 2011) and his scholarly presentation of the conciliar drafting process of Chapter VIII of *Lumen gentium* (Napiórkowski 1992).

Dispersed articles, published in various journals and volumes, were later collected in two collections volumes under the common title *Matka* [Mother] (Napiórkowski 2011, 2019) or *Służebnica* [Servant] (Napiórkowski 2004b, 2009, 2015). These publications may be regarded as representative of Napiórkowski's Mariology.

His scholarly legacy also includes a three-volume edition of excerpts from academic works *Ku mariologii w kontekście* [Toward a Mariology in Context] (Napiórkowski 2008b) written under his supervision, and the academic series *Mariologia w Kontekście* [Mariology in Context] (Pek 2021, 2025; Siwak 2022/2023;

Saniewski 2008; Klauza 2008). This legacy, along with the works of Central and Eastern European authors inspired by his thought, deserves further research.

This study applies a theological research methodology based on reconstructing the theological thought of Napiórkowski in light of his methodological-theological postulate expressed in the motto “Mariology in context.” It also analyzes and evaluates his hermeneutical concept from the perspective of the Second Vatican Council.

It is also necessary to clarify the linguistic meaning and use of the expression Mariology in context. It is not a conciliar term. Napiórkowski did not indicate any theologian who directly inspired him to formulate it. Initially, in his discourse, a postulate of multiple forms of “being in” functioned as a conciliar *novum* integrating Mariology with the whole of theology and with the lived experience of the Church (Napiórkowski 2004b, 335). Over time, he transformed this into Mariology in context. Napiórkowski did not develop his concept of “context” either semantically or philologically. He adopted it in the sense of a “relation,” that is, as the linking of Mariological reflection to the whole mystery of faith and to the life of the Church (Napiórkowski 2000, 5). Nevertheless, this did not prevent this concept from functioning as a carrier of significant methodological-theological content.

Napiórkowski drew attention to this term in 1980, when Angelo Amato (Amato 1980) used the title *Mariologia in contesto* [Mariology in Context]. In later writings, Amato (1994, 1995) distanced himself from the Protestant term “contextual theology” and, as a proponent of inculturation, emphasized it instead. Napiórkowski interpreted this rather as a confirmation of his own direction of practicing Mariology. He did not attach greater importance to the term “contextual,” which, for him, meant the same as “in context.” He also did not refer to contextual theology as known in Asia and Latin America. Amato proposed several models of Mariology in context: traditional, practical, anthropological, and synthetic, based on Stephen B. Bevans’s contextual theology (Bevans 1992, 2002).

The European Mariological milieu, aware of the need to take into account the context of contemporary culture in the study of Mary, likewise did not use the term “contextual Mariology,” preferring “Mariology in context” (Peretto 1996).

Napiórkowski’s methodological and theological concept corresponds to the model adopted by his student, Marek Gilski, in his research under Napiórkowski’s supervision on Augustine’s theology: “By ‘context’ we understand here the material theological environment in which reflection on Mary develops, that is, the substantive connection of the teaching about the Mother of the Lord with other truths of the Christian faith.” (Gilski 2006, 19) Gilski’s dissertation represents an exceptional methodological-theological achievement, offering a comprehensive, coherent, and highly original interpretation of St. Augustine’s Mariology (Napiórkowski 2006). The thought of one of Christianity’s greatest theological authorities is presented as the fruit of consistently articulated “thinking in context,” in which the mutual interconnectedness of the truths of faith (*nexus mysteriorum*) emerges as indispensable.

On this basis, the postulate of practicing Mariology in context naturally opens itself to a diversity of theological references. In this way, Napiórkowski gained a compelling patristic argument demonstrating that the conciliar presentation of Mary in the mystery of Christ and the Church is not only theologically justified but also methodologically warranted and deserving of continued theological development.

It is difficult to classify Napiórkowski's concept unambiguously within any of these models. Rather, one should propose another model that systematizes his Mariology in context. The Italian theologian was also a co-author of the letter of the *Pontificia Academia Mariana Internationalis*, published in 2000. After reading it, Napiórkowski stated that the document contained nothing new, since he had long been practicing Mariology in context, which refers to theological methodology in Mariology rather than to a Mariological method (Napiórkowski 2009, 62). He shaped his position on the basis of his own hermeneutic of the Council, which incorporated the doctrine of the Mother of the Lord into the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

The analyses conducted thus far on Napiórkowski's use of Mariology in context make it possible to present his concept as principles and ways of practicing Mariology in context. This study applies the formal methodological model that the Polish theologian himself used in interpreting Church documents, including Paul VI's exhortation *Marialis cultus*.

1. Principles of Mariology in Context

Based on Napiórkowski's theological legacy, two fundamental principles for practicing Mariology in context can be identified: the Christological image of God and the image of the Church as communion. To present them properly, it is necessary to refer to several key ideas of the author.

Analyzing the origins of the doctrine of Mary, Napiórkowski observes that the Second Vatican Council faced a fundamental dilemma: should Mariology be treated as a separate discipline or integrated into the broader context of theological reflection? The prevailing concept was to present her person and mission within the perspective of the mystery of Christ and the Church (Napiórkowski 2019, 201). The title of the Mariological chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church thus reads "The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church," and not—as the Polish theologian repeatedly emphasized—"Christ and the Church in the Mystery of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God." (Napiórkowski 2019, 421) In the postconciliar period, Napiórkowski pointed to Roschini as a representative of a type of Mariology based mainly on the teaching of the recent popes, isolated from the wider theological context and striving for autonomy. He pointed out that the preliminary conciliar draft contained only a few references to the Fathers of the Church,

whereas the final text included more than 30 (Pek 2020, 151). This kind of Mariology emphasized, among other things, the proposal for a dogmatic definition of Mary's universal mediation and co-redemption, formulated from a radically Christotypical perspective. The Second Vatican Council rejected such a way of practicing Mariology (Napiórkowski 2004b, 9; 2019, 17). Such a position has also been reaffirmed in recent magisterial teaching of the Church, indicating continuity (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2025).

Napiórkowski argued that isolationism and the pursuit of autonomy caused Mariology to lose prestige in the eyes of theologians of other disciplines. The Council initiated a process of its theological rehabilitation (Napiórkowski 2019, 12), opening it to the fullness of theological sources that had long remained neglected. In this sense, one can say that the Second Vatican Council restored Mariology to its Catholic dimension—rooted simultaneously in Scripture, the tradition of the Fathers, the decisions of the councils, and the teaching of the popes. Theology, as Napiórkowski emphasized, is not truly Catholic if it limits itself to a single current—biblical, patristic, Augustinian, Thomistic, Ephesian, Tridentine, or papal. It becomes Catholic only when all these dimensions are united into an integral whole. In this sense, one can say that the Second Vatican Council gave the Church a more Catholic Mariology—rooted in Scripture, the tradition of the Fathers, conciliar decisions, and papal teaching (Napiórkowski 2019, 94). In light of this conciliar perspective, Napiórkowski postulated that Mariological reflection and the shaping of Marian devotion—both in Poland and in the wider European context—should be carried out in the spirit of contextuality. In his view, Mariology and Marian devotion, if detached from Christology, soteriology, pneumatology, charitology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, become distorted and lose their theological balance. Openness to the aforementioned theological disciplines is therefore a condition of their correctness and maturity. In this sense, as he argued, Mariology should be practiced “in context,” that is, in close relation to the entire mystery of faith as professed and lived.

Likewise, devotion to Mary should be experienced within the framework of the one Christian worship: to the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit. There is no separate, autonomous “Marian cult,” since it is inscribed within the Trinitarian structure of faith—Napiórkowski concluded in 1998 during one of the scientific symposia (Napiórkowski 2004b, 37, 62).

He maintained that a proper Mariology can be developed only in close relation to the theology of God and of man: in reference to the mystery of the Word made flesh, who died on the cross and rose again for our salvation; to the Holy Spirit, through whom the Incarnation took place, who filled Mary, anointed Jesus, and descended in the Upper Room. It should also be considered in the context of the Church, in which the glorified Lord lives—in the light of the Word of God and of the sacraments that are the paths of salvation—as well as in the perspective of the ultimate realities, of what awaits humanity after death (Napiórkowski 2009, 222). Napiórkowski

presented this theological thought at the conference “Kościół w życiu publicznym. Teologia polska i europejska wobec nowych wyzwań” [The Church in Public Life: Polish and European Theology in the Face of New Challenges] (Catholic University of Lublin, 2004). Since that time, these words have become an answer to the question of how to practice Mariology in context.

1.1. The Principle of the Christological Image of God

While discovering the conciliar message that the Mother of the Lord should be understood within the mystery of Christ, Napiórkowski realized that this was by no means an easy task. He examined the Protestant maxim *Solus Christus* (“Christ alone”) and reached the conclusion: *Solus Christus, numquam solus* (“Christ alone, yet not Christ in isolation”). He recognized that the concept of “Christocentrism”—the focus of faith and theology on Christ—is not univocal, not only in Protestantism but also in Catholicism, and therefore requires clarification. Christ is the beginning and the end of all things; through him all was created, and in him all finds its center. Christ constitutes the axis around which all theological reflection and understanding of revelation are organized.

In this approach, Napiórkowski distinguishes between direct Christocentrism, in which the believer adores Christ himself, and indirect Christocentrism, in which one acknowledges his central role while also turning in prayer to the saints or to Mary. He also highlights the affective approach to Christ (Napiórkowski 2019, 124). In the course of this reflection, Napiórkowski arrived at a clear articulation of the problem of the image of God. The Council, by presenting the Mother of the Lord in *Lumen gentium*, outlined at the outset the mystery of the Triune God as a communion of love.

Only a few years after the Council, Napiórkowski observed that how a person conceives and perceives God is of fundamental significance for every religion; in Christianity, this fullness is revealed in Jesus Christ. In him, God reveals himself as Love without limits—merciful and seeking every human person. Jesus not only proclaims God as Love but is himself the incarnate presence of that Love—Emmanuel, God with us and for us. As long as time endures, he remains the Savior, the source of forgiveness, the Friend, and the Way leading to the Father (Napiórkowski 2019, 129, 139). Napiórkowski concluded his academic exposition with a practical presentation that shaped the Church’s experience of faith. He noted that almost the entire text of *The Angelus* is derived from Scripture. In praying it, we venerate the mystery of the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery, recalling the salvific plan of the Father, the obedience of the Son which brought redemption, and the action of the Holy Spirit placed at the service of human salvation (Napiórkowski 2019, 26).

Similarly, he broadened the interpretation of another biblical text deeply rooted in Central European devotion. He observed that, according to John, the scene

at Cana (John 2:1–12) portrays Mary as a believer in Jesus—at least as a miracle worker—yet not fully understanding him. Jesus distances himself from her, indicating the primacy of the Father’s will (Napiórkowski 2019, 55). In his theological reflection on the image of God, also in the context of Mariology and Marian devotion, Napiórkowski observed that contemporary theology increasingly sees not only Father but also Mother in God. Divine parenthood encompasses the totality of life and requires no completion in any creature. God himself is the full source of supernatural life, and his maternal tenderness complements his paternal power. In this light, the Polish theologian pointed out that a simple comparison of God the Father with Mary as a spiritual Mother may lead to an oversimplification of the mystery of the divine essence. The mystery of God transcends human categories and combines both the paternal and the maternal (Napiórkowski 2004b, 130). From his reflection on the thesis that Christian devotion depends on the image of God, Napiórkowski drew the conclusion that one should not idealize popular piety nor treat it uncritically as a theological source. When reviewing the forms of Marian devotion, one must remember that they derive from divine revelation. It is to be emphasized that veneration of Mary flows from her unique dignity as the Mother of the Son of God, the beloved Daughter of the Father, and the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. Napiórkowski concluded that her participation in the work of redemption is also recognized. Mary holds a special place among the People of God and in the glory of heaven. All expressions of Marian devotion should therefore be shaped in accordance with these truths and lead to a deeper union with Christ (Napiórkowski 2019, 28). Given this conciliar premise—emphasizing the mystery of Christ, which illuminates the mystery of the person of the Mother of the Lord—Napiórkowski is critical of the message of certain prayers. He observed that the most striking example is the antiphon *Salve Regina*, which presents Mary as the Mother of Mercy and the embodiment of divine mercy essential for salvation, whereas the true embodiment of the Father’s mercy is Jesus Christ (Napiórkowski 2019, 62).

Interpreting the image of Christ, Napiórkowski saw Mary as “the Masterpiece of the mission of the Son and the Spirit in the fullness of time.” (Napiórkowski 2019, 721) She became the space of the Son’s and the Spirit’s special indwelling among humanity.

Commenting on the Church’s teaching expressed in the *Catechism*, he discerned its conciliar origin. Napiórkowski stated that the sanctification of Mary was not intended primarily for her own sake, but for the work of Jesus. In her, the Spirit of God fulfills the Father’s plan, reveals the Son, inaugurates the communion of Christ with humankind, and universalizes Mary’s motherhood (Napiórkowski 2019, 670). According to Napiórkowski, the Council, in describing the relationship of the Holy Trinity and Mary, presents her as the most beloved Daughter of the Father and the holy dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. In this way, it emphasizes that Mary’s holiness has a deeply relational and personalistic character, rooted in the mystery of divine

filiation. Mary appears not only as the Mother of the Son of God but also as a person living in full communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, which reveals the Trinitarian totality of her holiness. Such a perspective presents grace as the relationship between God and man (Napiórkowski 2004b, 32). Following Napiórkowski's thought, one should add that the conciliar description of the relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit is particularly prominent—mentioned no fewer than ten times—and therefore cannot be limited solely to “the mystery of Christ.” Reading the conciliar text together with Napiórkowski's commentary, one should note that Mary ought to be understood primarily within the mystery of the Spirit, as his temple rather than merely his spouse. Too narrow a conception of Mariology referring only to Christ could impoverish its pneumatological dimension and deprive the Word of God of its nuptial meaning. Only by recognizing Mary as the prototype of the Church-Bride can one preserve the fullness of the relationship among the Word, the Spirit, and the Church.

The Council, following the interpretation of Gérard Philips, a Belgian theologian (reiterated by Napiórkowski), does not include the activity of the Holy Spirit within the category of mediation understood as participation in Christ's mediation. According to this concept, the Holy Spirit does not mediate in an analogous way to Christ, because his action does not depend on the human nature of the Incarnate Word. It is Christ, as Mediator between God and humanity, who bestows the Holy Spirit upon the world, not the other way around. Mediation thus takes place “through the body” of Christ, while the Holy Spirit is not dependent on that body; rather, he shapes it, making it the instrument of sanctification in the Eucharist and in the life of the Church (Napiórkowski 2004b, 34). The Council leaves open the possibility of reinterpreting the notion of mediation. Napiórkowski noted that, although the formal definition of the Holy Spirit's activity as mediation is absent, one can discern a mediating dimension in the very nature of his presence and action. He thus indicated the possibility of developing the theme of “Mary as Mediatrix in the Holy Spirit.” (Napiórkowski 2004b, 34)

Reading Mary in the mystery of Christ, following the Council, Napiórkowski showed that this simultaneously reveals the mystery of the Christian God—living and active in the Church.

The consequence of such thinking is a different perception of human action: as more receptive (*receptio*) than cooperative (*cooperatio*) toward the action of God. God appears as the creator of relationships. The Polish theologian enthusiastically embraced John Paul II's postulate that the motto *Per Mariam ad Iesum* (“through Mary to Jesus”) should be complemented by *Per Iesum ad Mariam* (“through Jesus to Mary”), accepting the latter as fundamental (Napiórkowski 2004b, 155, 159, 287; 2009).

1.2. The Principle of the Communion Image of the Church

Interpreting the conciliar presentation of the Mother of Christ within the mystery of the Church, Napiórkowski also asked himself the question: “in what kind of Church?” He did not limit himself merely to reading Mariological texts but examined the entire conciliar debate, interpreting it from the perspective of one increasingly engaged in ecumenical dialogue. As a theologian, he participated in mixed commissions at the international level.

He first analyzed the intra-ecclesial discussions among Catholics regarding the Church. He observed that the Second Vatican Council did not unequivocally side with either of the two dominant tendencies in ecclesiology. Although the Council clearly distinguished the reality of Christ from the reality of the Church, it did not take a definitive stance on the issue. The Council Fathers did not fully clarify the extent to which the Church can be regarded as the agent of salvific action.

In the background of this question lies the classical tension between understanding the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ and the continuation of the Incarnation (in which the Church appears as an active instrument of salvation) and viewing the Church as the sign and sacrament of salvation—a passive instrument that participates in the work of Christ without replacing Him. It is precisely this tension, according to the Polish theologian, that constitutes the specificity of typically conciliar ecclesiology (Napiórkowski 2019, 215).

To this reflection, he added an analysis of the image of the Church from an ecumenical perspective, particularly with reference to Mariological issues. He drew attention to the question of *communio sanctorum*. In his view, this truth should be understood broadly: between those who have already attained the fullness of salvation with the Lord and those still journeying on earth, there exists a real and living bond. The former, the Polish theologian noted, intercede for the latter, while those still on pilgrimage enjoy the full right and freedom to turn to the saints with requests for their intercession.

Napiórkowski’s research on this topic drew the attention of leading Italian Mariologists, who in 1985 invited him to write a theological entry for the *Nuovo dizionario di mariologia* (Napiórkowski 1985; Pek 2014). According to Napiórkowski, the level of ecumenical discussion should take into account the fact that ecclesiological issues are also conditioned by anthropology. Evangelical Christianity, he observed, proceeding from an anthropology fundamentally pessimistic about human capability and moral condition, maintains a significantly greater distance from this form of mutual relationship between the pilgrim and the triumphant Church (Napiórkowski 2019, 47).

As a Catholic theologian, Napiórkowski was convinced that Mary’s transition to the glory of her Son in no way weakened her bond with believers in the mystery of *communio sanctorum*. On the contrary, it strengthened her spiritual closeness

and involvement toward those for whom Christ, her firstborn Son, gave his life. In his interpretation, the Council's teaching on Mary's place in the mystery of the Church revealed her maternal role in the order of grace. Napiórkowski pointed out that the ecumenical debate on the Church—and within it, also on Mary—emphasized the uniqueness and perfection of Christ's mediation, while also pointing to the mediating and intercessory function of the Holy Spirit, who acts as Advocate, the Paraclete.

All who are justified by grace form the community of saints (*communio sanctorum*), which embraces both the living and the dead. Within this community, Mary holds a unique place as the one who fully participates in the Economy of Salvation (Napiórkowski 2019, 549).

The Polish theologian's reflection also included liturgical sources. He considered the liturgy as the revelation of the depth of communion existing within the Church, encompassing the angels, the saints, and the community of the faithful still journeying on earth. Within this reality of *communio sanctorum*, Mary occupies a special place as the Mother of God and the Mother of all people. As the Mother of Christ, true God, she radiates mercy and power; as our Mother, she radiates graciousness and tender care (Napiórkowski 2019, 386).

According to Napiórkowski, the prayer of the Church's liturgy is directed primarily to God the Father, and, more rarely, to the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, or Christ; it is never addressed to any other person. At times, however, the Church in prayer also turns to Mary and the saints, incorporating them into the dialogue with God and Christ (Napiórkowski 2019, 97).

Napiórkowski concluded that the life of a Christian consists in unity with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that is, in relationship with the Father through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Its source lies in Christ, who is the center of faith and proclamation. It is precisely in him that a person encounters Mary, the Church, and the world, and experiences communion with the Father in the action of the Holy Spirit (Napiórkowski 2019, 382).

According to the theologian, the human person should not seek enlightenment and salvation in isolation, but within the community of believers. There are two principal paths leading to salvation: the Word of God and the Eucharist. It is the Word of God, proclaimed within the community, that brings light and salvation to humanity (Napiórkowski 2019, 268). The Polish theologian also drew attention to the teaching of St. Ambrose of Milan, present in conciliar ecclesiology, according to which the Mother of the Lord is the model and prototype of the Church (Napiórkowski 2019, 447). Napiórkowski linked this aspect of Ambrose's teaching with the idea of the Church as Mother and Bride.

Above all, however, he focused his reflection on the theological image of the Church as communion. What seemed at first glance a simple observation—the recognition in the biblical narrative of Mary's various relationships, first with

the personal God and later with the disciples of Jesus—led Napiórkowski to emphasize that popular devotion should also be shaped by the truth of Mary’s bond with Joseph. Thus, Mary should be seen not only as Mother but also as Sister (Napiórkowski 2004b, 12, 349, 351).

2. Ways of Practicing Mariology in Context

Inspired by the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the Mother of the Lord in the mystery of Christ and the Church, Napiórkowski made this principle the central methodological foundation of Mariology in context. His reflection, grounded in the analysis of conciliar sources and the hierarchy of truths of faith, arose from theological reflection on the experience of popular religiosity (especially Marian devotion) and on ecumenical dialogue. At the heart of this concept, he placed the authority of the Word of God, the life of the Church, and the pursuit of Christian unity as the fundamental criteria for shaping Mariology in context.

2.1. The Way of the Word of God (And the Signs of Christ)

In his early theological work, Napiórkowski encountered two fundamental positions regarding the sources of revelation. On one hand, there was the tradition which, after the promulgation of the encyclical *Humani generis* (1950), had been identified primarily with the Church’s magisterium—something that, in practice, led to the marginalization of Scripture and the writings of the Fathers of the Church (Napiórkowski 2019, 92). On the other hand, there stood the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* (1988).

The conciliar teaching about God as the sole source of revelation enabled the Polish theologian to reconstruct theological *topoi* and to reject the exclusive model based solely on Scripture. This became the starting point for emphasizing the theology of the Word of God as the central dimension of theological reflection (Napiórkowski 1975). Napiórkowski found inspiration for this concept primarily in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, especially in its presentation of the Mother of the Lord in the perspective of salvation history, as well as in the liturgy. In the Word of God, he perceived the primary source for deepening Mariology and as a light for the contemporary world (Napiórkowski 2019, 268). He firmly emphasized that Catholic theology is not based on the principle of *sola Scriptura*, and that Tradition is not its alternative but rather the integral bearer of the same Word of God (Napiórkowski 2019, 93). Against this background, the theologian developed the distinction between “Tradition” (capitalized) and “tradition,” understood as different yet complementary forms of transmitting revelation. Napiórkowski’s reflection

also encompassed the ecumenical dimension, especially regarding the Orthodox understanding of tradition. He observed that Eastern theology likewise faces the need to verify the function of tradition in the theological process. At the same time, he emphasized those perspectives that authentically reveal and transmit the living Word of God (Napiórkowski 2019, 46).

Reading the Word of God in the light of the Council's interpretation, especially the constitution *Lumen gentium*, led Napiórkowski to a deeper understanding of its inner connection with the Holy Spirit. The theologian called the Spirit the "Artist" and the Word of God, his "chisel," through which God continually shapes the face of the Church and of the human being (Napiórkowski 2019, 108). It is precisely in the dynamic interplay of Word and Spirit that the living reality of revelation is manifested, in which Mary holds a special place.

From the biblical and theological perspective, the Word of God presents Mary at the center of salvation history, alongside the Incarnate Word—Christ, the Redeemer and Savior. Through her motherhood, she participated in the work of salvation in a unique and unrepeatable way (Napiórkowski 2019, 189). This participation, rooted in her relationship to Christ, is an essential element of Christian reflection on humanity's cooperation in God's salvific plan.

The Word of God is not exhausted in the words of Christ alone. Napiórkowski observed that the decades following the Second Vatican Council saw a noticeable decline in the general criticism of Catholic teaching and Marian devotion. In his view, the radical Protestant stance was often less an authentic proclamation of the Word of God than an opposition to Catholicism itself (Napiórkowski 2019, 66). Emphasizing the role of the Word of God in shaping Mariology in context gave particular significance to the concept of *sacra Scriptura*—not in the sense of *solus*, but primarily in relation to the living presence of God in the Church and in the world. The Bible, for Napiórkowski, did not serve speculation but theological systematization, as it normatively reveals the truth about God and about the human being to whom God speaks.

The presentation of the role of the Word of God in shaping Mariology in context should also be linked with the signs of Christ, that is, with the liturgy. Napiórkowski insisted that it should always be oriented "through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ" (*per Christum et cum Christo et in Christo*). He asked whether Polish Marian devotion fully respects this principle, which includes trust and love toward God as well as the sacramental dimension of the Word of God (Napiórkowski 2019, 421).

It is worth noting that in this thematic area, Napiórkowski drew only indirect inspiration from conciliar teaching. His primary point of reference was Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Marialis cultus*, in which—particularly in its commentary—he most fully articulated his understanding of the liturgy as a way of shaping both Marian devotion and Mariology in context.

2.2. The Way of Dialogue and Christian Unity

While familiarizing himself with the newly published conciliar documents, Napiórkowski read them alongside the works of Protestant theologians. The fruit of these studies was his doctoral dissertation, *Mariologia a ekumenizm. Poglądy mariologiczne współczesnych europejskich teologów protestanckich rozpatrywane w aspekcie ekumenicznym* [Mariology and Ecumenism: Mariological Views of Contemporary European Protestant Theologians from an Ecumenical Perspective], which he defended shortly after the promulgation of *Lumen gentium* (Napiórkowski 2008a, 2011; Pek 2011).

Given the then-prevailing tension between Protestantism and Catholic teaching on the Mother of the Lord, the Polish theologian clearly identified this issue as contentious. He also revealed the main sources of misunderstanding: the “image of God” (which differs not only between Protestants and Catholics but also within Protestant traditions themselves) and the “image of the human being” (particularly the Protestant pessimistic anthropology, distinct from the Catholic approach).

The next stage of Napiórkowski’s theological work was his participation in the international Lutheran–Catholic commission and his co-authorship of ecumenical declarations at Mariological congresses. The Second Vatican Council, together with his involvement in doctrinal sessions, highlighted in his thought the category of dialogue. The theology he developed in the ecumenical context provided a rationale for theological pluralism and a certain degree of “pluriformity in” Marian devotion.

Practicing Mariology from the perspective of ecumenical dialogue culminated in the publication—unique in the world—of a collection of texts dedicated to the Mother of the Lord in Evangelical Christianity (Napiórkowski 2019, 51, 85, 207, 233).

Napiórkowski’s research on the drafting of conciliar teaching on the Mother of the Lord cannot be overestimated. He discerned in it the image of Christ the Mediator and the idea of mediation “in Christo,” formulated by the Lutheran pastor Hans Asmussen (Napiórkowski 2019, 86) and probably introduced at the Council by Karl Rahner (Napiórkowski 2019, 112). In the conciliar reflection, the Polish theologian also recognized the specificity of the Catholic methodological approach, which consists in a broad interpretation of the Word of God and, consequently, in a broader understanding of justification and grace.

This approach, inspired by the spirit of dialogue, opened the possibility of encouraging Protestant theologians to reconsider the exclusive application of the principles *sola gratia* and *sola Scriptura* (Napiórkowski 2019, 51). According to Napiórkowski, agreement on theological pluralism among the Churches should entail maintaining different theological models. In his view, theological dialogue aimed at complete identification deprives each side of something profoundly valuable. Paradoxically, in Napiórkowski’s conviction, it is precisely respect for one’s own tradition

and its deeper interpretation in the light of the Word of God that bears fruit in “unity within diversity.”

Within this theological and ecumenical framework, the Polish theologian proposed to both sides the practice of “Mariology in the ecumenical context.” (Napiórkowski 2019, 545) One need not be an expert in conciliar teaching to recognize in this an echo of *Lumen gentium*, which expressed the truth about the possibility of deepening theological knowledge of revelation.

2.3. The Way of Experience as a Locus Theologicus in and Within the Church

Napiórkowski placed particular emphasis on the need to include “experience” as a *locus theologicus* after the publication of John Paul II’s 1987 encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*. In it, the pope pointed to the “historical experience of persons and Christian communities” (*experientia historica variarum communitatum christianarum*) in the teaching on the Mother of the Redeemer. Long before he became pope, as early as 1970, he had studied the significance of experience in ethics and theology. For the future Bishop of Rome, experience was a form of human cognition—both intellectual and sensory—embracing the whole human person (Napiórkowski 2019, 629).

The Polish theologian had already reflected on the “signs of the times,” inspired by conciliar teaching. He sought a “hermeneutics of the signs of the times” by analyzing the reflections of specific figures, such as Bishop Hélder Câmara (Napiórkowski 2009, 204–7) and his thought on liberation in Brazil, Fr. Franciszek Blachnicki (Napiórkowski 2009, 206, 208, 211) and his concept of forming a “new man” in a Church constrained by communism in Poland, or the witnesses of faith in Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century. Napiórkowski observed the principle “see—judge—act” within the hermeneutics of the signs of the times, formulated by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn (1882–1967). However, this was a method of practicing mercy inspired by Catholic social teaching, lacking a methodology of merciful “seeing” of the surrounding world, especially of the poor.

Another sign of the times for Napiórkowski was popular religiosity, and particularly Marian religiosity in Poland. He saw in it a bearer of the Gospel, conditioned by historical, social, and even political contexts. At the same time, he recognized within it numerous forms and contents that were far removed from Christianity. Nevertheless, he did not consider it a point of departure for theological reflection; rather, he saw the need to illuminate it with the light of the Gospel. Despite his critical view of Marian devotion, he was convinced of its value and its potential for renewal. His positive attitude was strengthened by his reading of the documents of the “Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano” conferences (Medellín 1968, Puebla 1979, Santo Domingo 1992, etc.), which emphasized popular religiosity and presented Marian devotion as positively conditioned by the cultural context. It was probably at that time that

he encountered contextual theology; however, this model of doing theology did not convince him. He remained faithful to his own method, which he called Mariology in context.

When Napiórkowski encountered John Paul II's statement about the experience of persons and communities (*Redemptoris Mater* no. 48)—he noted the omission of “persons” in the Latin text of *Redemptoris Mater* (AAS 79 [1987], 427) (Napiórkowski 2019, 404)—having already reflected on the signs of the times and popular religiosity, he was even more motivated to respond to the question of how Marian devotion—often based on doubtful doctrinal and theological foundations, yet drawing from the richness of historical and contemporary experiences—bears witness to the preservation of Christian identity (Napiórkowski and Kowalik 1999, 269–70). Without hesitation, he defined experience (more “in the Church” than “of the Church”) (Napiórkowski 2019, 253) as a non-objectified *locus theologicus* and included it in the theological *topoi* of his manual *Jak uprawiać teologię* [How to Practice Theology] (Napiórkowski 1996a, 38, 47–48).

In light of the statement in *Lumen gentium* no. 67 that true devotion “derives from true faith” (*a vera fide procedere*), the Polish theologian interpreted the Marian intuition of the Council—read through *Redemptoris Mater* no. 48—as a reference to the *sensus fidei* of the faithful, as well as an indication of the experience of faith which the Church recognizes in the practice of certain forms of Marian devotion. In experience, according to Napiórkowski, one can also discern new forms and paths of Christian piety (Napiórkowski 2019, 399).

Convinced of the need to practice Mariology in context, Napiórkowski did not cease to explore the role of experience within theology. He initiated a broad consultation with Edward Schillebeeckx, one of Europe's most renowned scholars of the theological significance of experience. This work was developed creatively by Antoni Nadbrzeźny, who provided sufficient arguments to demonstrate that the Mariology (inspired by experience) of the Flemish theologian is “in context” (Napiórkowski 2005). Meanwhile, proponents of contextual theology would probably have called it “contextual Mariology,” since a few years later, during a major academic session, they interpreted Schillebeeckx's theological thought as “contextual interpretations of fundamental experiences of salvation.” (Schillebeeckx 2010, xiii) This matter remains debatable, as the doyen of Flemish theology himself, who was present at that session, did not confirm such an interpretation.

For Napiórkowski (Napiórkowski and Kowalik 1999; 2009, 203–13), experience constitutes an essential dimension of practicing Mariology in context, because it enables the discernment of the signs of the times and of Marian devotion in its historical, cultural, and ecclesial conditions. Experience is not merely a source of empirical data (he followed the insights of the sociology of religion with interest), but a theological place of encounter between the mystery of the Word of God and the concrete experience of believers. In this way, Mariology in context becomes a hermeneutical

space in which experience serves not only to interpret but also to verify Marian devotion in the light of the Gospel and Tradition.

Napiórkowski emphasized the significance of experience as a *locus theologicus* after the promulgation of the 1987 encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, which he read in the light of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. The pope appeared to him as an interpreter of the Council. Earlier, the functional equivalent of experience for Napiórkowski had been the “signs of the times.” Although he did not formulate his own definition of experience, he regarded it as indispensable for the practice of Mariology in context, in accordance with the intention of the Council.

It is worth adding that Napiórkowski’s openness to the signs of the times and to broadly understood experience proved fruitful for the academic world in Poland and Central and Eastern Europe, where he organized theological forums and supervised numerous dissertations.

Conclusion

The study conducted above allows for the positive verification of the hypothesis concerning the conciliar origin of Napiórkowski’s postulate of practicing Mariology in context. The early works of this eminent Polish theologian already contained contextual intuitions that the Second Vatican Council would later make into a binding rule of theological reflection. Therefore, it may be said that without the Council, his Mariology in context would likely not have assumed its particular shape or significance. After an analysis of Napiórkowski’s writings, can one say what “context” means? One possible answer may be formulated as follows: “context” denotes an ecclesial space in which the mystery of God revealed in Christ is lived and theologically articulated in reference to the totality of the truths of faith (*nexus mysteriorum*), the life of the Church as *communio*, the historical and cultural situation of believers, and their experience of faith. In this perspective, Mariology in context appears as a way of doing theology that integrates reflection on the Mother of the Lord with the entirety of the mystery of faith and with the concrete life of the Church.

Napiórkowski’s originality lies not simply in relating Mariology to Christ and the Church, but in transforming this relationship into a lasting methodological principle. The postulate of Mariology in context emerged as a response to an autonomous model of Mariology separated from the broader theological reflection.

A study of Napiórkowski’s writings makes it possible to formulate three responses to the questions posed in the introduction:

- 1) **The Hermeneutics of Development and Mariology in Context.** For over 50 years, Napiórkowski read and interpreted the Second Vatican Council and worked creatively toward formulating the postulate of practicing Mariology in

context. It would therefore be too risky to frame his entire body of work within a single model of conciliar hermeneutics. He cannot be unambiguously classified either within the hermeneutics of reception (as in John Paul II), or the hermeneutics of continuity and reform (as in Benedict XVI), or—still less—within the hermeneutics of rupture, especially where he criticized isolated Mariology. Nevertheless, elements of all these hermeneutical forms can be found in his theology.

Napiórkowski's thought was not aimed at reproducing the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, but at seeking to think in its spirit and according to its method. For him, Mariology in context functions as a methodological rule rather than as a collection of theses derived from conciliar documents. His model grows out of conciliar teaching, yet it cannot be reduced to its literal reception or to a systematic exegesis of the Council's texts. Napiórkowski did not formulate his own theory of conciliar hermeneutics; instead, he consistently employed the Council's mode of reasoning in reflecting on the development of the understanding of the Trinitarian mystery within the Church and the world. In this sense, the contexts he proposed do not exhaust the conciliar perspective, but rather reveal its capacity for further theological generation of meaning.

It appears that in his approach to the Council, Napiórkowski primarily employed a hermeneutics of development. This model is close to the typology proposed by French theologians who spoke of a so-called dynamic hermeneutics (Galiniér-Pallerola et al. 2012; Donneaud 2013). The hermeneutics of development that Napiórkowski practiced reveals two interrelated levels in his Mariology in context.

At the formal level, he remains faithful to the Trinitarian-ecclesial principle, interpreting the Second Vatican Council as an authority not merely institutional but also substantively rooted in the Word of God, in the image of God revealed in Christ, and in the communion of the Church.

The second level of the hermeneutics of development is dynamic, grounded in the truth of God's real presence in history, and shaped by his Word, which transcends human experience. Mariology in context thus becomes a space of the maturing of the Church's faith, a locus in which the mystery of Mary, inscribed within the mystery of Christ and the Church, is read in the light of the Word, the liturgy, and the lived experience of believers.

The next step in this hermeneutics of development should be reflection on the meaning of "mystery" itself. Commentaries on conciliar Mariology generally omit the phrase "in the mystery." Similarly, Napiórkowski, though deeply convinced of the theological significance of the image of God, did not make use of this expression, which carries considerable theological potential.

- 2) **The Theological Significance of Mariology in Context.** Among the theological values of Mariology in context, the first to be highlighted is the image of God upon which it depends. In his reflection on the person of Mary, Napiórkowski

remained consistently faithful to the Gospel. The Council and its Mariological teaching became for him an authority precisely because he sought to preserve fidelity to the Gospel.

The conciliar depiction of the Church is conditioned by the Christological image of God as a communion of persons and by the image of the Church as communion. In this light, the Mother of the Lord appears as both relational and real.

The theological dimension of Napiórkowski's Mariology in context led him to emphasize the importance of Christian formation, understood as a process of growth. Yet, he never reduced it to a form of spiritual therapy for contemporary humanity, whether within or outside the Church. In the final phase of his academic activity, his hermeneutics of development became closely associated with his postulate that Mariology in context should be grounded in the Word of God, in the signs of Christ, in dialogue and Christian unity, and in the experience of the Church, both within it and in relation to the world.

There was, however, a stage in Napiórkowski's work when he strongly advocated the renewal of Mariology and Marian devotion. Among both the Polish episcopate and certain theologians and pastors, this caused unease, as it seemed to promote a conciliar hermeneutics of rupture.

Over time, Napiórkowski himself recognized certain limits to the postulate of renewal. Perhaps he had, at times, overemphasized the need for renewal, not fully taking into account the original intentions of its earlier proponents.

In a certain sense, he thus echoed the tension also present in contemporary contextual theology, whose promoters often regard Mariology as merely speculative. Yet, it should be remembered that the so-called maximalists likewise sought a deeper understanding of Mary's place within the mystery of faith, guided by the logic of the development of Christian doctrine.

- 3) **The Contextuality of Mariology in Context.** Paradoxically, Napiórkowski—who deliberately avoided the terms “contextual theology” or “contextual Mariology”—proposed a method of practicing Mariology in context that is inherently contextual. The context he most profoundly considered was the living, complex reality of the Church itself, encompassing both traditional communities and communities of renewal. Initially, he applied this primarily to the situation in Poland, and after the sociopolitical transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, also to that broader region.

He paid particular attention to the contexts of Marian devotion and ecumenism. He also took into account the dramatic (and often martyrological) history of Christian life in this part of Europe, where he saw “greater and lesser prophets.” Another significant context for him was the academic world of the Catholic University of Lublin, where he taught, inspired, and guided nearly 500 students.

The Council and its reception in different regions of Europe, as well as the wider Western theological tradition, also formed crucial contextual horizons.

In relation to the latter, Napiórkowski articulated the postulate of reorienting theology (and Mariology) in Poland, convinced that one must not rely solely on “ready-made” theologies. This list of contexts cannot be regarded as exhaustive. For Napiórkowski, context was not the backdrop of theology but the very place of its actual realization—the space where the faith of the Church encounters reality. He clearly perceived context within the Church itself.

Behind this stance lies an essential assumption, close to what John Henry Newman once observed, that Christianity has never existed in a “pure” form. Likewise, Napiórkowski recognized the crucial process by which believers move from religiosity to faith.

In this light, it must be emphasized that practicing Mariology in context within the Church in Poland should not be viewed as a narrow panorama but as an expression of the creative realism of this theology. Napiórkowski did not idealize context; he perceived it as a living, personal reality containing either the signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit or their complete absence. In such an approach, one does not encounter a merely symbolic narrative but a realistic and personal one, revealing the Mother of the Lord within the lived faith of believers.

Despite this contextual dimension, Napiórkowski cannot be classified among the representatives of contextual theology (Bevans 2002), which continues to be carefully examined in Poland (Napiórkowski, Gilski, and Wąsek 2025).

The culmination of Napiórkowski’s reflection remains the motto *De Maria numquam satis vere*. This phrase encapsulates his theological method: about Mary, never too much but always correctly.

Translated by Thaddaeus Lancton

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Faith and Culture in Dialogue: Tomáš Halík en Route from Vatican II to Synodality

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Abstract: This article examines how the Czech Catholic Church engages in dialogue with modern culture during two transformative periods: the post-conciliar and post-communist era of the 1990s and the current synodal process. The analysis is structured around a comparative reading of Tomáš Halík's early text *Víra a kultura* (1995) and his recent *Spiritual Introduction to the European Synodal Assembly* (2023), situating both within their historical and ecclesial contexts. The method combines historical-theological analysis with textual interpretation, focusing on Halík's concept of dialogue as a theological and pastoral principle. The study reveals that Halík consistently frames dialogue as essential for the church's credibility and mission, rooted in Vatican II's vision and adapted to contemporary challenges. While the first text emphasizes cultural engagement and overcoming a "ghetto mentality" after communism, the second calls for synodality as a pilgrim journey of reform and solidarity in a globalized, pluralistic world. The paper argues that Halík's dialogical approach offers a coherent response to secularization and internal crises, presenting dialogue not as a strategy but as an incarnational imperative for renewing both church and society.

Keywords: dialogue, Tomáš Halík, Vatican II, synodality, faith and culture, Czech Catholicism

In 2025, the Catholic Church celebrates the 60th anniversary of the conclusion of Vatican II, marked by the approval of important theological documents on the church's role in the modern world. It also signifies 30 years since Tomáš Halík entered public life and began writing. One of his earliest works, *Víra a kultura* [Faith and Culture], examined the Czech post-conciliar theological debate and predicted his rise as a highly respected and well-known author, with his faith-related books translated into 19 languages and numerous awards in literature and theology (Halík 2025).¹

Looking back at Halík's numerous contributions, published as books, essays, homilies, and commentaries, dialogue remains a unifying and recurring theme. A relationship between faith and the world (culture, society, politics, seekers...) appears in various forms and themes throughout his work. The framework is historical and contextual: the concept of dialogue evolves slightly as the author matures and society around him changes. Some themes Halík emphasized shortly after the

¹ In 2014, Halík received the Templeton Prize in recognition of his outstanding contributions to theology and his relentless efforts to facilitate interfaith dialogue.

fall of communism have faded, and new themes have emerged as the world faces 21st-century challenges. His work demonstrates impressive thematic and stylistic consistency; it's difficult to distinguish texts written 30 years ago from those written more recently.

From this perspective, I examine Halík's study of post-conciliar dialogue in Czech theology and society. I focus on two periods in which Halík reflects in detail on the church's role: the enthusiastic period of new democracy in the early 1990s and the "afternoon of Christianity" in the current synodal era. By reading two texts separated by three decades, *Víra a kultura* (1995) and *Spiritual Introduction to the European Synod Assembly* (2023), I analyze Halík's ad intra dialogue: his theological and ecclesial visions for renewing spiritual life and church structures. Although both texts address dialogue between faith and society, the primary audience is the Catholic Church, represented by hierarchy and laity. The author offers a theological and ecclesial foundation for two transformative periods. First, a shift from a persecuted and disoriented church to an open church that discerns the signs of the times. Second, a transition from a clerical and disappointed church in a globally changing world to a synodal church that embraces new challenges. What defines these two periods? What traits do they share, and what is unique to each one? To what degree does Halík's focus on dialogue mirror these particular features? Before I proceed, I briefly outline the Catholic Church's situation under communism to provide context for Halík's theological background and reflection.

1. Catholic Church in Communist Czechoslovakia

Historians and theologians agree that the council's direct impact on the Czech church, which the communist regime had forcibly separated from the global church, was limited, and Czech scholarship still needs to explore the indirect influences (Fiala and Hanuš 2001, 175–76; Hanuš 2011, 93–94; Halík 1995, 18). When examining Vatican II and its effect on the church in Czechoslovakia, it is important to consider the social and historical context.

In the 1960s, the country had been under a harsh totalitarian regime for 15 years. This regime promoted an ideology that opposed Christianity and persecuted the Catholic Church, viewing it as a symbol of Western powers. Unlike Poland and Hungary, Czechoslovakia had a history of strong anti-clerical feelings before 1948, which made it easier for the church to submit to political power (Maier 1999, 45–46). Jiří Hanuš describes three groups within church life: the home official church, the home unofficial church, and the church in exile. The division within Czechoslovakia was shaped by reactions to state policies, such as the suppression of religious orders and education policies (Hanus 2005, 175–77).

The home official church consisted of clerics and laypeople who practiced their faith within the regime-controlled area, mainly through Sunday liturgies. Although some took part in communist organizations or even served as agents of the secret police (*Pacem in terris*), most people avoided conflicts with the authorities. The home unofficial (hidden, underground) church consisted of individuals excluded from public life and ministry, often persecuted and imprisoned. Priests were not allowed to serve publicly, so they participated in unofficial activities such as education, sharing, and liturgy. If necessary, priests were trained and ordained abroad, in places such as East Germany and Poland. Local groups kept strong international contacts, especially with Italy and Poland (Hanuš 2005, 175).

The church in exile reflected two main waves of emigration, closely linked to state politics, in 1948 and 1968. Catholic exiles in Rome were strongly represented by the Křesťanská akademie, which provided information, media support, and financial aid to Czechoslovakia through smuggling (Vrána 1995, 258–59). An important contact was also established with Kraków, which became a leading resource for literature and spiritual support for many Czech intellectuals during the 1950s (Hanuš 2005, 175). The division within the church caused by the council is noteworthy; it was evident in Czechoslovakia but was felt more intensely among exile communities. A key symbol of this division was the *Studie* journal published in Rome, which took a clearly conciliar stance under the guidance of theologian Karel Skalický. This position created significant challenges for more traditional Catholics both locally and internationally (Hanuš 2011, 81; 2005, 177).

The need for ad intra and ad extra dialogue was a vital challenge for the suffering church. The council was seen as a chance for renewal in many ways. In Czechoslovakia, it aligned with social awareness and the call for reforms in social, political, and economic areas during the Prague Spring of the mid-1960s (Felak 2016, 100–101; Hanuš 2011, 79–80; Balík and Hanuš 2007, 5).² Scholars note that the council's ideas reached Czech society on demand. In some ways, the church's persecution in the previous decade accelerated theological reflection and pastoral changes, and it occurred before the council (Halík 1995, 140; Hanuš 2011, 80–81; Petráček 2020, 90). Due to the regime's "mistake," many church members were imprisoned in prisons and labor camps for years, which facilitated unofficial education and theological exchange:

² Some authors emphasize parallels between Vatican II and the Prague Spring reform movements: "As Vatican II did for the laity, Czechoslovakia's reform Communists sought a greater dignity and role for the citizenry. This meant, above all, everyone outside the ranks of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, cutting across broad strata of Czechoslovak society. Like the Council fathers, reform Communists were open to new ideas, including those that came from outside the system and its institutions. They sought a greater emphasis on dialogue, both within the Communist Party and with those outside of it. The new emphasis in the party was less on hierarchy and more on collegiality, again paralleling the aspirations of the Council. Finally, as with Vatican II, Czechoslovakia's reform was elite-driven, with new forces among the party leadership emerging in the course of the 1960s to challenge the old guard." (Felak 2016, 100–101)

The prison “universities” were effectively established, where almost all Catholic prisoners studied. Working together, they discussed lectures and debated issues concerning the state of the Church from all sides. We want to put forward the thesis that certain preparations for the council took place here, despite the complete isolation from world events and even from basic domestic information. (Hanuš 2005, 178)³

This dialogue began in prisons, labor camps, factories, and workplaces where priests, often secretly ordained or lacking official approval, and laypeople, who lead convincing Christian lives, interacted with Christians of different denominations, people with Tomáš Masaryk views, and even communists involved in regimes they helped establish during purges. After 1968, the dialogue continued through unofficial lectures, samizdat publications, and groups like Charter 77, growing stronger until the November 1989 events. Halík suggests that some Catholics saw the church’s challenges as a chance for internal change. They believed persecution was a means of refining the church, akin to Old Testament prophets. Priests in communist prisons saw their suffering as a form of atonement, hoping for a simpler, more honest church rooted in its spiritual essence rather than its past institutional forms (Halík 1995, 140–142).

Hanuš reflects that, in hindsight, the insights applicable to Western European countries can similarly be applied to Czech society, albeit with some differences. Key milestones—such as liturgical reform, the adoption of national languages in worship, a shift in understanding of religious freedom and conscience, ecumenical efforts, and interfaith dialogue—are now fundamental to Catholic Christians’ worldview and lifestyle. However, the depth and scope of Western discourse on these topics have not yet been fully realized locally. So, although the council succeeded in transforming the Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia, the details of the changes still need to be examined and discussed (Hanuš 2011, 94).

2. Post-Conciliar Dialogue in *Víra a kultura*

Amid the excitement of the early 1990s, Halík transitioned from a concealed, persecuted church into a free society and began contributing to theology and public debate. In 1995, Halík published *Víra a kultura*, a study of post-conciliar developments in Czech Catholicism in the journal *Studie*.⁴ It was a new opportunity to address contemporary challenges for a broader audience, drawing heavily on the

³ Translations from Czech into English are by the author.

⁴ Earlier, Halík published a first essay collection, *O přítomnou církev a společnost* [On the Present Church and Society] (1992).

recent experiences of the persecuted church. Halík presented his understanding of faith and the church in the modern world, emphasizing respect for historical sacrifice and hope for the church's role in a free society. In analyzing the theological journal, Halík followed a specific direction in Czech Catholicism that he called "dialogical, open, and conciliar." (1995, 16) Halík acknowledged that his methodical approach could not offer a fully representative or objective insight into Czech Catholicism as a whole. Nevertheless, Halík maintained that it would be hard to find a more meaningful direction that encompassed the history of persecuted Czechs and produced more results. Halík (1995, 19) viewed *Gaudium et spes* as the Magna Carta of the church's new dialogical relationship with modern society and culture. Culture is the legitimate locus theologicus, and Halík (1995, 14–15) aligned with its concept of culture.

The word "culture" in its general sense indicates everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he strives by his knowledge and his labor, to bring the world itself under his control. He renders social life more human both in the family and the civic community, through improvement of customs and institutions. Throughout the course of time he expresses, communicates and conserves in his works, great spiritual experiences and desires, that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family. (GS 53)

Representatives of the pro-reform theological school responded positively to his early work. Even before Halík published the collection of essays in 1992, his teacher from the unofficial persecuted church, Oto Mádr, questioned the point of publishing "an author as well-known and popular in the Czech and Moravian churches as Tomáš Halík ... Everyone has read him or heard him on television. People in Europe enjoy listening to him." (Mádr, quoted in Halík 1992, 5)⁵ Mádr might be surprised to see how Halík's later writings continue to inspire a wide international audience with their eloquent and timely analysis of the human pursuit of meaning and transcendence. Or, perhaps, his teacher would not be too surprised. After all, he already advised readers on how to approach Halík: "Read carefully and thoroughly. Let the elegant form entice you to imagine the content. Accept his brilliant ideas as a call to action, but also—even before that—to dialogue, critical reflection, and internalization." (Mádr, quoted in Halík 1992, 5) Similarly, Skalický, a representative of the exile church, recognized Halík's ability for theological reflection during the transformation period: "His work is a rare resource and catalyst for the process of self-awareness

⁵ In fact, given to his psychological training and profession during communism, Halík co-authored two psychological books with Zbyněk Kuchyňka—*Lidé a konflikty* [People and Conflicts] (1981) and *Člověk a konflikty* [Man and Conflicts] (1979)—as well as meditations for healthcare workers, *Sedm úvah o službě nemocným a trpícím* [Seven Reflections on the Service to the Sick and Suffering] (1991); all were published before 1992.

that every national, state, and church community desperately needs if it is not to degenerate into a mere mass that does not know what is happening within it or where it is heading.” (Skalický, quoted in Halík 1995, 8)

So, Halík, who received his theological education and pastoral training from leading post-conciliar Czech theologians Antonín Mandl, Josef Zvěřina, and Mádr, conducted a thorough study of the *Studie* journal to explore Czech theology after Vatican II. Building on a detailed examination of three decades of journal existence (1958–91), Halík proposed a concluding essay, “Post scriptum,” in which he summarized research results and provided an insightful perspective into the future of the church. In a 22-page-long text, dialogue appears 33 times, making it the central concept of Halík’s reflection. It is not only dialogue between faith and culture, but also interreligious, ecumenical, and societal dialogue. Karel Vrána, another theologian of the exile church, observed that Halík succeeded in demonstrating that both branches of Czech Catholicism, the home and exile churches, developed a dialogical approach to culture (see Halík 1995, 161).

The dialogue between the church and culture, as presented in Vatican II and reflected in Halík’s *Víra a kultura*, marks one of the most important shifts in modern Catholic thought. The council moved away from a defensive “fortress mentality” and adopted a more open approach, recognizing that culture is not an external threat but a vital space where the Gospel can take hold (Halík 1995, 139). Culture is understood holistically: as the collective expression of human life, thought, and creativity. The church acknowledges the independence and freedom of cultures, supports their diversity, and insists that evangelization must engage with culture as a whole rather than just with individuals. This means that the Gospel should be inculturated—embedded in the lived experiences of different peoples—while also renewing and lifting up those cultures through dialogue.

In the Czech context, this dialogue was not mainly imported from abroad but developed from the church’s own experience of persecution under communism. Isolated from the broader Catholic world, Czech believers and theologians found dialogue in prisons, labor camps, and underground communities. There, Catholics met Protestants, liberals, and even disillusioned communists, and together they pursued truth and freedom. This experience eliminated the remnants of a ghetto mentality and opened the church to solidarity with other ideas. In the 1970s and 1980s, dialogue continued through parallel culture, samizdat publications, and dissident groups such as Charter 77. The persecuted church became a moral authority, inspiring unofficial culture and providing a spiritual depth that secular humanism alone could not sustain (Halík 1995, 141–42).

Halík stated that the council’s principle of engaging with the modern world aims to recognize the “maturity of the world,” acknowledging diverse opinions and religions and the universal right to freedom of conscience and belief. *Gaudium et spes* endorses modern values such as democracy, tolerance, and political and cultural

liberty. It examines the rise of civilization rooted in these ideals, providing a balanced view of its strengths and weaknesses (Halík 1995, 139). He highlighted that similar development can be observed in both the home and exile church theology, despite limited mutual exchange. Halík's research identified significant similarities among leading Czech theologians isolated from the global church (Zvěřina, Mandl, Mádr) and those in exile (Vrána, Skalický, Alexander Heidler) (Halík 1995, 144).

The development of a dialogical relationship between faith and culture arises in the persecuted Czech Church primarily through reflection on its own historical experiences. Openness to dialogue is born in the minds and hearts of theologians and believers who bear the cross of severe persecution and live in a church deprived of many external supports. This persecuted church does not succumb to a ghetto mentality, but, on the contrary, it largely rids itself of the remnants of this former mentality. It enters dialogue with other spiritual and intellectual currents in society, especially with those representatives and advocates who are also persecuted by totalitarian power and long for truth and freedom. (Halík 1995, 140–142)

The journal *Studie* was a crucial witness to this process. It served as a platform for Catholic intellectual life, bringing together voices from exile and, later, from within Czechoslovakia. *Studie* documented and influenced the new relationship between faith and culture, covering theology, politics, economics, and human rights. It engaged critically with Marxism, supported dialogue with dissenters, and emphasized the European and Christian roots of Czech culture. By encouraging discussion on national identity, history, and the moral renewal of society, the journal became both a record and a catalyst of the church's cultural involvement. It accompanied the Czech church through the major stages of the Prague Spring, normalization, and the spiritual revival that contributed to the fall of communism (Halík 1995, 145–47). Halík asserts that the success of this dialogue relies on balance. The church must avoid the extremes of rigid traditionalism, which isolates it from the modern world, and excessive liberalism, which erodes its identity into secular culture. Instead, it must communicate with honesty, creativity, and depth, providing a language that resonates with modern humanity. In this way, the dialogue between church and culture becomes not a compromise with modernity but a faithful continuation of Christianity's incarnational movement—God's Word entering human history and transforming it from within.

The author expands on the importance of dialogue between the church and culture, highlighting both its potential and its dangers. He emphasizes that dialogue is not just a superficial adaptation to modernity but an extension of Christianity's incarnational principle: just as the Word became flesh, faith must also engage with the real-world experiences of human culture. This entails openness to diversity, respect for freedom of conscience, and a willingness to learn from philosophy,

science, and the arts. Simultaneously, the author warns that dialogue must uphold the church's identity; it cannot dissolve into secular liberalism nor retreat into nostalgic traditionalism. The key challenge is to communicate genuinely in a language that connects with today's humanity, avoiding both confrontational rhetoric and superficial slogans.

Halík reflects on the Czech Catholic experience under communism as a powerful example of how dialogue can arise from hardship. Deprived of privileges and institutional support, the persecuted church gained new credibility and moral authority. In prisons, labor camps, and secret communities, Catholics engaged in dialogue with Protestants, liberals, and even disillusioned communists, all united by a quest for truth and freedom. This solidarity fostered a culture of resistance and moral renewal, which later helped fuel the broader dissident movement and the regime's eventual fall. For Halík, this demonstrates that dialogue is not a luxury but a necessity: it begins in suffering and becomes a source of strength.

The challenges the author identifies are therefore twofold. For the church, the task is to maintain its distinctiveness while engaging openly with modern culture, avoiding both isolation and assimilation. For Christians, the challenge is to live responsibly in a pluralistic world, defending human dignity and contributing to a "civilization of love." He acknowledges that postmodern society presents new difficulties—skepticism, relativism, and the crisis of rationality—but insists that these are precisely the contexts in which dialogue must continue. The church's credibility depends on its ability to speak honestly, embody solidarity, and offer a vision of hope that transcends both ideological rigidity and cultural conformity. In Halík's view, this is the path by which faith and culture can enrich each other and remain vital in today's world.

3. Synodal Dialogue in *Spiritual Introduction to the European Synodal Assembly*

Halík delivered a spiritual impulse to the delegates at the continental assembly in Prague in February 2023. He gave a 30-minute speech, *Spiritual Introduction to the European Synodal Assembly*, which became a resource for further synodal discussion (Synod on Synodality 2023). Halík begins by recalling the earliest Christian self-understanding: Christianity was not primarily a new philosophy or religion, but "the Way." This dynamic view of faith as a journey needs to be revived in times of crisis. The synod, he explains, is an act of anamnesis—remembering and reawakening the pilgrim nature of the church. Synodality means walking together, listening to the Spirit, and staying open to change. The church is not a fixed institution but a living organism that is constantly evolving (Halík 2023).

The author places this reflection in the Czech context, characterized by reform movements, religious conflicts, and persecution under totalitarian regimes. In prisons and camps, Christians learned practical ecumenism, solidarity, and dialogue with nonbelievers. He identifies three waves of secularization in Czech history: the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society; the violent secularization during communism; and the postmodern pluralism of recent decades. These crises, he argues, challenge the church to rediscover what is essential.

He warns against triumphalism—the temptation to see the church in history as already perfect. The church must distinguish between its historical form and its eschatological fulfillment. When the church confuses itself with the “ecclesia triumphans,” it risks idolatry and the misuse of militant power. Instead, its mission is to inspire transformation, honor freedom of conscience, and reject manipulation. Scandals of abuse demonstrate how easily spiritual authority can be misused. Today’s mission should not be reconquest or proselytizing, but accompanying others in dialogue, broadening boundaries to include seekers and the marginalized. Synodality is a process of mutual learning, not one-sided teaching (Halík 2023).

Halík expands on Pope Benedict’s idea of the “courtyard of the Gentiles,” emphasizing that the church must stay open to seekers who feel close to Christianity but do not fully identify with it. He recalls Pope Francis’ metaphor of the church as a “field hospital,” called to diagnose, prevent, and heal a world wounded by populism, nationalism, fundamentalism, and violence. He emphasizes that truth is not an ideology or a possession; Christians are not owners of truth but lovers of it. Orthodoxy should be combined with orthopraxy (right action) and orthopathy (right passion and spirituality). Without this balance, faith can become cold or ineffective.

The author reflects on the paradox of secularization: while Christianity lost cultural dominance, elements of the Gospel—such as freedom of conscience—were incorporated into secular humanism. Vatican II aimed to end the culture wars and integrate these values into church teachings. *Gaudium et spes* expressed the church’s promise of solidarity with modern humanity, even though modernity itself was already fading. Postmodern globalization now presents both intense interconnection and significant diversity, along with darker issues: terrorism, pandemics, ecological destruction, fake news, and ideological extremism. He references Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s vision of globalization culminating in a conscious shift toward love, a force that unites without destroying.

For Halík, synodality represents the church’s contribution to this transformation: a communal journey that can inspire humanity to avoid a clash of civilizations and instead foster a “civitas ecumenica,” a universal brotherhood. The church must be “semper reformanda,” continually renewed through spirituality. Empty churches in Europe serve as a warning, but also a call to “go to the deep” with courage and faith. The synod is a journey from *paranoia* through *metanoia* to *pronoia*—discernment and openness to God’s future. Halík sees synodality as a path of Easter

transformation: dying to old forms, rising to new life, and seeking the living Christ in unexpected places. The church's mission is to combine contemplation and action, prayer and political love, building bridges of solidarity and integrating the Gospel into today's pluralistic world. In essence, Halík's (2023) *Spiritual Introduction* frames synodality as a pilgrim's journey of dialogue, humility, and transformation, rejecting triumphalism and fear, and calling the church to serve as a sign of universal brotherhood in a fractured, globalized age.

4. Evaluation and Critical Discussion

Both of Halík's texts explore the role of the church in transforming society, but their genres and audiences differ. Halík chooses language and symbols carefully; he appeals to readers and listeners in various stylistic ways. *Víra a kultura*—written in Czech—adopts a scholarly, historical tone, rich with references to Vatican II, papal documents, and cultural theory. It employs analytical vocabulary (e.g., dialogical relationship, inculturation, and plurality) and cites theologians (Karl Rahner, Joseph Ratzinger), and philosophers (Martin Heidegger, Romano Guardini). Its style is systematic and argumentative, emphasizing cultural analysis and ecclesial strategy. It aims at an educated but unseen readership. *Spiritual Introduction*—presented in English—uses biblical metaphors (I am the Way, grain of wheat), Latin theological terms (*ecclesia militans*, kenotic ecclesiology), and rhetorical questions. Its tone is pastoral and visionary, designed to inspire transformation and synodality. The language is universalist, addressing global Christianity and humanity. It functions as a spiritual and motivational message for church leaders, who sit directly in front of the speaker.

Both texts emphasize the importance of dialogue, reform, and cultural engagement, while rejecting triumphalism and fundamentalism. *Víra a kultura* provides a historical and sociological analysis, focusing on cultural dynamics and practical church strategies, especially in the Czech Republic and Europe. It navigates post-modern pluralism without losing its identity; advocates for avoiding both traditionalist isolation and liberal dissolution; addresses clerical weaknesses and cultural marginalization; and fights against relativism while promoting dialogue. *Spiritual Introduction* frames the dialogue within a spiritual, eschatological vision of synodality and global solidarity. It urges overcoming fear and nostalgia, revitalizing spirituality amid empty churches, resisting ideological extremes, and transforming globalization into communion.

This analysis highlights Halík's sensitivity in engaging with different partners across various eras. Sometimes, Halík addresses secular humanists; at other times, he speaks to fellow Catholics. After a period of "discussion" with seekers, the author

shifts to an exchange with nones. In interfaith dialogue, Halík aims for a universalist language that is not syncretic. Nevertheless, as shown in the two texts examined, Halík values meaningful articulation, maintains theological consistency, and exhibits pastoral sensitivity. This paper explores dialogical thinking in Halík's work, from his early writings on Vatican II to his reflections on synodality, illustrating how central themes of dialogue and transformation shape his theology.

5. Dialogue Outward and Inward

Halík has served as a messenger of dialogue for the past 30 years, and his academic and ministerial work combines external and internal dialogue. He uses the concept, which originated in Vatican II and later theological reflection, to frame the church's mission in the modern world. In his publications, speeches, and homilies, Halík sees both dimensions as inseparable. The church cannot credibly engage in external dialogue with the world if it lacks internal dialogue. Conversely, internal dialogue becomes sterile if it does not reach outward. For Halík, dialogue is not a tactic but a theological necessity: it reflects the Incarnation, in which God enters human history, and embodies the church's mission of universal service.

Dialogue in Halík's work is not just about conversation or debate. It is a way of life that embraces openness to many perspectives, diversity, and otherness. It involves genuine, respectful curiosity about another person's experience and reflections. While the traditional idea of dialogue involves mutual discussion between two or more people, Halík often "leads dialogue" alone by asking challenging, reflective questions. These are like a literary genre, engaging with a fictional character; when words, images, and symbols are presented in public space for those who "have ears to hear" without necessarily expecting a reply.⁶

Halík considers dialogue outside of his own church essential for credibility—faith must connect with contemporary people, including atheists, the non-religious, seekers, and followers of other religions, rather than remain confined within a closed community. To those outside his church, the author offers a "human face of Christianity" through inclusive and sensitive language. He does not abandon his theological roots, but without romanticizing, he approaches a secular landscape with a vision of ongoing dialogue rather than a static set of ideas (McGrath 2023, 399). In this context, Alister McGrath regards Halík's main contribution to modern Christian thought as cultural witness. This involves the delicate and vital practice of demonstrating, living out, and expressing the Christian faith within a cultural

⁶ Halík's most recent book, *Dopisy papeži* [Letters to the Pope] (2024), employs a highly dialogical genre: the author writes 12 letters to the fictional Pope Raphael to discuss the future of the church.

environment often skeptical of simple solutions to complex issues and cautious of relying on traditional certainties (McGrath 2023, 399). It is notable that, while in his writings and public speeches Halík offers witness rather than aiming for conversion, his parish ministry draws hundreds of candidates into the Catholic Church. His compelling, non-normative Christian message appeals to people seeking existential meaning. In this view, dialogue is not a tool for forced conversion but a way to live one's faith and share it through actions and words. Conversion, then, is a personal choice (Muchova 2025a).

Halík emphasizes that inward dialogue is essential for authenticity—without internal openness within the church, outward dialogue risks remaining superficial. We previously saw that Halík offered clear visions for the church in post-communist democratic societies. In *Víra a kultura*, e.g., he addressed various aspects of church life that need development and discussion. Alongside his role as a university professor, he became a parish priest at the Academic Parish of Prague and has served that community since then. While enjoying his civil profession, he criticized the church hierarchy for isolating itself in a ghetto mentality and fearing a free society. His inward dialogue is primarily characterized by a prophetic call for openness, listening, and seeking meaning. Halík is unafraid of confrontation and openly challenges, for instance, the misuse of religion for political purposes (Muchova 2025b). Interestingly, Halík's early publications in psychology from the 1970s and 1980s addressed conflicts. However, Halík consistently portrays dialogue as the solution to conflict.

Having studied two of Halík's texts spanning three decades, we must also consider his other writings and speeches along the way: Halík's thought and theology evolve and respond to contemporary challenges. So, who are, e.g., Halík's partners in dialogue? Are they atheists, nones, seekers, fellow Christians, or members of the Catholic hierarchy? While readers from outside Christianity may see terms such as "nones" and "seekers" as insensitive and paternalistic, Jan Loffeld recently questions the Christian assumption that everyone is seeking a spiritual end (Loffeld 2025). I argue, however, that Halík's contribution is primarily pastoral and attentive, not philosophical or argumentative. There is a biographical reason: for 30 years, hundreds of people have visited Halík's community at the Academic Parish of Prague, students have attended his lectures at Charles University in Prague, and thousands are reading his books translated into dozens of languages. Halík's primary audience truly consists of seekers with existential questions who arrive at the Christian doorstep (Muchova 2025a). So, while his themes address dialogue outward, his methods are also inward—persuading the church to believe in dialogue with society. Following McGrath, I argue that, in addition to being a cultural witness in secular society, Halík is also a Christian witness within his own church.

Conclusion

Readers often see Halík as a philosophical writer rather than a theologian. The professor of philosophy and religious studies prefers to emphasize this view because it makes his works more accessible to readers outside the church. McGrath (2023) and Aden Cotterill (2024) highlight that Halík's writing skillfully combines philosophical inquiry with theological reflection. This paper, therefore, identified two distinct periods during which Halík actively participated in church and theological debates. Both are linked to church reform processes: the post-conciliar era in the 1990s and recent synodal discussions. While the middle period focuses on interreligious dialogue, societal conversations, and interactions with seekers and nonbelievers, Halík's recent work again addresses the church's role in society—specifically, the dialogue between faith and culture—as he described 30 years ago. In this way, Halík's writings serve as a prophetic voice for internal church dialogue—addressing current challenges and issues within the church while also proposing solutions. The author believes that openness, dialogue, and listening to other cultures are essential responses to a secular society, which still includes people seeking transcendence and meaning. He maintains his faith in the Christian message and the transformative power of individual spiritual exploration.

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The Reception of Vaticanum II in the Apologetics of Józef Myśków (1927–1988)

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to present the reception of Vatican II teachings in the apologetics of Józef Myśków (1927–1988), a theologian and apologist associated with the Warsaw School of Apologetics, which conducted research and teaching at the Faculty of Theology of the Academy of Catholic Theology in Warsaw from 1956 to 1992. With the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council and the publication of the council's documents, a shift can be observed in Myśków's scholarly reflections. The Warsaw apologist, keenly interested in Vatican II, not only undertook analysis of key texts but, above all, rebuilt his own apologetic system to incorporate the thought of the latter council. Using an analytical method, the author of the article presents the debate on apologetics after the Second Vatican Council, as reflected in the writings of the Warsaw professor. The second part is devoted to Myśków's concept of ecumenical apologetics in its theoretical and practical dimensions. The analyses conducted allow us to conclude that, according to Myśków, apologetics after the last council is tenable, although it should be supplemented with selected issues proposed by the documents of Vatican II, both in terms of Christology and ecclesiology. Inspired by ecumenical ideas, Myśków proposes a new approach to apologetics, with a clear ecumenical slant. While he admits that it was not the council itself that gave rise to this idea, the council's teachings confirmed and strengthened his beliefs regarding the integration of apologetics and ecumenism. As a result, Myśków creates his own, original concept of apologetics, which is being called comparative. In addition to his theoretical efforts related to the new model of apologetics, the Warsaw professor undertakes practical activities, promoting doctoral theses with a clear apologetic-ecumenical profile and preparing scholarly articles based on the methodology he has developed.

Keywords: Józef Myśków, apologetics, Warsaw Apologetic School, Second Vatican Council, ecumenism

Józef Myśków (1927–1988) was a theologian (see Myśków 1959, 1960) and an apologist (see Myśków 1965, 1973, 1986) associated with the Warsaw School of Apologetics (WSA), which pursued scientific and teaching activities at the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic Theology Academy in Warsaw in the years 1956–1992 (see Kwiatkowski 1965, 5–17). With the end of the Second Vatican Council and the publication of the conciliar documents, a shift can be observed in his academic reflections. Myśków became keenly interested in Vatican II. Not only does he analyze key texts, but above all, he reconstructs his own apologetic system so that the ideas of the last council are present in it (see Myśków 1968b).

The aim of this article is to show the reception of Vatican II in Myśków's apologetics. Using an analytical method, in the first part I will present the debate on apologetics after the council as it appears in the writings of the Warsaw professor. The second part will be devoted to Myśków's concept of ecumenical apologetics in its

theoretical and practical dimensions. At each stage of the article, I will refer mainly to Myśków's writings, which will be the primary sources analyzed, as well as to the texts of other Warsaw apologists.

When examining the *status quaestionis* of the title issue, two older studies should be mentioned, namely the article by Tadeusz Gogolewski (1991) and the work by Ewa Korbut (2003), as well as two new texts by Przemysław Artemiuk (2025a, 2025b). In characterizing Myśków's academic achievements, Gogolewski adopts a chronological approach and points to the key themes of his work, namely his interest in dogmatics, especially Christology, his transition to apologetics, his description of its methodology, and the development of his own concept with an ecumenical and then religious studies inclination (see Gogolewski 1991). Korbut, in turn, in a short monograph devoted to Myśków's apologetics, deals with the conditions of his apologetic thought, the structure of ecumenical apologetics, and his achievements in its practice (see Korbut 2003). Two new texts on Myśków attempt to approach his apologetics from a historical-synthetic (Artemiuk 2025a) and an ecumenical (Artemiuk 2025b) perspective.

1. The Situation of Apologetics After Second Vatican Council

Myśków, dealing with the thought of the Council and undertaking editorial work on theological texts concerning Vatican II, is aware of the rise of fundamental theology at that time. Therefore, he questions the place of apologetics in the ecclesial space (see Myśków 1969, 1970a, 1970c). He begins with a definition and then points to the reasons for addressing the pronouncements of the Church's Magisterium (see Myśków 1973, 1986). He understands scientific apologetics as

a field of religious studies that systematically and critically examines the self-defense of the historical foundations of the Christian religion from an axiological point of view. Admittedly, the subject of scientific apologetics is the apologetics of all religions, not just the apologetics of the Christian religion, and therefore, in relation to the latter, the term "scientific apologetics as applied to the Christian religion (applied apologetics)" should be used, but we agree that in our article the term "scientific apologetics" will have a narrower meaning. (Myśków 1969, 17)¹

According to Myśków, the rulings of the *Magisterium Ecclesiae* are the sources for scientific apologetics, which is why, from the perspective of the last council, we should ask: "how should the internal structure of this science be shaped in the face

¹ All translations from Polish into English are the author's own.

of the resolutions of the Second Vatican Council.” (Myśków 1969, 18) The Warsaw apologist admits that apologetics was not discussed during the council deliberations and is difficult to find in the published documents, but, according to Myśków, they show a connection with “the subject of scientific apologetics, both in terms of Christological and ecclesiological facts.” (Myśków 1969, 18)

To justify this claim, the apologist refers to Polish post-conciliar literature and undertakes its analysis, taking into account its usefulness for scientific apologetics. He points out that apologists from the WSA at the Academy of Catholic Theology present a different perspective from that of theologians from the Catholic University of Lublin. As far as the WSA is concerned, we are dealing with apologetics understood as an independent science, taking on the character of religious studies. In the case of Lublin researchers, we are dealing with apologetics practiced in a theological manner and defined as fundamental theology. “This direction makes the internal structure of this science dependent mainly on the development of the proper concept of Revelation, credibility, and miracle.” (Myśków 1969, 19) Myśków notes that Warsaw apologetics does not show any particular interest in Christological topics. Apologists from the Warsaw School of Theology deal with the historical value of the Gospel as a source enabling access to the historical figure of Jesus, as well as the defense of the religion he preached. In particular, they undertake a critical analysis of the historical-morphological method presented by Rudolf Bultmann and the researchers who formed his school (see Myśków 1969, 19; 1967, 1968a, 1972). What topics present in Polish theological literature dealing with conciliar themes can apologetics draw on? The apologist lists the following: the historical nature of the Gospel sources (the “history” of the Gospels, positive and negative elements of the historical-morphological method, Jesus of history and Christ of kerygma, the Gospels as sources of kerygmatic history, the evangelists as authors and editors); the concept and methods of transmitting Revelation (the concept of Revelation, the transmission of Revelation, Scripture and Tradition, the Magisterium of the Church and Revelation). In Polish theological circles, it is emphasized that the Second Vatican Council presents the above topics in a progressive and ecumenical spirit of openness. When it comes to progressiveness, Polish theologians emphasize the possibilities that arise from learning about and taking into account contemporary theology. This may contribute to the creation of a fuller and broader vision of the issues discussed. In addition, they emphasize that the conciliar resolutions contain new elements (Myśków 1969, 40). Ecumenical issues should be recognized in the statements of the Council Fathers concerning Christian revelation. Their presence creates space for dialogue with separated brethren.

According to Myśków, the subject matter of applied apologetics demands confrontation with the resolutions of Vatican II. The Warsaw apologist is primarily interested in the hypothetical correlation between the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and contemporary applied apologetics (see Myśków 1970a, 133). Myśków

addresses this issue, starting with the Christological fact. In his opinion, the Council's statements on the nature of the Gospel as "sources enabling objective knowledge of the activities of Jesus of Nazareth and His defense of the Christian religion" remain crucial (Myśków 1970a, 133). According to the Warsaw professor, the Council's position on this issue is crucial for apologetics. Myśków emphasizes that a positive solution to this problem determines the further directions of apologetic research and also influences the scientific status of theoretical and applied apologetics. Apologetics can continue its research on Christian apologies, especially the classical ones presented by Jesus of Nazareth, only if the works containing these apologies are genuine historical sources (see Myśków 1970a, 133–34). As far as the sources, i.e., the Gospels, are concerned, the key statements of the Council are contained in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*. According to Myśków, the Council applied the principle of the "golden mean" to the dispute between liberal theologians, who saw the Gospels as merely kerygmatic texts, and conservative theologians, for whom they were strictly historical texts. While defending the absolute historical truth contained in the Gospels, the Council also acknowledged that they are not strictly historical works, but also have a kerygmatic character. In other words, according to *Dei verbum*, the Gospels are historical-kerygmatic in nature, i.e., they contain history that has been subjected to kerygmaticization (see Myśków 1970a, 135). The Warsaw professor emphasizes that from the perspective of his discipline, it is important to confirm in the conciliar resolutions the "scientific status of apologetics" developed by the creator of total apologetics (Wincenty Kwiatkowski) and the WSA. According to the Constitution on Revelation, the four-fold Gospel, while retaining the form of preaching, conveys as the foundation of faith "the sincere truth about Jesus." (Myśków 1970a, 135) Furthermore, the council rejected the questioning of the authenticity of studies critically discussing the apology of the Christian religion contained in the Gospels, and also pointed to the need for an open and positive attitude towards the contemporary direction of exegetical research, to which *Dei verbum* owes its form to a large extent. Apologists should be less critical of their opponents and at the same time be cautious in using certain Gospel and biblical texts, taking into account their kerygmatic character (see Myśków 1970a, 135–36).

In the context of ecclesiology, the task of apologetics remains to comprehensively illuminate the very fact of the Church, according to the method it has adopted. Theologians, in turn, should address ecclesiological issues from a non-empirical perspective (see Myśków 1970a, 136). Myśków believes that every theological study should be preceded by an apologetic one. The essence of the Church can only be revealed once the fact of its existence as a religious community established by Jesus of Nazareth has been justified. Before a theological answer to the question "What is the Church?" can be given, the apologist should first explain: "Does the Church exist and where is it located?" (Myśków 1970a, 136–37) The Warsaw professor notes that the conciliar documents contribute significant themes to ecclesiological fact, especially

in places where they draw attention to the issue of the Church as the People of God, the collegiality of authority in the Church, and Tradition as an expression of revealed teaching. These issues are found in the second and third chapters of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, as well as in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, the Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, and the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*. In summary, Myśków notes that a comparison of the material subject of applied apologetics with the thinking of Vatican II reveals the need for an integral approach to apologetic material and the inclusion of conciliar thinking, especially ecumenical themes. A positive view of the research conducted by Protestant and Orthodox scholars, followed by the systematization of research in the field of “ecumenical apologetics,” as well as taking into account the role of the lay faithful in the teaching and pastoral authority that was handed down by Christ to the Apostles, are areas of scientific interest for apologists (see Myśków 1970a, 143).

The year 1970 brought a discussion about *Ratio studiorum* in Higher Theological Seminaries. In this context, the question of the meaning of teaching apologetics in them also arose (see Myśków 1970b). Myśków spoke out, proposing total apologetics instead of pre-conciliar textbooks (see Myśków 1970b, 52). According to the Warsaw professor, the system created by Kwiatkowski, i.e., total apologetics, in contrast to intellectualist and voluntarist approaches, and in opposition to integral apologetics and all approaches defined as fundamental theology, combines the material and formal subject into one and adheres to the methodology appropriate for this type of research. The author of the system explains this tendency by the introduction, through total apologetics, of the implicative integration of various parts of the material subject, which appeared in previous apologetic works in associative connections, referred to as *demonstratio Christiana* and *demonstratio catholica*. In addition, total apologetics undertakes the task of implicitly integrating the formal subject, which from now on is the whole Christ (together with His Church) as an absolute religious value and the whole human being as a subject committed to this value (*Sanctum*). In view of the comprehensive approach to the material subject and due to the development of religious studies, total apologetics omits the study of religion from its research. Based on the implication of the correlation between Christ and the Church, it speaks in both its parts about the single consciousness of Jesus of Nazareth, once in the religious-individual aspect, once in the religious-social aspect. Taking as its material subject the apology of the Christian religion, especially in its classical form, it examines axiologically the two-stage structure of the self-defense of the Christian religion carried out by Jesus of Nazareth, covering both His declarations and their justification (see Myśków 1970b, 52–53). Myśków, in view of the essence of total apologetics outlined above, asks about its place in seminary studies. In his response, he gives three opposing reasons. First, the new post-conciliar study program does not devote much space to apologetics. Second, Kwiatkowski’s system does not

take the form of a textbook for students. Total apologetics is a scientific work, and therefore a specialized one, which can help researchers much more than alumni. It is written in scientific and at the same time sophisticated language. Third, unlike total apologetics, the Second Vatican Council places different emphases on certain issues. The lecture would therefore need to be significantly expanded, supplemented, and reformulated in some areas, especially with regard to ecclesiological themes. Taking these reasons into account, the system of total apologetics could be applied, assuming the necessary conditions. Myśków, aware of both the objections raised against total apologetics and the proposals and solutions of the Council, corrects Kwiatkowski's system, suggesting necessary changes (see Myśków 1970b, 57–64). The conclusions he draws from his analyses are as follows: the system of total apologetics has a wealth of data that can form the basis for lectures in seminaries, even in the post-conciliar era. The reservations raised are more formal than substantive in nature, as they do not affect the structure of the system itself, but only point to the need to adapt the material taught to the specific conditions of the seminary and to the need for certain additions. Thus, the question raised in this topic, whether the system of total apologetics can and should be taught in seminaries, receives a positive solution (see Myśków 1970b, 64).

2. The Ecumenical Profile of Apologetics

As an apologist, Myśków actively participated in the post-conciliar theological debate by organizing a scientific apologetic seminar with a distinct ecumenical orientation. His goal was to develop a model of apologetics that would take on an interdenominational form (see Myśków 1976).

According to the Warsaw professor, apologetics and ecumenism, although they seem to be completely opposite terms that are difficult to combine, in fact turn out to be only an apparent contradiction. The relationship between apologetics and ecumenism can take on a completely different form when we properly define the former. Myśków begins his development of a new concept of apologetics by responding to Kwiatkowski's total apologetics (see Kwiatkowski 1959; Wilemski 1967), and then broadens his perspective. In his opinion, like the founder of the WSA, apologetics is a non-theological science that belongs to the disciplines of religious studies. Referring to Kwiatkowski, Myśków starts from the fact that there is an apologetic feature in religions, consisting in the unshakable conviction of their followers about the truth of their religion. Apologetics in this context deals with justifying the adopted religious attitude (see Myśków 1976, 54). The Warsaw apologist then notes that, from a scientific point of view, there is a need to undertake critical research on the objective value of the phenomenon of religious apologetics. Myśków emphasizes that

the axiological aspect of apologetics is not the subject of any theological or religious studies discipline. Therefore, this creates the basis for organizing an independent science with such a profile. It would include, first, the material subject—all religious apologetics; secondly, the formal subject—their objective value, i.e., the axiological aspect; thirdly, the method—a set of non-theological methods specific to religious studies, including the historical-critical method as the leading one (see Myśków 1976, 54). Myśków notes that Kwiatkowski originally intended to cover the entire religious reality with apologetics. Ultimately, he limited his idea to one religion, namely Christianity, which he identified with Catholicism.

Inspired by total apologetics, Myśków interprets Kwiatkowski's original assumptions, proposing a new model of apologetics with a clear ecumenical orientation. According to the Warsaw professor, the original methodological assumptions adopted for total apologetics imply its ecumenical dimension to such an extent that they constitute an indispensable basis for the creation of this discipline as ecumenical apologetics. According to Myśków, the implication applied indicates that the ecumenical character is contained in the very structure of apologetics understood as a religious science—more precisely, in apologetics dealing with the systematic and critical understanding of the self-defense of Christianity from an axiological point of view. This type of apologetics subjects the apologetic material contained in Christianity to critical analysis (see Myśków 1976, 55). Myśków is of the opinion that Kwiatkowski ultimately did not take this implication into account. He omitted it because he simplified apologetics, depriving it of its ecumenical character. The Warsaw apologist, presenting his project, first criticizes the simplifying measure and only then presents the material subject of ecumenical apologetics.

In view of the simplification, which limits apologetic research to the apology of one religion, Myśków proposes the following steps (see Myśków 1976, 56). The first issue is a radical expansion of the research material. This means that the material subject of apologetics becomes the apologies of all religions. Naturally, the subject of total apologetics could be narrowed down to Christianity alone. However, in that case, the name would have to be changed to applied apologetics, which would mean “applying the principles adopted by a given type of apologetics to the study of a specific apology of religion, not necessarily Christian.” (Myśków 1976, 56–57) Myśków's suggestion leads to a division between general apologetics and applied apologetics. The former deals with the apologies of religion in general, while the latter deals with the apology of one religion, namely Christianity. At this stage, it would also be necessary to specify which religion's apology is meant. According to the Warsaw professor, the new name of the subject in its full form could be as follows: applied apologetics—Christianism or apologetics of Christianity (see Myśków 1976, 57).

The second issue concerns narrowing apologetic research to the classical apologetics of the Christian religion. Myśków first explains Kwiatkowski's approach and then expands on it. He suggests, in accordance with the accepted methodology, that

research on the apology of Christianity should first focus on the original, classical apology, which comes from the Founder of the Christian religion. It is authentic and authoritative. However, one cannot limit oneself to it exclusively. Although it is possible to achieve the goal, i.e., to establish the personal dignity of Jesus of Nazareth and the Church as the religious community he founded, with such a narrow subject of research, this nevertheless leads to a failure to realize the formal subject of apologetics. And let us remember that it consists in confrontation with existing ecclesial structures. Therefore, in order to fully realize the formal subject of apologetics, it is necessary to examine the classical apologetics of the Christian religion in its axiological aspect. Myśków explains that this involves finding what derives from the authentic kerygma of Jesus and His will as recorded in the Gospels, and what has remained in the Churches that recognize Christ. According to the Warsaw apologist, examining only classical apologetics does not yield complete results and does not allow for the realization of the formal subject of apologetics; in addition, the narrowed goal leaves the research suspended in a vacuum (see Myśków 1976, 57–58). Myśków therefore suggests broadening the field of research to include, in addition to classical apologetics, secondary or derivative apologetics, i.e., Orthodox and Protestant apologetics. This will avoid the inconsistencies pointed out and ensure that the formal subject is fully realized.

The third issue concerns the limitation made by Kwiatkowski, who equated classical apologetics with Catholic apologetics (see Myśków 1976, 58). In this case, Myśków suggests defining classical apologetics in its Catholic version as derivative or secondary, similar to Orthodox or Protestant apologetics. This would change the very subject of apologetics. It would no longer be “a systematic and critical exposition of the self-defense of Christianity, both in its oldest form, i.e., Catholic, and in its later forms: Orthodox or Protestant,” but “both in its oldest form and in its later forms: Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant.” (Myśków 1976, 59–60) This change is significant, and it is not just a matter of replacing the adjective “Catholic.” Myśków proposes a restructuring of

the subject of apologetics both in the sense of respecting the distinction between the apology carried out by Jesus of Nazareth and its Catholic form, as well as the resulting necessity to confront them in order to also implement in this section of the subject of formal apologetics, i.e., the axiological aspect of the apology of Christianity. (Myśków 1976, 60)

The apologist explains that the change in the subject of apologetics is not about a confrontation between classical apologetics and its Orthodox and Protestant forms. What is at stake here is an approach to the material subject of applied apologetics that would encompass both classical apologetics and its three variants, while the formal subject would be realized through a three-way confrontation between secondary apologetics and classical apologetics. The Warsaw apologist notes that the material

subject of apologetics, viewed from this perspective, approaches the adjective “ecumenical.” Therefore, Myśków suggests that apologetics understood in this way should no longer be called applied, but ecumenical. According to the apologist, the formal subject should also have this character, because the axiological aspect of the apology of the Christian religion boils down to those elements in all apologies of Christianity whose author is Jesus of Nazareth. In Myśków’s proposal, the formal subject would be ecumenical in nature, as the goal of apologetics would be to identify those elements that are common to both Jesus’ apology and its three Christian variants. The formal subject of apologetics understood in this way would be the ecumenical (rather than axiological) aspect of Christian apologetics, provided that all subjectivity or bias is eliminated from the adjective “ecumenical.” According to Myśków, the ecumenical nature of apologetics has its source in the internal structure of the discipline itself and exists independently of the ecumenical nature of the Second Vatican Council and post-conciliar theological reflection. Certainly, such an approach to apologetics can help in the implementation of the resolutions of Vatican II concerning ecumenical dialogue (see Myśków 1976, 60).

The conclusion, as Myśków deduces, is as follows: apologetics, which is not a theological science but a religious science, “as an independent discipline, inspired not by the Council but by its very nature, can and should be ecumenical to such an extent that, in the case of the apology of Christianity, it is justified, given its material and formal subject matter, to refer to it as ‘ecumenical apologetics.’” (Myśków 1976, 61)

The Warsaw apologist thus divides apologetics into classical Christian apologetics and secondary or derivative apologetics. The original, classical apology of Christianity contains Jesus’ statements about both himself and the religious community he established, called the Church. It includes the declarations of the Master of Nazareth, testifying to his messianic and filial consciousness, as well as the motivation present in them. This apologetics also includes Jesus’ statements referring to the structure of the community He established, including primacy and apostolate (see Myśków 1976, 61). Although these elements, as Myśków emphasizes, were already present in total apologetics, from the perspective of the latest research and the teachings of Vatican II, they require a new approach. This concerns primarily the issue raised in *Dei verbum* (the concept of revelation, Christological themes) and elements relating to authority in the Church (collegiality, primacy) present in *Lumen gentium* (see Myśków 1976, 61). Myśków gives a positive assessment of the system of total apologetics. He points out that, in critically examining classical Christian apologetics, he wanted it to be, by definition, an open system that took into account the latest achievements in biblical studies. According to the Warsaw apologist, this is a specific difficulty of ecumenical apologetics, for which the findings of classical apologetics are the starting point. In addition, the new vision of apologetics requires parallel research into all four apologies of Christianity, namely classical, Catholic, Orthodox,

and Protestant. Myśków is convinced that the proposal of ecumenical apologetics will prove to be creative and adequate for post-conciliar times (see Myśków 1976, 62).

Secondary apologies, i.e., Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, need to be brought out, appreciated, and shown in their originality. The first of these should be treated today not as a classical apology of the Christian religion, but as a secondary one. It should be divided and the classical elements, i.e., the original ones, should be separated from the Catholic ones, which remain secondary. This is evident in the concept of the Church of Christ, but also where the issue of collegiality arises, which is also present in the conciliar documents. The Orthodox apology, in turn, contains, like the classical apology, basic statements about the individual consciousness of Jesus. The differences between it and the Catholic apology appear in ecclesiological themes (the social consciousness of Jesus). The two secondary apologies also differ on the question of the primacy of authority, the issue of conciliarity (collegiality in the Catholic Church), and the charism of the Church's infallibility. Protestant thought, from the perspective of ecumenical apologetics, also shows common elements (see Myśków 1976, 65). Myśków first draws attention to research on the historicity of the Gospels. He then emphasizes Protestant interest in Christological titles (see Myśków 1976, 66). Also important is the motivational awareness of Jesus, signifying His miraculous activity, as well as the fact of the resurrection. These topics are also taken up by Protestant scholars (see Myśków 1976, 67). In addition, the issue of the kerygma about the Kingdom of God, examined from a Protestant and Catholic perspective, proves valuable for the classical apologetics of Jesus (see Myśków 1976, 67). Protestant thought also contributes to research on primacy (see Myśków 1976, 68) and apostolate (see Myśków 1976, 68).

Myśków's reflection on the ecumenical nature of apologetics, undertaken in the perspective of the Second Vatican Council, leads him to the following conclusion:

It is methodologically correct to refer to this discipline as ecumenical apologetics. Its material subject matter is both the classical apology of the Christian religion and its three varieties: Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, while its formal subject matter is the ecumenical aspect of these apologies realized in a three-way confrontation between secondary apologies and the classical one. (Myśków 1976, 69)

Research on ecumenical apologetics has found its application. First, in doctoral dissertations written at a scientific seminar led by Myśków: "Ustrój hierarchiczny Kościoła według Sergiusza Bułgakowa i jego zwolenników" [The Hierarchical Structure of the Church According to Sergiusz Bulgakov and His Followers] (Ireneusz Wrzesiński); "Podmiot i przedmiot nieomylności w Kościele według A.S. Chomjakowa i jego szkoły" [The Subject and Object of Infallibility in the Church According to A. S. Komyakov and His School] (Mieczysław Wójtowicz); "Pneumatyczno-charyzmatyczny charakter Kościoła w prawosławnej eklezjologii eucharystycznej"

[The Pneumatic-Charismatic Character of the Church in Orthodox Eucharistic Ecclesiology] (Jan Jarek); and “Przekazy biblijne o chrystofaniach” [Biblical Accounts of Christophanies] (Z. Proczek) (see Gogolewski 1991, 8) and, subsequently, in scientific articles written in the spirit of the developed apologetic model (see Myśków 1979, 1980).

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to show the reception of Vatican II in Myśków’s apologetics. Using an analytical method, in the first part I presented the debate on apologetics after the Council as presented in the writings of the Warsaw professor. The second part was devoted to Myśków’s concept of ecumenical apologetics in its theoretical and practical dimensions. At each stage of the article, I mainly used Myśków’s writings, which were the primary sources analyzed, and I also referred to the texts of other Warsaw apologists.

To conclude the analysis, I would like to formulate the most important conclusions. Firstly, according to Myśków, post-conciliar apologetics is still valid, although it should be supplemented with selected issues proposed by the documents of Vatican II, both in terms of Christological and ecclesiological facts.

Secondly, inspired by the ecumenical ideas proclaimed by the Council, but also referring to his own scientific research and intuition, Myśków proposes a new approach to apologetics with a clear ecumenical inclination. He admits that it was not the Council itself that gave him this idea, but that the Councils teaching confirmed and strengthened his convictions regarding the combination of apologetics and ecumenism. As a result, Myśków created his own original concept of apologetics, which became known as comparative apologetics.

Thirdly, in addition to his theoretical efforts related to the new model of apologetics, Myśków took practical action. This took two forms. At the academic seminar under his supervision, works with a clear apologetic-ecumenical profile were created, while the Warsaw apologist himself prepared academic articles using the methodology he had developed.

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Speaking from Within Science: Vatican II's Legacy in John Paul II's *Letter to George Coyne*

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Abstract: This study examines how the Second Vatican Council's teaching on science finds a mature and influential expression in John Paul II's "Letter to Reverend George V. Coyne, S.J., Director of the Vatican Observatory" (hereafter cited as *Letter to Coyne*). The Council affirmed the autonomy of the sciences, encouraged dialogue with contemporary culture, and called for renewed theological engagement with a world shaped by scientific inquiry. The *Letter to Coyne* develops these principles with greater clarity and precision and is well-suited to the scientific community because it begins from within the scientific outlook and speaks in a manner that resonates with the concerns and methods of scientists. For this reason, it becomes a particularly effective medium for transmitting the message of Vatican II to those for whom scientific inquiry is a daily practice. The *Letter* presents a vision of complementary competences between theology and the natural sciences, proposes that theology benefit from methodological insights of scientific work, and articulates a model of mutual purification in which each discipline contributes to the integrity of the other. The study also situates the *Letter* within John Paul II's intellectual formation and the circumstances of its composition. Finally, it suggests that the text has contributed to an intellectual climate more favorable to interdisciplinary research in fields such as cognitive science and artificial intelligence.

Keywords: science, theology, hermeneutics, image of the world, scientific method

The period when the Second Vatican Council was in session (1962–1965) coincided with the unparalleled development of science. In physics, the discovery of the cosmic microwave background (1965) provided the first decisive evidence for the Big Bang. Meanwhile, Roger Penrose proved his black hole singularity theorem (1965), showing that gravitational collapse generically produces real singularities hidden behind event horizons. Particle physics was transformed by the introduction of the quark model (1964), which revealed the deeper structure of matter. In biology, researchers deciphered major parts of the genetic code (1961–1965) and determined the full structure of the transfer RNA (1965), establishing how DNA instructions are translated into proteins and launching the modern era of molecular biology. These discoveries, together with the scientific advances of the previous decades, led to the reshaping of the picture of the world understood as the set of commonly held beliefs on the structure and the history of the Universe (e.g., Liana 2010). If a single novel feature of this emerging picture were to be named as the most distinctive, it would be the shift from the static to the dynamic view of the temporal characteristics of the Universe (e.g., Heller 2003c). Undoubtedly, this scientific progress contributed

immensely to the rapid transformation of society and culture in the second half of the 20th century and made the call of John XXIII to align the ecclesiastical milieu with the ensuing changes all the more important.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the dissemination of the Vatican II's response to the development of science by tracking how the pertinent conciliar tenets are echoed and developed in an important document issued by John Paul II in 1988 on the relations between science and religion known as the "Letter to Reverend George V. Coyne, S.J., Director of the Vatican Observatory" (John Paul II 2000) (hereafter cited as *Letter to Coyne*). The reason this particular document is selected in this article is its unique and broad impact on the scientific community, as was clearly indicated by Michał Heller. He maintains that in contrast to John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et ratio*, which counts as John Paul II's principal statement on the relations between science and religion, the *Letter to Coyne* is written from "within science" rather than from its "outside" as viewed by philosophers and theologians (Heller 2003a, 12; cf. Wszolek 2010). For this reason, the *Letter* is particularly apt for communicating the Church's affirmative stance toward scientific inquiry beyond ecclesiastical circles and for countering the widespread perception that the Church stands in opposition to scientific progress and to the transformations that science brings to contemporary culture.

1. The Council and Its Legacy

Like any other major ecclesiastical event, Vatican II did not engage with such an influential domain of human intellectual life as contemporary science suddenly by decree or vote. Rather, the Council affirmed ideas that had matured over decades in the minds of individual bishops and theological experts who brought into the conciliar venue the fruits of their long study and reflection. Several leading conciliar theologians, including Karl Rahner (1961) and Joseph Ratzinger (2004, 174–77), fostered a marked openness toward dialogue with the scientific worldview. While a detailed examination of these interactions exceeds the scope of this study, one example clearly illustrates how a scientific idea filtered into conciliar thought. It is the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose distinctive influence stems from his attempt to integrate the theory of evolution into a grand theological vision in which the history of the universe converges with the history of the final coming of Christ (Teilhard de Chardin 2008). Despite his bold claims, de Chardin influenced Vatican II only indirectly. By the early 1960s, many bishops and experts were familiar with his vision of an evolving universe and of humanity growing in historical consciousness (e.g., Putz 2005; Lind 2023; Ratzinger 2004, 236–38; Rahner 2002). This outlook helped shape the atmosphere in which the Council adopted a more dynamic idea of the human

condition and a more positive view of scientific and cultural development, especially in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (Flannery 1981d). The Council did not explicitly use Teilhard's specific language, yet its readiness to speak of change and progress reflects a climate of thought to which his work had contributed.

It turns out that identifying purely Teilhardian motives as well other areas of Vatican II's engagement with contemporary science has already been the subject of studies carried out by John F. Haught (2009) and Job Kozhamthadam (2007). Haught observes that although *Gaudium et spes* never mentions Teilhard de Chardin by name, the document's most innovative affirmations, especially those found in paragraphs 5 and 21, clearly echo his pioneering integration of Christian faith with an evolutionary image of the world. In particular, paragraph 5 makes the famous assertion that humanity has moved from a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic evolutionary one and that this shift requires new efforts of analysis and synthesis. This corresponds to Teilhard's conviction that the universe is an unfinished creation whose ongoing development must reshape Christian theology. Paragraph 21 of *Gaudium et spes* stipulates that Christian hope for the final fulfillment of history does not diminish but rather strengthens the importance of human duties in the present, a point that Teilhard had long stressed in his claim that eschatological hope becomes an incentive to responsibly preserve and manage the Earth's resources.

As Haught points out, decades before the Council de Chardin had already articulated the need to reframe doctrine within the story of a cosmos still in the process of becoming. Haught observes that de Chardin's major works that appeared after his death were widely read among theologians such as Rahner and Henri de Lubac, whose contribution to the spirit of Vatican II is paramount. Even Ratzinger, whom Haught does not mention, later noted that the draft text of *Gaudium et spes* showed traces of what he called the Teilhardian theme that Christianity means greater progress, an insight that further confirms Teilhard's indirect presence in the conciliar atmosphere (e.g., Ratzinger 2009, 144). Teilhard's emphasis on the forward-driving dynamics of creation, the gradual convergence of humanity within a growing noosphere, and the cosmic Christ drawing the Universe toward its fulfillment provides a conceptual background for these key conciliar assertions. Thus, the optimism of *Gaudium et spes* about scientific progress, its affirmation of the world as the arena of God's ongoing creative action and its presentation of Christian hope as a fresh incentive for responsible engagement in history reflect, at least indirectly, Teilhard's distinctive synthesis of modern science and Christian eschatology which the Council implicitly received when it adopted an evolutionary horizon for the Catholic thought.

Kozhamthadam's study provides a comprehensive account of the way *Gaudium et spes* and related conciliar texts engage with modern science by situating these affirmations within the larger pastoral and intellectual objectives of Vatican II. In discussing paragraphs 4 and 5 of *Gaudium et spes* he stresses the Council's recognition

that contemporary intellectual formation is decisively shaped by the mathematical and natural sciences and that technology has acquired a growing predominance in practical life. He highlights the famous conciliar statement contained in paragraph 5 that the human race has moved from a static concept of reality to a dynamic and evolutionary one and that this transition has generated new questions that require renewed efforts of analysis and synthesis. For Kozhamthadam, these observations show that Council's openness to science does not represent a discontinuity with the Christian tradition, but it expresses a deliberate effort to present the Church's message in a manner adapted to contemporary conditions.

Kozhamthadam further draws attention to paragraph 62 of *Gaudium et spes* where the Council affirms that recent studies and findings in science, history, and philosophy raise new questions on the nature of life and demand new theological investigations, while insisting that the substance of the ancient doctrine remains unchanged. He understands this paragraph as an expression of the central aim of *aggiornamento*, which seeks neither rupture nor adaptation by superficial reformulation but a substantive engagement with the intellectual world shaped by scientific progress. The Council seeks a balanced relationship between the scientific and the religious aspects of human existence, and this balance is a recurring theme in Kozhamthadam's interpretation.

Another significant emphasis in Kozhamthadam's study is the methodological development represented by the Council's formal acknowledgment of the autonomy of the sciences. Paragraph 59 of *Gaudium et spes* asserts that the arts and sciences are to be permitted to operate according to their own proper principles and methods, and the Council affirms the legitimate autonomy of human culture. This affirmation is grounded in paragraph 36, which states that created things are endowed with their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order, and that scientific investigation conducted in a genuinely scientific manner never truly conflicts with faith. The same paragraph also admits with notable candor that Christians have not always respected this rightful independence and that this failure has led many to believe that faith and science are opposed. For Kozhamthadam these statements mark a deliberate shift by the Council toward mutual respect and dialogue. He also notes the conciliar caution concerning scientism. Paragraph 57 observes that the methods of the sciences may be wrongly taken as the supreme rule for discovering the ultimate truths and that such an attitude can generate the false impression that human beings are sufficient unto themselves. The Council therefore distinguishes the valid achievements of science from its possible misuses without diminishing its fundamentally positive appraisal of scientific inquiry.

Kozhamthadam also highlights Vatican II's positive evaluation of scientific and technological progress. Paragraph 57 of *Gaudium et spes* declares that human ingenuity has produced astonishing inventions and that when rightly used, they bring solid nourishment to the human family. This activity is interpreted as a genuine

fulfillment of the Divine mandate. When human beings develop the Earth and participate in social life, they carry out the design of God manifested at the beginning of time. The Council, therefore, presents scientific creativity as a meaningful participation in God's ongoing work of creation.

Next, Kozhamthadam takes up the pastoral implications of this renewed appreciation of science. Paragraphs 57 and 58 of *Gaudium et spes* acknowledge the dispositions cultivated by scientific practice, such as dedication to truth, cooperation, solidarity, and responsibility. They affirm that these values can prepare the ground for the acceptance of the Word of God. Paragraph 62 encourages pastors to make appropriate use of psychology, sociology, and other secular sciences so that the faithful may grow in maturity of faith. This pastoral concern extends to the Church's wider educational mission in two other important conciliar documents. Paragraph 9 of the Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis* (Flannery 1981a) stresses the importance of scientific and technical training in schools, and paragraph 15 of the Decree on the Training of Priests *Optatam Totius* (Flannery 1981b) stipulates that seminarians become familiar with contemporary philosophical and scientific developments. In this way, scientific training becomes an integral part of the Church's educational and pastoral outreach.

Kozhamthadam also emphasizes the Council's conviction that scientific developments stimulate theology itself. Paragraph 62 of *Gaudium et spes* affirms that new discoveries raise new questions that call for renewed theological inquiry. The same paragraph encourages collaboration between theologians and experts in other disciplines and urges theologians to be up to date with the current state of scientific knowledge. For Kozhamthadam, this recognition constitutes a decisive opening toward sustained and constructive engagement between theology and the sciences. He further notes that the "Closing Message to Men of Thought and Science" issued at the final session of Vatican II is the Council's only text addressed directly to scientists (Second Vatican Council 1965a). In this text, Paul VI greets scientists as companions in the search for truth and expresses a desire for sustained collaboration grounded in mutual respect. Through these interconnected observations, Kozhamthadam concludes that Vatican II acknowledges the decisive role of modern science in shaping contemporary culture and that the Council seeks to present the Church's teaching in continuity with this transformed intellectual horizon. The *aggiornamento* initiated by Vatican II, therefore, fosters a constructive dialogue in which the Church and the scientific community work together in the service of human and cosmic development.

Although the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* is a treatise on the Divine Revelation (Flannery 1981c), it articulates several important theological principles with broad methodological implications that dispose theology toward dialogue with the sciences. At its foundation, the constitution affirms in paragraph 2 that God freely reveals himself and makes known the hidden purpose of his will in a way that engages

human understanding, while in paragraphs 5 and 8, it states that the Holy Spirit brings faith to completion and leads believers toward an ever-deeper understanding of revelation. Revelation presupposes a real and ordered creation, as paragraph 3 teaches that God, through the Word, creates all things, keeps them in existence, and gives an enduring witness to himself in created realities. This affirmation of a stable intelligible cosmos supports the view that created realities can be investigated with confidence through disciplined human inquiry.

Dei verbum further develops a scriptural theology that opens up hermeneutical space for scientific insight. In paragraph 11, it teaches that the sacred writings under divine inspiration teach without error that truth which God willed to be set down for the sake of our salvation, and that the human authors wrote as true authors making use of their own powers and abilities. Paragraph 12 adds that interpreters must attend carefully to the intention of the sacred writers by considering the historical circumstances in which each text arose, the literary forms employed, and the circumstances of the authors' own time and culture. Paragraph 13 then states that the Divine Word is expressed in truly human language adapted to human limitations in a manner analogous to the Incarnation. Taken together, these principles allow interpreters to distinguish the inspired salvific message from the cosmological frameworks that ancient authors naturally presupposed. Moreover, paragraphs 10 and 12 insist that Scripture must be read with attention to the content and unity of the whole Bible and interpreted in harmony with the living Tradition and teaching office of the Church. According to paragraphs 23 and 24, such interpretation demands sustained work by scholars and students of sacred theology since sacred theology rests on the written word of God and the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of theology. Through its central tenets, *Dei verbum* offers a vision of truth and revelation that is naturally compatible with responsible scientific investigation and provides a hermeneutical foundation for constructive dialogue between theology and the natural sciences.

2. John Paul II and the Origins of the *Letter to Coyne*

Issuing a document such as the *Letter to Coyne* presupposes a mind with a marked sensibility to the value of the scientific enterprise. Long before Vatican II articulated the rightful autonomy of the sciences and the need for a renewed dialogue between faith and scientific culture, Karol Wojtyła had been formed within an intellectual environment conducive to the transmission of the conciliar vision of science into the life of the Church (e.g., Grygiel 2024). His years in Kraków, reaching back to 1953, allowed him to see some elements of this vision already put into practice as he remained in continual contact with physicists whose intellectual curiosity and openness shaped his own understanding of the search for truth (Nowina-Konopka 2020).

These interactions created in him a disposition of respect for scientific inquiry and a readiness to enter into dialogue with it through the exploration of theologically relevant metaphysical implications of contemporary physics. Their discussions involved such fundamental issues as the nature of existence, the structure of matter, the meaning of physical laws, the philosophical status of quantum theory, the way language expresses reality, and the problem of time (Janik 2005). Wojtyła's philosophical training allowed him to converse with them in depth and to show that philosophical reasoning can open paths that scientific method cannot reach, while at the same time acknowledging that scientific research contributes genuine insight into the created world. The intellectual milieu of Kraków taught him that science makes the world known in ways that invite theological attention and that the Church may profit from the intellectual culture that science promotes. After he had been elected a pope, he carried this intellectual posture forward by regularly inviting scientists and philosophers to open interdisciplinary summer meetings in Castel Gandolfo.

Two factors are particularly important for understanding the background and development of the *Letter to Coyne*. The first factor is related to the rapid acceleration of the in-depth studies of the relations between science and theology in the 1980s carried out by scientists, theologians, and philosophers of both Catholic and non-Catholic provenience, uniting in a fruitful dialogue. This large group includes figures such as Ian G. Barbour (1974), Arthur R. Peacocke (1979), Coyne (1998), and the two scholars from Poland: Heller (1981) and Józef Życiński (1985, 1988). The second factor involves initiatives taken directly by John Paul II. The origin and the publication of the *Letter* coincided with the process of the ultimate resolution of the Galileo case, which was launched by John Paul II in his address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in 1979 on the 100th anniversary of the birth of Albert Einstein (Giovanni Paolo II 1979). As a result, a special commission was formed to investigate the matter, and its works were completed in 1992 (e.g., Coyne 2005).

The direct initiative of John Paul II that gave origin to the *Letter to Coyne* is his wish to mark the 300th anniversary of the publication of Isaac Newton's most famous work entitled *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*. In preparation for this jubilee, the pope asked the Vatican Observatory to organize a major international symposium that would bring together scientists, theologians, and philosophers for a serious reflection on the relation between scientific understanding and faith. The symposium took place in Castel Gandolfo in 1987 (Heller et al. 2016, 296–300). John Paul II wished to address the symposium's final session with a substantial reflection on science and faith. For this purpose, he asked the Observatory to prepare a draft text, and a working group was formed, which included Heller and Życiński.

While in his closing speech, the pope used a different text, the original one was published on June 1, 1988, under the title "Letter to Reverend George V. Coyne, S.J., Director of the Vatican Observatory." It presented a clear and confident vision for dialogue between science and theology. It affirmed the autonomy of the sciences, stated

that neither science nor religion should dominate the other, and encouraged theologians to learn from contemporary discoveries. For many scholars, this *Letter* became the single most important modern papal statement on the relation between science and faith. This assessment has been echoed in a broad range of English-language studies on the dialogue between science and religion, where the *Letter to Coyne* is frequently cited as a key reference point for understanding John Paul II's approach to the relationship between theology and the natural sciences (Russell, Stoeger, and Coyne 1990; Russell 2011; Tanzella-Nitti 2024). In this literature, the *Letter* is commonly situated within the wider intellectual activity of the Vatican Observatory and treated as a programmatic text for subsequent interdisciplinary engagement.

3. The Council and Beyond

Building on the conciliar themes identified above, namely the autonomy of the sciences (GS 36, 59), theology's engagement with contemporary knowledge (GS 62), the hermeneutical principles of *Dei verbum* (DV 11–13), and the unity of truth coupled with caution against scientism (GS 57), *Letter to Coyne* develops these insights with greater methodological precision and extends the vision of *Gaudium et spes* and *Dei verbum* into new conceptual territory shaped by the realities of contemporary science. It offers a mature restatement of the Church's engagement with science, and it displays a new intellectual disposition as well as a new firmness in delineating the respective competences of theology and scientific inquiry.

The first area where the *Letter to Coyne* builds on Vatican II concerns the autonomy of scientific research. *Gaudium et spes* affirms that the sciences possess their own proper methods and must be granted legitimate autonomy within their own sphere (GS 36, 59). The *Letter* takes up this principle and renders it into a clear rule regarding the limits of theology, insisting that theology and science must not overstep the boundaries of their proper competence and that their options do not include isolation. It further states that the Church does not judge the truth or falsity of scientific theories, since this belongs to the internal procedures of the scientific community. While Vatican II articulated the independence of the sciences in general terms, the *Letter* expresses this insight as a definite methodological boundary: theology should not intrude into scientific explanation but is instead called to respect the particular competence of scientists who pursue their inquiries according to rigorous empirical and rational standards. The *Letter* thus advances the conciliar affirmation into a more articulated account of disciplinary differentiation and complementary competence.

The second area of development concerns the intellectual framework within which theology interprets the world. Vatican II encouraged theology to draw upon contemporary advances in human knowledge and called for renewed engagement

with the intellectual culture of the age. The *Letter to Coyne* goes further by proposing the need for a scientifically informed metaphysics that can help theology express its doctrines in categories emerging from a deepened understanding of the workings of the universe. In particular, the *Letter* recalls the medieval appropriation of Aristotelian natural philosophy as a historical model and asks whether contemporary scientific developments do not challenge theology “far more deeply” than Aristotle once did. This openness, it suggests, should extend as far as the development of a scientifically motivated metaphysical framework that is recognizable in a scientific age and, at the same time, capable of sustaining and considerably deepening insight into the mysteries of the faith of the Church. This represents a marked evolution of the conciliar theme of intellectual *aggiornamento*, articulated with a clarity and urgency not found in Vatican II.

The third area concerns concrete engagement with specific scientific fields. Vatican II noted that modern science influences culture and shapes human self-understanding, but it spoke in general terms of the transition to a dynamic picture of the universe. *Dei verbum* affirmed that the biblical authors expressed revealed truth through the cultural forms of their time and that Scripture therefore requires interpretation attentive to historical context and literary forms. The *Letter to Coyne* takes this further by considering particular scientific disciplines and asking how they may illuminate theological questions. Just as the ancient cosmologies of the Near East were purified and integrated into the opening chapters of Genesis, so contemporary cosmology and evolutionary theory may shed new light on areas of theological inquiry such as creation, theological anthropology, Christology, and eschatology, thereby fostering the development of doctrine in light of a universe vast in age and scale. The *Letter* itself raises this possibility in interrogative form when it asks whether contemporary cosmology and the theory of evolution might offer new perspectives on creation, anthropology, and eschatology. In this way, it moves from the general conciliar affirmation of the value of scientific progress to a more detailed consideration of how contemporary scientific insights might enrich fundamental theological themes and promote doctrinal development. This movement represents a significant elaboration of the conciliar impetus and positions theology to address the scientific worldview not merely with apologetic concern, but with intellectual curiosity and theological attentiveness.

The fourth area concerns theological methodology itself. While Vatican II encouraged theology to attend to the findings of the sciences, it did not reflect explicitly on scientific inquiry as a mode of knowing. The *Letter to Coyne* introduces this dimension by asking whether theology might learn from the epistemological discipline of the sciences, particularly from their use of models and their recognition of the provisional character of explanatory frameworks. This is not a call for theology to imitate empirical procedures but an invitation to acknowledge the limits of its formulations and to approach doctrine as an ongoing exploration of mystery rather

than as an exhaustive description. In this way, the *Letter* clearly advances beyond Vatican II by foregrounding the epistemological virtues implicit in scientific practice as resources for theological reflection.

A final and especially influential development in the *Letter to Coyne* concerns the theme of mutual purification. Vatican II had affirmed the unity of truth and the compatibility of faith and reason, but it had not expressly articulated a reciprocal critical relationship between science and religion. This relationship comes to a better focus in the famous metaphor of *amalgam* proposed by Rahner uniting both variable and invariable elements “the truths which from the dogmatic point of view are absolutely binding can be expressed and handed down by means of ideas (propagated *de facto* at a given period in time by means of models and accepted patterns of reasoning), conveyed inseparably with the basic doctrinal statement, and later on considered as having no binding power or even false.” (Rahner 1977, 6) The *Letter* gives this principle a dynamic form by famously asserting that “science can purify religion from error and superstition and that religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes.” This formulation grants each discipline a constructive role in the maturation of the other. While science demythologizes theology by constantly realigning its statements with the most accurate knowledge of the workings of the Universe, theology prevents science from turning its outcomes into absolutes that aspire to the ultimate explanations of the Universe. Thus, the formulation elevates the dialogue between theology and science to a level of mutual responsibility where each partner is capable of contributing to the integrity of human understanding. This is perhaps the most distinctive development beyond Vatican II, and it reveals the *Letter’s* vision of a relationship marked by intellectual humility and shared pursuit of truth.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis presented here demonstrates that the *Letter to Coyne* constitutes a significant extension of the conciliar principles articulated by Vatican II. It takes the Council’s call for respectful dialogue with the modern world and elaborates it into a coherent program for constructive and critical engagement with contemporary science. It proposes a theological approach that is confident in the truth of revelation, deeply attentive to the insights of the sciences and unafraid to revise inherited conceptual frameworks when fidelity to the Gospel requires new modes of expression. As such the *Letter* stands as a mature fruit of Vatican II and a key resource for any theology that seeks to remain faithful to the tradition, while speaking to a scientific age with clarity and hope. By taking its unique point of commencement from within science, the *Letter* turns into a very efficient channel of transmitting the conciliar pronouncements to the secular scientific world, not in

a passive repetitive manner but with significant deepening and precision so that for those whose language is that of science, the theological message of Vatican II can be properly conveyed. Interestingly enough, the *Letter* puts considerable emphasis on the method of theology, suggesting that in addition to assimilating the scientific worldview into its discourse, theology could profit from certain methodological insights of the sciences. This has been succinctly reaffirmed by Heller, who, in answering the famous question of Edwin Schrödinger as to which achievements of science have best helped the religious outlook of the world, asserts that it is its method (Heller 2003b, 166). John Polkinghorne (2007, 15) has reframed this outcome in more precise philosophical terms by placing both science and theology under a common umbrella of *critical realism* to reflect the common denominator with which the two disciplines operate in the pursuit of truth.

In addition to turning the message of Vatican II into a coherent framework of mutual enrichment of science and theology, the *Letter to Coyne* spans yet another dimension of disseminating this message to the world of science by contributing an intellectual climate for a proliferation of research that relates these two disciplines in view of the most recent developments of cognitive science (e.g., Newberg 2018; Murphy 2006) and artificial intelligence (e.g., Singler and Watts 2024). It turns out that it was John Paul II, who made a particularly decisive step in facing the outcomes of the theory of evolution in the spirit of what he laid out in the *Letter* as he spoke to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on October 22, 1996 (John Paul II 1998). He recognized the vast accumulation of evidence supporting evolutionary biology and stated that the theory should be treated as more than a hypothesis. At the same time, he held that the human person possesses a spiritual dimension that cannot be reduced to material processes. This distinction between the biological continuity of life and the spiritual uniqueness of the human being reflected the very balance promoted by Vatican II in its call to respect the insights of science while safeguarding the full truth of the human person. With these outcomes in hand, one clearly sees that both science and theology pursue different dimensions of the same truth, whereby believers and scientists do not have to stay opposed but can easily enter into a fruitful space of common understanding.

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The Work of Cláudio Pastro in the Context of Sacred Art After the Second Vatican Council

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Abstract: A fundamental aspect of the Second Vatican Council is the novelty of the literary genre of its documents and its configuration as an event of language, which demonstrates its profound affinity with symbolic and artistic language, even though the theme of art does not occupy many lines of its texts. From this perspective, the importance of the reception of Vatican II in subsequent artistic production becomes clear. This article focuses on the work of the Brazilian artist Cláudio Pastro (1948–2016). Subject of growing research over the last three decades, his work has been identified as a model of art for worship in line with Vatican II, capable of clearly and powerfully embodying its theological, ecclesiological, liturgical, and anthropological principles. In this article, we seek to consolidate these recent acquisitions in Brazilian academic production, highlighting the relationship between Pastro's work and Vatican II and situating it within the scope of international research. To this end, we shall first outline certain aspects of his trajectory, his formation, and the sensibility that characterized him, and then present and comment on a few selected works within his extensive artistic output. Finally, we will address the reception of his work in the ecclesiastical, academic, and artistic spheres, highlighting it as a model for the reception of Vatican II and a space for its fruitful and creative assimilation in our communities today.

Keywords: contemporary sacred art, art for worship, Latin American art, history of the Catholic Church in Latin America, *ressourcement*

The Second Vatican Council took shape as an event of language (O'Malley 2010), attentive, as John XXIII (1962) indicated in his opening address, to the importance of form and to the careful elaboration of statements. In the very documents issued by the Council, we notice a return to the biblical and patristic tradition, in continuity with the biblical, liturgical, and patristic movements; the wording of these documents, in general, is generous with symbolic language (Codina 1986, 161). In this sense, the very conciliar textual genre represents a novelty: its dynamics resemble those of a work of art or of literature, which offers itself to contemplation or meditation and, precisely in this way, addresses the experiences of life (Rush 1997, 178). Similar to biblical and patristic language, the conciliar corpus is open and structurally oriented toward dialogue (Theobald 2012, 221–22). The texts of Vatican II thus appear as performative language, and the faith that emerges

from this contemplative and dialogical process as creative apprehension (Villas Boas 2015, 401–2).

For all these reasons, the theme of artistic language is deeply connected to the Second Vatican Council. The renewal that the council demands of ecclesial communities cannot fail to involve openness to a new sensibility, expressed both as symbolic–ritual language and as poetic–artistic language (Koller and Fernandes 2024, 610–11). Even so, when considering the dissemination and development of the renewing forces of Vatican II, it is common to highlight the role of bishops and theologians, placing artists, at best, in the background (Fernandes 2015, 797). Yet, given these considerations regarding the Council’s linguistic choices, it is, in fact, artists who should be regarded as its privileged recipients and amplifiers. At the same time, sacred art would constitute an important field for verifying the assimilation of Vatican II, precisely because of the depth characteristic of cultural processes, which artistic expression captures with peculiar subtlety.

However, identifying a given artistic production with the perspectives of Vatican II—highlighting it as representative of an art imbued with the principles of conciliar renewal—is a complex task. This is because the Council documents devote few lines to the subject of art; there are significant but fleeting references in *Gaudium et spes* (nos. 7, 36, 53, 57, 59, 61, and especially no. 62) and moral concerns in *Inter mirifica* (nos. 6 and 14–15). At the same time, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* addresses music and sacred art in two rather brief chapters (VI and VII) (Second Vatican Council 1963a, 1963b, 1965). This requires that the comparison between artistic production and the principles of Vatican II, rather than being drawn directly, must be mediated by the identification of the Council’s major themes, its style, and its concerns.

The work of Brazilian artist Cláudio Pastro—one of the most prolific and renowned sacred artists of the post-conciliar period—has been identified as a model of art for worship in line with Vatican II, capable of clearly and powerfully embodying its theological, ecclesiological, liturgical, and anthropological principles. Over the past thirty years, a number of academic studies at master’s and doctoral levels have focused on his work, consistently recognizing in it an artistic translation of the vision of the Second Vatican Council (de Aquino and Sanchez 2025). In this article, we seek to consolidate these recent acquisitions of Brazilian academic production, highlighting the relationship between Pastro’s work and Vatican II and presenting the artist and his work within the scope of international research.

To this end, we will first outline certain aspects of his trajectory, his formation, and sensibility, and then present and comment on a few selected works from his extensive artistic output. Finally, we will address the reception of his work in the ecclesiastical, academic, and artistic spheres, highlighting it as a model for the Second Vatican Council’s reception.

1. A Biographical Profile

Cláudio Pastro was born in São Paulo on October 16, 1948. He drew from an early age, encouraged by his mother, a dressmaker who sketched patterns freehand, which amazed him. He would also develop this skill, as Elisabeth Prégardier (2009, 81) observes: “We were impressed by the confidence and speed with which he drew and colored the immense panel from a small sketch.”

It was through contact with Benedictine communities that the impulse to pursue his artistic vocation developed (Fernandes 2015, 800). The artist declared himself self-taught, as he had not studied fine arts because his family could not afford the costs of such training. Michael Brücker (2009, 77) writes about this: “The path to artistic Olympus for Cláudio ... was anything but easy. Since he could not afford to attend the School of Fine Arts, he opted to study Social Sciences.” It was in this field that he graduated from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP) in 1972.

It was the era of the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985). Feeling the oppression of the regime and unhappy with the political and ecclesial climate, with its divergent currents of thought in the 1970s, he was encouraged by friends to leave for Europe (Brücker 2009, 77; Fernandes 2021, 298).

In Europe, Pastro not only attended several courses in Italy—at the Pontifical Athenaeum of Saint Anselm in Rome and the Academy of Arts in Viterbo—but also in Spain—at the National Art Museum of Catalonia in Barcelona—and in France—at the Abbey of Notre-Dame de Tournai. He also visited museums and churches, especially those from the first millennium, which aroused his interest and, guided by his monk and nun friends, prompted him to return to the sources at the heart of Vatican II (Fernandes 2021, 298).

Pastro also traveled to Israel, and from one of his observations, it can be inferred that he visited Egypt as well: “Throughout the Mediterranean, I discovered Romanesque and Byzantine art. In Israel, Egypt, and Ethiopia, Coptic art. In Brazil, Indigenous and black art. We have much to learn from the primitives.” (Pastro 1986, 52) He had been introduced to the thought of the Eastern Churches through French worker priests residing in Brazil (Pastro 2001). In his words, it was in these “Eastern roots, with the Hebrew spirit and orthodoxy,” that he came to know “the origins of the Gospel.” (Pastro 2001, 17) They recommended to him the writings of Paul Evdokimov and Olivier Clément, as well as the work of theologian and iconographer Egon Sendler.

It should also be noted that in 1967, Pastro traveled to Senegal, where he stayed at the Abbey of Keur Moussa, whose church has rich iconography and inculturated music that strongly impacted him. César Augusto Sartorelli (2013, 18–19) reports that in that monastery, “there was a church with frescoes ... characterized by an aesthetic of reinterpretation of African primitivism.... They are a major reference for the first phase of Pastro’s work.”

Pastro was interested in the peoples who shaped Brazil and Latin America: Indigenous, African, and European. In Rome, at the Sant'Anselmo Institute, he studied with Mexican architect and Benedictine monk Gabriel Chávez de La Mora, and in 1986, he went to the Tepeyac Monastery in Mexico City for a seminar led by Chávez; he even made a processional cross for the Abbey of Our Lady of Guadalupe. That same year, he traveled to that city as a special guest at the IV Latin American Monastic Encounter. On both occasions, he was able to closely observe the cultures and artistic and artisanal expressions of the country's indigenous peoples.

It is also known that he taught an extension course at the Catholic University of Asunción, Paraguay, in 1983–1984, and that he then visited the Guarani Missions, closely observing their inculturated art. Finally, researching the artist's personal archives, we found evidence that he was in Chile and painted a mural in a church in the capital, Santiago, and in Colombia, where he participated in a meeting of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council (CELAM), becoming acquainted with the art and crafts of the Andean peoples. This visual heritage of cultures originating from Africa and Latin America, combined with the Paleo-Christian iconography of the Mediterranean—southern Europe, the Holy Land, and perhaps Egypt and even Ethiopia—constitutes the iconographic archive that Pastro would draw upon throughout his life.

His proximity to the Benedictines not only guided his artistic vocation but also shaped his thinking and work. Pastro (2001, 7) stated that it was the Benedictine monks and nuns who instilled in him “a taste for bold, strong, and contemporary art, leaving aside the mere copying of ‘holy cards’ of dubious taste that still linger around and call into question the Christian faith.” In Brazil, he was particularly close to the monks of the Monastery of the Annunciation in Piraquara, closed under the atmosphere of persecution of the military dictatorship, with the monks relocating to Goiás, the nuns of the Monastery of the Encounter, first based in Curitiba and then in Mandirituba, and those of the Abbey of Our Lady of Peace in Itapeverica da Serra, where he became an oblate in 2004. He is buried there, following his death on October 19, 2016, in São Paulo, after 41 years devoted almost entirely to working with works of art for the liturgical space (Fernandes 2015, 800–801; 2021, 298; de Aquino and Sanchez 2025, 278; Souto 2022).

Despite his notoriety, with more than 300 works in Brazil and abroad, Pastro remained remarkably simple and humble, perhaps influenced by Benedictine thought and his vision of himself as a servant of the Church and of God. He himself stated that “the Christian artist is one among many ministers in the sacred liturgy and is at the service of the Church.” (Pastro 1986, 8) Brücker visited him at his residence and wrote about the sobriety he found there:

The reception is ... unpretentious, no ostentatious or exaggerated gestures, let alone the familiar mannerisms of an artist; instead, a brief word of welcome and a warm embrace. Cláudio Pastro is not a man who speaks loudly. Genuine cordiality instead of staged

joviality. This first impression is reinforced when we see the interior of his home, furnished with surprising simplicity... The Spartan decoration seems to enlarge the rooms, making them more airy and fresh. (Brücker 2009, 75)

One of the artist's defining traits is the clarity of his work, which mirrors that of his thinking. "In Cláudio Pastro's world, everything seems to obey a profound inner order. His phrases are simple and refined at the same time. His gaze is as serious as it is frank, and his voice, balanced and calm." (Brücker 2009, 75) In fact, from the monastic tradition, Pastro learns that "the creative act of art has nothing to do with inspiration, but requires a human attitude of contemplation, silence, and self-emptying." (Fernandes 2021, 298)

It was in this spirit of service, seeing his contribution as a ministry—he liked to compare himself to the *fossores*, those responsible for excavating the catacombs but also for producing the art found there, whom early Christian literature attests to have been true ministers of the Church—that Pastro devoted his entire life to sacred art, always attentive to the recommendations of the Second Vatican Council; he called himself a post-conciliar artist. João Paulo Berto writes about the importance of his works:

His recognition by the Church as one of the most important sacred artists, justified by the consonance of his ideas with those of the institution, gave his career a major boost, leading him to produce works all over the world. (Berto 2012, 279)

Sartorelli (2013) highlights another of his defining traits—that of an artist who works with the concept of "total art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), a term coined in the 19th century by Richard Wagner, which implies organizing the arts into a single harmonious whole. Márcio Luiz Fernandes refers to Pastro as "a complete artist":

The complex scope of his work ranged from the creation of pictorial murals to the architectural design of buildings and objects conceived to occupy the space of worship: from sculpture to illustration; from murals to stained glass windows and liturgical articles. (Fernandes 2021, 301)

When reflecting on the celebratory space, it is Pastro himself who teaches:

Therefore, from the walls to the paintings, from the liturgical articles to the vestments, from the flooring to the altar (and ambo, cathedra, and baptistery), from the images to our posture (body-image), everything comprises the iconographic program. If what we celebrate is Christ, *everything* must reveal Christ within us. (Pastro 2018, 75)

In this sense, he adapted churches to the liturgy proposed by the Second Vatican Council, designed the interiors of others, conceived the iconography of cathedrals and oratories, designed liturgical poles and stained glass windows, illustrated books,

painted murals, modeled in ceramics, created liturgical articles and vestments, and developed liturgical vessels, including for Popes Benedict XVI and Francis on the occasion of their visits to Brazil. He experimented with all materials and techniques, blending Amerindian, African, and Iberian imagery with Romanesque, Byzantine, and Coptic traditions.

Reflecting on his work, Pastro (1986, 52–53) analyzes:

My lines, my pure, flat colors are a continuation of the Sacred Text. My language is symbolic and not realistic—I want to go beyond the real and the copy.... I use the same elements of creation: clay, the figure, colors, light.

He summarizes:

The image, poor matter, is the loving language that the Creator chose to communicate.

His absorption of the principles of Vatican II was not at a distance. Pastro connects directly with that generation which, especially in Europe, actively followed the movements that culminated in Vatican II, as well as its realization and implementation. He found the spirit of returning to the sources and conciliar renewal very much alive in people such as, among others, Philippe Leddet, from the Monastery of the Annunciation, Chantal Modoux and Anne Farcy, from the Monastery of the Encounter, Michel Cüenot and Jomar Vigneron, from the worker priests, Doroteia Rondon Amarante and Mônica Castanheira, from the Abbey of Our Lady of Peace, and Martinho Michler, from the Monastery of Saint Benedict in Rio de Janeiro, the pioneer of the liturgical movement in Brazil, from whom Pastro borrowed his oblate name. He himself would write:

My vocation, gift, and charism lie at the root of my story. There is a single guiding thread in my life, with people, names, and places that are protagonists of the Spirit that keeps me alive. Through these people, the Spirit came to me and gave me the treasure of faith, beauty, and a zest for life. (Pastro 2001, 16)

2. An Introduction to His Works

Pastro's artistic output is vast, encompassing works across diverse media and purposes. Seeking to provide an introduction to his work, we present here a selection of works that aims to represent, in a very limited way, this variety, as well as the four decades over which his activity extends. There are seven works: illustrations for a book published in Italy and a mural in a church in São Paulo, works from the 1980s; a panel for a chapel in Germany and a piece commissioned by the Vatican, created in the 1990s; and three works produced after 2000: the stained glass windows of a monastery in Paraná, an oratory aimed at children, and the design of the

liturgical space and iconographic project for the great National Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida.

At the beginning of his career, and for about two decades, Pastro worked on book illustrations and produced postcards with Christmas, Easter, and other themes. “His work as a graphic and visual artist was carried out in parallel, in order to supplement his income and serve as a means of promoting his iconographic repertoire,” notes Sartorelli (2013, 37).

For *Perché a te, Antonio?* [Why to You, Anthony?], written by Davide Maria Turoldo in commemoration of the 700th anniversary of the death of Saint Anthony of Padua, published in Italy in 1981, Pastro painted forty gouaches. The iconography is typical of his early phase, with Coptic inspiration, as Alberico Sala notes (Turoldo 1981, back cover): “An Eastern and African wind blows through Pastro’s paintings: many of the figures have attitudes and rhythms typical of Coptic devotional painting.” The critic also observes the arrangement of the figures, a typical feature of works from this period: “And the framing is constantly closed, to suggest the idea of a small panel” (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Illustration from the book *Perché a te, Antonio?* (Turoldo 1981, 71).



Figure 2. Illustration from the book *Perché a te, Antonio?* (Turoldo 1981, 137).

One can observe the earthy tones, the strong black lines, the absence of linear perspective, the images that are too large for the available surface, and therefore “fitted” into a frame of fine lines, circumscribing them. The iconography is symbolic, with dark-skinned figures, elongated noses, large open eyes that stare at the reader,

and small, closed mouths; the draperies are voluminous, without outlining the bodies: only feet and hands are visible. Everything is curved, sinuous, and each iconography is presented as if it were an element of a comic book, in line with *biblia pauperum*, a term Saint Gregory the Great used to refer to the role of art in communicating the biblical message to those who cannot read the sacred text.

The following year, 1982, Pastro completed the mural painting of the presbytery of the Church of Saint Benedict of Morumbi, in São Paulo (Figure 3). It is his first large panel. The colors and style are the same as those seen in the iconography of Saint Anthony. Note also the liturgical poles in solid stone and their arrangement, the floor raised by a few steps and made of the same stone as the poles, all conceived and designed by Pastro.

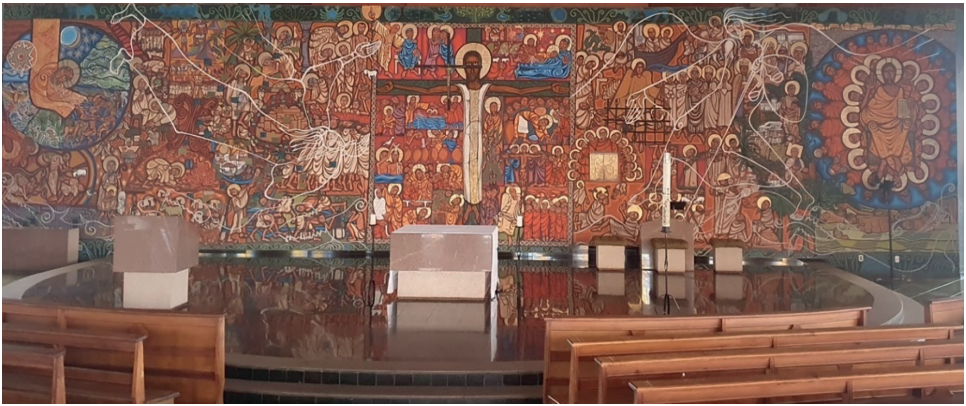


Figure 3. Presbytery and mural, Church of Saint Benedict of Morumbi, São Paulo, 1982.
Photo: Christiane Meier.

The 150 m² panel (30 meters long by 5 meters high) was painted in acrylic on plaster (Pastro 1986) and depicts the story of salvation, from Genesis to the Apocalypse, with Christ at the center: it is from him that the narrative is observed. To the left of the viewer is the First Testament, and to the right, the Second.

Here, too, earthy, dark colors prevail, reminiscent of the clay found in Brazil, dark and reddish; it is the raw material used by God in creation. Drawn with fine white lines, two large angels can be seen on the panel: on the left, the Angel of Promise, who leads the People of God in the Old Testament up to the advent of Jesus; and on the right, the Angel of Memory, who leads the congregation to heavenly Jerusalem, keeping the memory of Jesus alive. Both move toward the center, toward the risen Christ, Pantocrator and Chronocrator—the Lord of the universe and of time.

The images condense and recapitulate the life of Christ and the History of Salvation. There is a reinterpretation of the Old Testament that leads to Christ. And finally, the theological

center of all liturgical action is visualized in space: the iconography of Christ in glory, of Christ the Judge and Redeemer, affirming not a human ideology, but his Divine nature. (Pastro 2006, 41)

Therefore, the great Christ at the center is the *axis mundi* as mentioned by Mircea Eliade, an author whom Pastro studied intensively. He is the one who connects time, from creation to the end of days and the final establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth; and, by entering the dwelling of the dead, from which he rescues all, he unites earth with Heaven. Indeed, in the artist's own words, "the sacred space is not just any space. It is heaven on earth." (Pastro 1986, 8)

In sacred art, "there are no boundaries, no space, no limit of time, language or culture," explains Pastro (1986, 4). He further clarifies what can be observed in the panel, that is,

Time for God and man has:

- **beginning: Creation**, beautiful yet corrupted;
- **center: the Birth, Death, and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus**, toward which everything prior converged and now converges;
- **end: the New Creation**. The Creator intervenes in time and establishes in Jesus a New Creation and New Time. Time belongs to God.

THE DAY OF THE LORD = SUNDAY. (Pastro 1999, 29)

It is also worth noting the alignment of the altar and Christ, in the same line, since "the liturgical center is the basic sense of orientation of the celebratory space. The axis of all action is Christ, and physically, the altar and the ambo are expressions of one and the same Paschal mystery or Eucharist." (Pastro 2006, 38)

In this panel, there is a heavy stroke, a fusion style of the various cultures of the artist's interest. We also note that Pastro is a skilled storyteller and, in this sense, we emphasize his concern with initiation into the faith. He acknowledges this characteristic: "Artists developed a taste for storytelling, illustrating walls, Evangeliaries, Codices... thus developing the *BIBLIA PAUPERUM*, the Word in form and color, which began in the first century in the catacombs." (Pastro 2006, 40 [ellipsis and capitalization in the original])

This panel captivated Prégardier, then administrator of Adveniat, the German episcopate's initiative for Latin America, which she saw during a visit to São Paulo in 1989. Pastro was then invited to submit a proposal for a chapel that would include an iconographic program for the institution's administrative headquarters. The work was subsequently completed in 1995 (Figure 4).

It can be observed that in this work, the earthy tones of Pastro's earlier pieces do not predominate, nor does the sinuous style; the colors are intense, and the

images are less curved and constricted. However, it is divided into modules that give rhythm and dynamics to the composition, which is, in principle, rather static, as can be seen in the image of the woman in the foreground, on the yellow disc in the background, and in the white angel above, who floats motionless. It is a denser angel, more full-bodied than the previous two, from Morumbi, which have only white outlines. It is worth noting that this angel is the only figure painted in this color.

These changes represent the transition from the first to the second phase of his career. The first phase, marked by the appropriation of the “primitive,” heavier, and more chromatic, gave way in the 1990s to a more essential, sober, and highly stylized style (Sartorelli 2013).



Figure 4. *Flow of Life* panel, Adveniat Chapel, Essen, Germany.
Photo: Christiane Meier.

The panel portrays the peoples of Latin America and their evangelization. It begins on the right, at the entrance to the chapel, with the apparition of the Mother of God to a young indigenous man, Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, in 16th-century Mexico. The narrative of the apparition involves the image of the Virgin imprinted on Juan Diego’s cloak, as a sign before the local bishop. This iconography, “not made by human hands,” became known as the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is in the foreground of the panel. Beside her is her crown in the shape of a quarter of a headdress typical of the indigenous peoples of Brazil; thus, the artist indicates that she is the Mother and Queen of the New World.

However, it is worth remembering that the Virgin of Guadalupe is also the woman described in chapter 12 of the Apocalypse, clothed with the sun and standing

on the moon. She does not have a crown with twelve stars, since her crown is indigenous, made of feathers, yet the stars are on her mantle, in great number, the moon under her feet, and her mandorla is solar.

Mary stands with her hands joined before her womb, in prayer and contemplation of what is at the other end of the panel—God. Therefore, she is not a deity, but an example of faith, obedience, and life for every Christian. It is not her we should worship, but God, as she does and teaches us. At the other end, we see a large sun, the god of many American peoples, here in its Aztec representation. In a Christian, inculturated context, it represents the Light of the world, Jesus.

Below, a red stripe runs across the entire panel, symbolizing blood: both that shed in the wars of conquest and that which gives and sustains life. Thus, this flow of blood recalls that the encounter between the indigenous peoples and the Christian missionaries was not without problems and had its dark moments.

It should be emphasized that Pastro designed the ambo, the altar, the tabernacle, and the pews of the chapel, as well as specified the color of the walls, the carpet, and the fabrics for the curtains, upholstery, and coverings of the liturgical poles. For these, he chose the best that Latin America has to offer: silk weaving from Guatemala.

While he was in Essen completing the chapel in May 1995, he received a phone call from the secretary general of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, Cipriano Calderón Polo, inviting him to Rome before returning to Brazil. The monsignor informed him that he would like to discuss the creation of “a Christ for the turn of the millennium, which would represent, for the Vatican, the figure of Christ after two thousand years of Christianity.” (Lima Torres 2007, 151) Pastro recounts: “I didn’t give it much importance because there are a thousand European artists far superior to me.” (Lima Torres 2007, 98) In Rome, he was informed that it was not a competition, but that he had already been chosen to develop the iconography. The work should express the ecumenical spirit of the new millennium and correspond to the faith professed by Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians, in short, all Christian denominations.

Pastro then reasoned that, to meet the expectations of the Orthodox, it could not be a sculpture, since they do not use them; for Protestants, the Word holds central importance, so Christ should somehow refer to the Word. He could not be suffering or dead, as none of the Eastern Churches favors his presentation in this form. He would therefore have to be a Christ in glory, apocalyptic, referring to the final condition of humanity and the cosmos, a Christ known to the one Church of the first millennium.

The artist’s choice fell upon a Pantocrator, engraved on a round copper plate covered with gold, measuring 0.9 meters in circumference, set on a square base of black-lacquered wood with a 1-meter edge (Figure 5). The golden color symbolizes the glory of Christ, the transfiguration with the luminosity reported by the disciples on Mount Tabor; the black, in turn, symbolizes the absence of light, the world that

has fallen into sin and knows death. The circle is the perfect shape, denoting the divinity of Jesus, and the square represents the earth with its four corners, the human nature of the Savior. The golden disc upon the black square: the Light that bursts forth upon the world, Emmanuel, God among us.



Figure 5. Christ of the Third Millennium, 1997 (Pastro 2001, 171).

Behind Christ, one can see a cross composed of grooves. It reminds us that Jesus had to experience the cross, overcome death to rise again on the third day, enter into glory, and sit at the right hand of the Father. The work is on display at the Vatican.

Pastro designs stained glass windows for almost all the chapels and churches he works on, yet he does not write about them. There is practically nothing in his texts concerning stained glass, even though light is one of his concerns; his only recommendation is that, where there is figurative painting, only abstract stained glass windows should be used.

As the church of the Monastery of the Encounter, in Mandirituba, Paraná, built in 2008, has no iconography on its walls, he designed a set of predominantly figurative

stained glass windows, a true altarpiece of light, emulating the gilded wooden altarpieces placed at the back of Baroque presbytery, for instance. Pastro took part in the entire conception of the space, including the design of the whole monastery building. Beyond the church, we will focus on the stained glass windows.

At the center (Figure 6), Mary presents Jesus in the temple and is approached by Simeon (Luke 2:22–38). To the left of the viewer is Joseph, and to the right, the prophetess Anna; this triptych of light, marked by an eruption of warm colors amidst the omnipresence of blue, is at the back of the presbytery. Flanking it are three more glass elements on each side. On the left is Saint Benedict, the founder of the order; on the right, Saint Scholastica, his sister, both framed by two abstract elements (Figures 7 and 8).

Shades of blue predominate in the stained glass window, with a yellow and orange center marking the Baby Jesus, the Light of the world, enclosed within a circle, thus referring to the sun. We find ourselves, therefore, before Christ as Light that knows no setting. Luminous rays radiate from the Child and illuminate the Virgin, Simeon, Joseph, Anna, and those present in the church. Pastro makes those in the space partake of the scene and receive the glory of Christ.

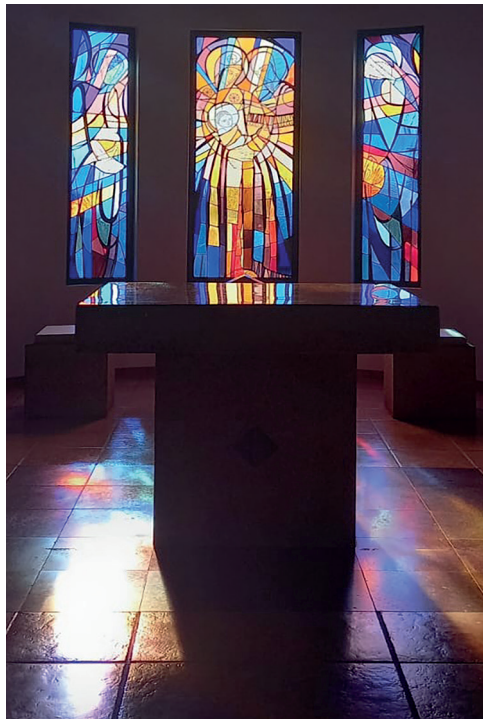


Figure 6. Detail of the central part of the stained glass window ensemble, Monastery of the Encounter, Paraná, 2008. Photo: Christiane Meier.

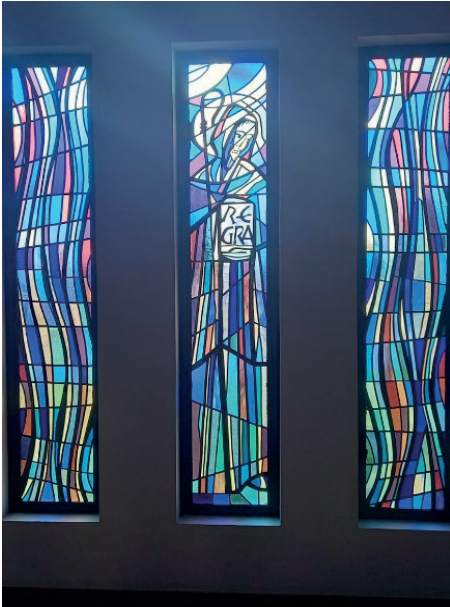


Figure 7. Saint Benedict,
Monastery of the Encounter, Paraná, 2008.
Photo: Christiane Meier.



Figure 8. Saint Scholastica,
Monastery of the Encounter, Paraná, 2008.
Photo: Christiane Meier.

Although all the images are elongated, hieratic, and even sublime, there is movement in the ensemble, caused by the rays of light radiating from the center and by the crackling of the images with various elements of colored glass. The sunlight, filtered and softened by the stained glass, produces a pleasant, welcoming luminosity inside the ecclesiastical building.

Having observed a private chapel (Germany) and two churches linked to Benedictine monasteries, one male (São Paulo) and one female (Paraná), and before we turn to his last and greatest work, we would like to present a delicate chapel designed for young children aged 3 to 7.

It is worth recalling that Pastro was interested in the integral formation of the human being and delved deeply into this subject. He thus focused on the writings of Héléne Lubienska de Lenval (1895–1972), a Belgian–Polish educator. In line with his teaching philosophy, Pastro develops a religious space for children who have not yet received their first communion. We draw attention to the fact that it is not a liturgical space per se, since there are no liturgical centers, given that the Eucharist is not celebrated here. The Little Ones’ Chapel is located in the early childhood education wing of Santo André School, in São José do Rio Preto, Brazil (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Little Ones' Chapel, Santo André School, São José do Rio Preto, Brazil.

Photo: Christiane Meier.

Note that the story of salvation is displayed on the wall at children's eye level; an adult needs to look down to see the scenes. Pastro is careful not to use a single strip for the narration, as this would be boring for a child; thus, he places the scenes at different heights, in rectangles and frames of varying sizes and colors, forming an interesting rhythmic pattern for the little ones.

The center of the space is marked by ceramic elements arranged in different ways; around it are small, lightweight stools that the children themselves can move as they work. In the background, Jesus, as teacher, welcomes two children, a boy and a girl. Painted with white lines on a blue background, it resembles a chalk figure drawn on a blackboard in a classroom, thus establishing a dialogue with and including the space in the rest of the school. Jesus is tall, reminding the adults present that he is the Educator; the children, on the other hand, are the same size as those who come here, allowing each one to feel equally welcomed by him.

Next to it, a stained glass window features a large yellow cross with five red dots: the wounds of Jesus. This stained glass window has a minimalist composition of

colors and shapes, almost a geometric abstraction, which does not interfere with the mural's iconography and, at the same time, filters sunlight and indicates that Jesus is the Light of the world.

If the chapel is delicate and small, suitable for children undergoing religious initiation, Pastro's last and most monumental work was undoubtedly the design of the interior of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, the largest Marian church in the world. We move from the minimalist to the monumental scale, yet in both cases, Pastro shows his mystagogical sensitivity, and Fernandes (2021, 304) recalls precisely this aspect: "The Christian artist is a mystagogue."

"His second artistic homeland is Aparecida. In this place of pilgrimage, ... stands the second largest basilica in the world." (Brücker 2009, 77) Fernandes adds:

The iconographic program of the church building of the National Basilica of Our Lady of Aparecida is undoubtedly the mature expression of Cláudio Pastro's conception of sacred space.... In particular, it is from the physical and symbolic center of the Basilica, which is the Altar and the Cross, that Pastro manifests all his liturgical, biblical, and theological concerns. (Fernandes 2021, 305)

To give an idea of the building's dimensions and its significance for the faithful, Jorge Sampaio provides the following details:

The largest Catholic evangelization center in Brazil mirrors the popular devotion of Brazilians and foreigners alike to the Queen and Patroness of Brazil, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of Aparecida. To welcome nearly 12 million pilgrims each year, the National Shrine offers devotees an area of over 1.3 million square meters, with nearly 143,000 square meters of built area. The specific area of the Basilica of Aparecida itself covers almost 72,000 m² ... which can accommodate up to 30,000 devotees around the Central Altar; for outdoor celebrations, the capacity is 300,000. (Sampaio 2017, 163–64)

The current basilica was built between the 1940s and 1980s, as the number of pilgrims visiting the site each year had grown enormously and the existing structures were no longer adequate to receive them. However, it was not until the 2000s that work began on completing the basilica's interior. Pastro took part in the project, which was conceived collaboratively by him and the architects Regina Celi de Albuquerque Machado Steurer and Laíde Sonda. Berto wrote in 2012 (281), during the construction work: "Without a doubt, the Basilica of Aparecida has been his greatest and most important work." Pastro passed away in 2016, before the dome's cladding was completed, which was inaugurated in 2017.

The team designed not only the monumental iconography but also the layout of the sanctuary and its liturgical poles, as well as relocating the image of Brazil's patron

saint from the altar to the side, creating a new niche for it. They designed and built several chapels, including the Baptism Chapel and the Resurrection Chapel.

The execution of Pastro's project began in 2000 with a series of studies for the central Altar, the Presbytery, and the Altarpiece of the image. Based on traditional Portuguese tiles, the unifying element of the space is the image of Heavenly Jerusalem, as the place of the new creation, which descends and settles among the faithful, also drawing inspiration from the Song of Songs, a work that symbolically expresses the ideal relationship between Christ and his Church. (Berto 2012, 281)

When the presbytery is viewed from above, one notices the symmetry of the large 8-meter-high cross, made of corten steel, hanging from the center of the dome above the altar. Berto (2012, 281) explains: "From the central dome, suspended by a large cable, hangs a steel cross with the hollow silhouette of the crucified Christ, the so-called cosmic cross: just an indication of the figure, a symbol of the living and invisible Christ who is present there."

Figures 10 and 11 show details of the interior of the basilica, highlighting, on the left, the iconography of the dome and walls surrounding the sanctuary, a set referred to here as the baldachin, as it mirrors the structure conceived by Christian architecture of the first millennium above the altar, including the large cross above the altar; on the right, the sanctuary seen from the dome, with the cross, the altar, the pews, and the floor, marked by the design of water waves. Note that the artist did not depict the water conventionally, but rather in the style of Brazilian indigenous peoples. Pastro (2013, 8) writes that it is the breath of the Spirit that stirs the waters. "The entire floor, inside and outside . . . , bears the movement of water, which indicates to us the presence of the Holy Spirit (the breath of the Risen One) in this place."

The walls, arches, and large dome of the basilica's central part form the Garden of Eden, with the Tree of Life depicted in Italian mosaics above—the stem is the cross that descends from the dome to the altar—and the surrounding garden flowing down the walls. We have the fauna and flora of Brazil, cultural elements from various regions, all around the altar, an apocalyptic plaza with the Lamb at its center. A heavenly Jerusalem that descends upon the sanctuary and encompasses the entire assembly.

As in all liturgical adaptations made by Pastro, the first step is to clear the presbytery, leaving only Christ there. The image of the Patroness is also removed and taken to a specially designed niche so that the faithful have easy access to it. Our Lady of Aparecida has always drawn thousands of faithful, and accessibility was a key consideration in the adaptation work. There is a wide ramp that allows people on foot and in wheelchairs to approach the saint's feet.

In 2004, one of the most important works was delivered, revitalized in 2011: the altarpiece/throne of the Image. It features a large central gold band containing, in the middle,

on a white band, three archangels in golden lines: Raphael at the top, Michael in the middle, and Gabriel below. Each figure is six meters high, corresponding to Jacob's ladder, on which the angels descend and ascend, bringing graces and carrying the requests of the faithful. At the base is the niche of the image, made of silver and brilliants, surrounded by a large sun that corresponds to the woman clothed with the sun of the Apocalypse. On each side, there are large panels in shades of ultramarine blue, turquoise blue, lilac, white, and gold, depicting 12 women from the Old Testament who prefigured the Virgin. (Berto 2012, 282)

Since for Catholics, the Virgin is an intercessor, in the present symbolism, the supplications addressed to the Mother of God are also identified as being carried by the three archangels to the merciful Son.

In the four naves of the great basilica, Pastro depicts in tiles, a hallmark of Portuguese tradition, the following cycles:

- a) to the south: Incarnation and Childhood of Jesus;
- b) to the north: Public Life of the Savior;
- c) to the west: Passion and Death of Jesus;
- d) to the east: Resurrection of the Lord.



Figure 10. Detail of the basilica's interior.
Photo: Christiane Meier.

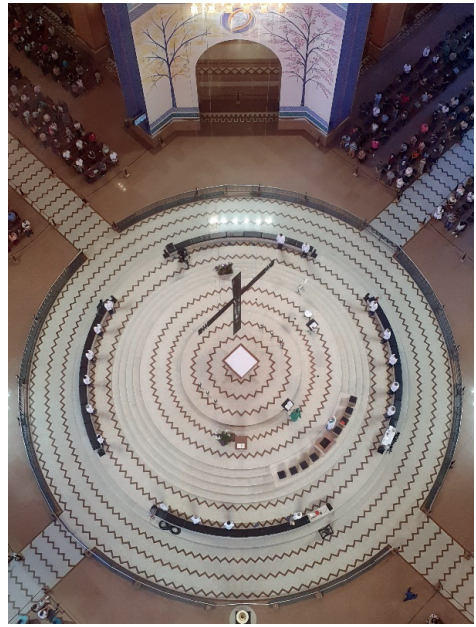


Figure 11. View of the sanctuary from the basilica's dome.
Photo: Christiane Meier.

It is a complete *biblia pauperum*, which forms a set with three large panels occupying the space that in the south nave is reserved for the Patroness's niche, dedicated to the great patriarchs and prophets of the First Testament and the apostles (east nave), the women in the history of the Church (north nave), and the evangelization of Brazil (west nave).

The National Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida is Pastro's best-known and most remembered work, given its monumentality and centrality in the faith of Brazilian Catholics.

3. The Reception of His Work

The visibility of Pastro's work, along with its distinctive artistic and theological qualities, makes him an unavoidable figure in Brazilian liturgical art and architecture. Pastro was a pioneer in the effort to introduce post-conciliar sacred art and architecture in Brazil. He discussed his pioneering role and the state of the Catholic Church in his time with interlocutors such as Brücker, when he stated that the Church should place equal emphasis on art as it does on social struggle:

For a long time, sacred art was relegated to the background. I have always drawn attention to this situation and fought against it with my work. Finally, the church is waking up from its cultural stupor. Everywhere working groups are springing up, diocesan commissions are emerging, and courses in sacred art are being offered at theological colleges. If I take pride in anything, it is in this. (Brücker 2009, 78)

Pastro argued that the absence of courses on sacred art and architecture in seminaries, combined with the scarcity of publications on the fundamentals of the organization and setting of liturgical spaces and iconographic programs, led to a lack of good examples of post-conciliar churches in Brazil. Thus, the artist himself took on the task, teaching classes, writing books, and encouraging the translation of works such as the important document *Via pulchritudinis*, from the Pontifical Council for Culture, and *The Mystery of Worship in Christianity*, by Odo Casel, a landmark of the liturgical movement.

Post-conciliar authors limited themselves to presenting systematic theological content related to liturgy and ecclesiology, but lacked the initiative to link this theological content to its practical repercussions in relation, for example, to the celebratory space. This delicate and difficult task was undertaken by Cláudio Pastro through the publication of books in which we can find discussions on the fundamentals of sacred art, language, symbolism, beauty, and, above all, engage with projects and practical suggestions for the

organization of space and setting in accordance with the spirit of what it means to build churches today. (Fernandes 2021, 304)

In this regard, it is interesting to note the testimony of architect Sartorelli concerning his choice of a research subject for his master's degree. He states:

This research began accidentally, when I first came into contact with Cláudio's work during my mother's graduation ceremony and mass in Theology at the Cathedral of São Miguel Paulista, a peripheral neighborhood of the city of São Paulo. The interior of this cathedral made a strong impression on me, where several frescoes on the walls illustrated biblical scenes, reminiscent of primitive, naïve art, yet at the same time full of symbolism, in a contemporary style. They possessed a level of sophistication that I never imagined I would find in a church on the outskirts of the city. (Sartorelli 2013, 11)

In fact, Pastro's work, especially in the last twenty years, has repeatedly been the subject of academic research. The earliest study dates back to 1995, but it was mainly from the 2000s onwards, when Pastro began working at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, that research on his work began to multiply. From 2005 to 2024, eleven academic works were published: four doctoral theses and seven master's dissertations (de Aquino and Sanchez 2025; Borges 2024). We are aware of at least two additional doctorates currently in progress. We can therefore infer that research on his work is increasingly present at universities and in art research groups, or specifically in sacred art and architecture research groups.

The first work is Vera M. J. Villela's master's dissertation in Urban and Regional Planning, entitled "Arquitetura e pintura na concepção de Cláudio Pastro" [Architecture and Painting in the Conception of Cláudio Pastro], which focuses on the chapel of Santo André School in São José do Rio Preto (Villela 1995). It was defended at the São Paulo State University (UNESP) in 1995. In 2005, we have two dissertations, one by Sartorelli on "O espaço sagrado e o religioso na obra de Cláudio Pastro" [The Sacred and the Religious Space in the Work of Cláudio Pastro], defended in the Graduate Program in Religious Studies at PUC-SP, later published as a book (2013), and the other by Alfredo C. Veiga, entitled "Cláudio Pastro: arte como veículo do sagrado" [Cláudio Pastro: Art as a Vehicle of the Sacred], defended in the Aesthetics and Art History Program at the University of São Paulo (USP) (Veiga 2005).

In the following years, we have two dissertations on works that are quite representative of Pastro's career: one by Marília M. M. S. Lima Torres, on "O Cristo do terceiro milênio" [The Christ of the Third Millennium], defended in 2007 for a master's degree in Arts at UNESP, and one by Egidio S. Toda, on "A arte sacra de Cláudio Pastro na Basílica de Aparecida e sua contemporaneidade" [The Sacred Art of Cláudio Pastro in the Basilica of Aparecida and Its Contemporaneity], defended in 2013 in the Master's in Art and Cultural History at Mackenzie Presbyterian University.

In the same year, we have the first doctoral thesis, by Wilma S. De Tommaso in the Graduate Program in Religious Studies at PUC-SP, on “O Pantocrator de Cláudio Pastro” [The Pantocrator by Cláudio Pastro] (De Tommaso 2013).

In 2015, Claudinéia C. Genoveze defended her master’s degree in Religious Studies at the Methodist University of São Paulo, addressing “Os painéis de azulejos sobre José de Anchieta no Pátio do Colégio concebidos por Cláudio Pastro, interpretados em três perspectivas: do artista, do espaço e do observador” [The Tile Panels Depicting José de Anchieta in the Pátio do Colégio, Designed by Cláudio Pastro, Interpreted from Three Perspectives: That of the Artist, the Space, and the Observer]. It was the last academic paper produced before Pastro’s death in October 2016.

After his death, two other master’s dissertations were completed: Richard G. da Silva’s “A iconografia da arte sacra de Cláudio Pastro na Basílica Nacional de Aparecida” [The Iconography of Cláudio Pastro’s Sacred Art in the National Basilica of Aparecida], defended in 2019 in the Master of Arts program at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) (da Silva 2019), and Silvana Borges’s dissertation entitled “Espaço litúrgico ontem e hoje: tradição e modernidade na arte e na arquitetura sacras cristãs na obra de Cláudio Pastro” [Liturgical Space Yesterday and Today: Tradition and Modernity in Christian Sacred Art and Architecture in the Work of Cláudio Pastro], defended in 2024 in the Master’s in Architecture program at the Belas Artes Faculty of São Paulo.

There were also three doctoral theses: Taciane T. Jaluska addressed “A educação patrimonial no espaço sagrado: o potencial educativo nas obras de Cláudio Pastro na ambientação do Santuário de Aparecida/SP segundo as percepções de visitantes e turistas” [Heritage Education in the Sacred Space: The Educational Potential of Cláudio Pastro’s Works in the Setting of the Aparecida Shrine According to the Perceptions of Visitors and Tourists] in a thesis defended in 2018 in the Graduate Program in Theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná (PUCPR); Toda continued his research with a PhD in Education, Art, and Cultural History at Mackenzie Presbyterian University, defending in 2019 a thesis entitled “A universalidade da mulher que se tornou Nossa Senhora e sua relação primitiva-contemporânea na história, arte, religião e semiótica” [The Universality of the Woman Who Became Our Lady and Her Primitive-Contemporary Relationship in History, Art, Religion, and Semiotics] (Toda 2019); and Hilda T. S. Souto focused on “Processos de criação na obra de Cláudio Pastro: uma investigação estético-teológica no acervo em papel do Mosteiro Nossa Senhora da Paz” [The Creative Processes in the Work of Cláudio Pastro: An Aesthetic–Theological Investigation of the Paper Collection of the Our Lady of Peace Monastery], completing her Doctorate in Theology at PUCPR in 2022.

It should also be emphasized that, on the occasion of Pastro’s 75th birthday in October 2023, special events were held to celebrate his birth at the Catholic University of Pernambuco (Unicap) and at the São Bento College in São Paulo, illustrating

the interest in his biography and work on the part of researchers and university professors, as well as the general public.

Artists and architects currently active in Brazil cannot be indifferent to his work, whether by drawing on his influence or openly opposing it. Many leading figures in this field follow the paths opened by Pastro, and often it is precisely contact with his work that marks the beginning of their careers. This is the case with Ruberval Monteiro. In an informal conversation in his studio in Rome in February 2025, he told us that he began painting by copying Pastro and was intrigued that his work never looked quite the same until he realized he was not Pastro. From then on, he no longer copied but was inspired and set out on his own iconographic path, as shown in Figure 12.



Figure 12. Pantocrator, Ruberval Monteiro, church of Cela São José, Itapetcerica da Serra (SP), 1998. Photo: Christiane Meier.

Alongside Monteiro, we can mention Romolo Picoli Ronchetti, Anselmo José Frugério, Guto Godoy, Laíde Sonda, Antonio Batista, Marcelo Molinero, and Maria Fonseca as contemporary Brazilian sacred artists influenced by Pastro. Pastro's work set a precedent and paved the way for the reception of the Second Vatican Council in Brazil, especially within the artistic and liturgical spheres.

Conclusions

During the years of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI (1964) emphasized that if the ministry of preaching lacked the contribution of artists, that ministry would find it necessary to become artistic itself, since it is the task and mission of art to “clothe in words, forms, colors, accessibility” the “world of the spirit, of the invisible, of the ineffable, of God.” The *Message to Artists*, delivered at the end of Vatican II in 1965, goes in the same direction: “Today, as yesterday, the Church needs you and turns to you. And she says to you through our voice: do not allow a fruitful alliance between all to be broken.... The world in which we live needs beauty in order not to fall into despair.” (Paul VI 1965).

“In some ways, Vatican II could be considered ‘too little, too late’ for sacred art. In others, it could be a classic example of institutions catching up with what is now called ‘best practice’ and making its protocols officially recognized,” stated Inge Linder-Gaillard (2021). Pastro followed the Council's path not only by faithfully adhering to its guidelines, but also by familiarizing himself with the entire flow of creativity and rootedness in tradition that characterized the movements preceding Vatican II. This intimacy with the theological, cultural, and spiritual sensibilities of the liturgical, biblical, patristic, and ecumenical movements, among others, was a fundamental component of the maturity of his artistic output.

At the same time, and precisely in line with the appreciation of local culture and the episcopal collegiality typical of Vatican II, Pastro listened to the documents of the Church in Latin America. He understood what the bishops' conference in Medellín (1968) stated about the place of artists and writers as interpreters of the anxieties and hopes of the Latin American peoples, what the conference in Puebla (1979) affirmed about their role as promoters of their dignity and voice, and what was emphasized in Santo Domingo (1992) about the importance of art in the assimilation of liturgical renewal and in the processes of inculturation of faith (Fernandes 2021, 301).

In fact, academic research on Pastro's work has highlighted some features that identify it as being characteristically inspired by the Second Vatican Council (de Aquino and Sanchez 2025): researchers have emphasized the Christocentric emphasis of his architectural and iconographic projects (Lima Torres 2007; Jaluška 2018); his unreserved affiliation with the conciliar liturgical reform (Toda 2013;

Jaluska 2018); his sensitivity to the inculturation of the Gospel (Sartorelli 2013; Souto 2022); his ecumenical perspective and his grounding in a return to the sources (Genoveze 2015). These traits run through all his work, in an intimate relationship between its content and form.

In the liturgical spaces he designed, in the iconographic projects he drew, and in the pieces he modeled, Pastro always kept before him the assembly that celebrates as a priestly people, united in the common dignity of baptism, in fruitful interaction with the local culture, deeply rooted in its identity as a sacrament of union with God and of the unity of all humanity, recognized through listening to the Word of God. His work is not only a model of post-conciliar sacred art but also a space for fruitful and creative assimilation of the Second Vatican Council for our communities today.

Translated by Rebeca Pinheiro Queluz

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Márcio Luiz Fernandes: Conceptualization, Methodology, Review & editing, Supervision | **Felipe Sérgio Koller:** Methodology, Review & editing | **Christiane Meier:** Writing original draft, Bibliography search.

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REVIEW



Andrzej Piwowar, *Księga Syracha. Wstęp, przekład, teksty paralelne i komentarz* (Biblia Lubelska. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL 2024). Ss. 556. 42 PLN. ISBN 978-83-8288-180-6

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W ostatnich latach badacze zainteresowani Mądrością Syracha są wręcz rozpieszczani obfitością publikacji dotyczących tej księgi. Ukazało się kilka epokowych wydań zagranicznych, nie wspominając o licznych artykułach¹. Także polscy czytelnicy otrzymali w ostatnich latach nowe książki poświęcone Syrachowi. Swoją rozprawę habilitacyjną opublikowała Jolanta Judyta Pudełko (2020)², światło dzienne ujrzały także dwa komentarze, z których późniejszy stanowi przedmiot niniejszej recenzji³. Książka ukazała się w serii Biblia Lubelska, a jej autorem jest ks. dr hab. Andrzej Piwowar, pracownik Instytutu Nauk Biblijnych Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła II (KUL)⁴. Warto podkreślić, że Autor należy do grona najwybitniejszych polskich znawców Księgi Syracha⁵.

Napisanie komentarza stanowi poważne wyzwanie dla każdego autora podejmującego się takiego zadania. W przypadku Księgi Syracha jest ono tym trudniejsze, że wiąże się ze specyficzną sytuacją tekstualną tej księgi biblijnej. Mimo że została ona napisana w języku hebrajskim na początku II wieku przed Chrystusem, do czasów współczesnych nie zachowała się w całości w języku oryginalnym. Stąd konieczność oparcia się na starożytnych tłumaczeniach. Najważniejsze z nich – greckie – stanowi podstawę tłumaczenia Piwowara. Jest to wybór fundamentalny, mający konsekwencje dla całego komentarza, a zarazem w pełni zrozumiały⁶. Co więcej, hebrajskie rękopisy

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- ¹ Wspominając tylko najważniejsze pozycje, należy zwrócić uwagę na wydanie hebrajskich rękopisów Księgi Syracha, których autorami są Frédérique Michèle Rey oraz Eric D. Raymond (2024), czy obszerny komentarz do greckiego tekstu księgi autorstwa zmarłego w lutym 2026 roku Takamitsu Muraoki (2023). Dodatkowo zespół naukowców pod przewodnictwem Renate Egger-Wenzel (2022) przygotował pomocne, choć nie tak przełomowe jak poprzednie pozycje, wydanie zbierające różne wersje językowe księgi w jednym tomie.
 - ² Zob. obszerną recenzję autorstwa Andrzeja Piwowara (2022).
 - ³ Wcześniej jest komentarz autorstwa Hugolina Langkammera (2020).
 - ⁴ Autor tej recenzji napisał także jedną z recenzji wydawniczych komentarza.
 - ⁵ Liczba artykułów dotyczących tej księgi wyłącznie w dwóch czasopismach wydawanych na KUL-u (*Verbum Vitae* oraz *The Biblical Annals*) przekracza 20 pozycji.
 - ⁶ Autor korzysta – z nielicznymi wyjątkami – z najlepszego wydania krytycznego autorstwa Josepha Zieglera (1980). Nie tłumaczy jednak nagłówków sekcji, które są zawarte w głównym tekście tego wydania (np. przed Syr 44,1: Πατέρων ὕμνος). Na temat wyboru tekstu jako podstawy do tłumaczenia zob. Wright 2014.

(głównie średniowieczne) zawierają różnego rodzaju dodatki i zmiany w stosunku do domniemanego tekstu oryginalnego (do którego można starać się dotrzeć, stosując krytykę tekstu, redakcji oraz tradycji). Co prawda również tekst grecki zawiera dodatki (jest to tzw. tekst rozszerzony, który w tłumaczeniu Autor wyróżnił kursywą), jednakże cechuje go dużo większa stabilność niż hebrajską tradycję tekstualną.

Książka składa się z dwóch głównych części: wstępu (s. 5–26) oraz tłumaczenia tekstu wraz z komentarzem do niego (s. 27–542). Dodatkowo, co w pełni odpowiada założeniom serii Biblia Lubelska, tekst jest obficie opatrzone odnośnikami do innych tekstów biblijnych. Całość zamyka bibliografia (s. 543–547), która jednak nie ma ambicji być wyczerpującą. Już sama objętość wstępu wskazuje, że stanowi on jedynie szkic wprowadzenia w myśl Syracha, podczas gdy zasadniczy akcent położony jest na tłumaczenie i komentarz. Jest to szczęśliwy wybór, ponieważ nie mamy do czynienia z komentarzem „technicznym”. Oddanie głosu mędrcom z II wieku jest godne najwyższych pochwał, choć dociera on do nas dzięki pracy tłumacza i komentatora.

Wstęp zawiera standardową tematykę, która przedstawia dzieło Syracha w jego kontekście historycznym, społecznym, literackim oraz teologicznym. Jako warte odnotowania jest wyszczególnienie Syr 24 jako „centralnego rozdziału księgi” (s. 12). Jednocześnie trochę dziwi wybór Autora, aby rozdzielić „główne idee teologiczne” (s. 14–21) od „nauczania moralnego” (s. 21–23). Jest to chyba tylko kwestia techniczna, gdyż tematy dotyczące społeczeństwa i grzechu są najpierw zapowiedziane jako część nauki moralnej (s. 21), a następnie stanowią osobne sekcje wstępu (s. 23–25 oraz s. 25–26).

Tłumaczenie ma raczej charakter dosłowny, ale jest to wybór, który można obronić, gdyż uzmysławia sposób wyrażania się – jeśli nie samego Syracha, to jego wnuka, tłumacza dzieła na język grecki. Co więcej, Autor polskiego tłumaczenia zadbał o czytelnika, wprowadzając specjalne noty oznaczone literą T, które dotyczą samego tłumaczenia, bardzo często podając alternatywne możliwe przekłady. Niestety, tłumacz rzadko rozwiewa wątpliwości, dlatego przyjął dany wariant w tekście głównym. Ponadto w samym komentarzu powtarza uwagę do tłumaczenia, ale bez rozwijania jej, co jest chyba niepotrzebnym powtórzeniem (więcej poniżej).

Komentarz wydaje się najtrudniejszym zadaniem, przed którym stanął Autor recenzowanej książki. Z jednej strony z założeń serii wynika, że nie powinien on być zbyt obszerny ani nadmiernie techniczny. Z drugiej jednak strony widać, że Autor wyraźnie pragnie podzielić się z czytelnikami swoją wiedzą i odkryciami⁷. W efekcie komentarz zatrzymuje się w połowie drogi pomiędzy tymi możliwościami. Nie wyczerpuje ich wszystkich, ale często jest znacznie obszerniejszy niż inne komentarze w tej serii⁸.

⁷ Z całą pewnością czytelnicy zaciekawieni danym fragmentem księgi powinni sprawdzić, czy Autor nie opublikował artykułu na ten temat, w którym w sposób wyczerpujący przedstawia analizę egzegetyczną.

⁸ Porównując, Księga Psalmów ma – według *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* – trochę ponad 2500 wersów, Księga Syracha – zgodnie z wydaniem Zieglera – ma ich niecałe 1500. Choć jest to porównanie „jabłek

Każdy komentarz, nawet najlepszy, będzie zawierał szereg wyborów autora, które nie będą podzielane przez innych egzegetów. Nie inaczej jest w przypadku recenzowanej książki. Choć można by przedstawić szereg przykładów, w których recenzent ma odmienne zdanie niż Autor komentarza, to jednak nie chodzi tu o wyznaczenie granic poszczególnych perykop, ich interpretację czy inne problemy podobnej natury, lecz o dwa – według mnie fundamentalne – pytania.

Pierwsze z nich dotyczy tekstu hebrajskiego oraz jego wykorzystania i prezentacji w komentarzu. Autor umieszcza w nim tłumaczenia na język polski najważniejszych wariantów tekstu hebrajskiego, co stanowi bardzo cenne wzbogacenie komentarza, szczególnie dla czytelników, którzy nie mają dostępu do tekstów oryginalnych. Zabieg ten nie jest jednak pozbawiony pewnych zastrzeżeń. Po pierwsze, jeśli dany fragment został zachowany w więcej niż jednej wersji, to Autor przedstawia tylko jedną z nich, ignorując pozostałe, zachowane w innych hebrajskich rękopisach (lub na marginesie danego rękopisu, szczególnie w przypadku MS B). Zapewne jest to podyktowane względami praktycznymi, ale rodzi pytanie metodologiczne o wybór wersji przedstawionej czytelnikowi. Po drugie, Autor zasadniczo nie podejmuje się wytłumaczenia ich relacji do tekstu greckiego. Jako przykład niech posłuży komentarz do Syr 15,20 (s. 143–144): „tekst hebrajski zawiera jeszcze dwa dodatkowe stychy: «Nie ma litości dla tego, kto czyni czyny swawolne, ani dla tego, kto zdradza tajemnicę»”. Ten dodatkowy tekst jest najprawdopodobniej późnym dodatkiem, ale Autor nie mówi tego wprost (tak można rozumieć stwierdzenie, że są one „dodatkowe”, ale nie jest to jedyna możliwość) (zob. np. Rossetti 2005, 251–53). Co więcej, dwa hebrajskie rękopisy, które zawierają Syr 15,20 (MS A i MS B), mają częściowo różne warianty⁹. Zrozumiałe, że w komentarzu serii Biblia Lubelska może nie być miejsca na szczegółowe i zawiłe wyjaśnianie kwestii pochodzenia tekstów oraz ich wzajemnej relacji, tym bardziej że często byłoby to rozwiązanie hipotetyczne. Taka praktyka może jednak pozostawić czytelnika zdezorientowanego co do wymowy tekstu biblijnego. Uważam, że dobrze byłoby przemyśleć sposób prezentacji tłumaczenia tekstu hebrajskiego, szczególnie w komentarzu, którego docelowymi czytelnikami są także specjaliści¹⁰. W przypadku recenzowanej książki rozwiązaniem mogłoby być osobne tłumaczenie dołączone jako załącznik do komentarza¹¹.

z gruszkami”, daje jednak ogólne wyobrażenie o wielkości tych ksiąg. Jeśli chodzi o komentarze w serii Biblia Lubelska, to komentarz Antoniego Troniny (2021) do Księgi Psalmów ma objętość ok. 400 stron, nie licząc wstępu.

- 9 MS B ma dłuższy tekst zawierający jeden stych więcej (ולא למד שקרים לאנשי כוב), „nie nauczył kłamców kłamstw”.
- 10 Na myśl przychodzi przedstawienie wielu polskich tłumaczeń w kolumnach, osobnej dla każdej wersji (hebrajskiej, greckiej, syryjskiej, łacińskiej).
- 11 Zastanawia jednak całkowite opuszczenie poematu hebrajskiego występującego w ostatnim rozdziale (między Syr 51,12 a Syr 51,13), a nieobecnego w tłumaczeniach greckim czy syryjskim. Choć Autor wspomina o nim i zauważa bliskość z Ps 136 (wspólny refren), warto udostępnić ten utwór czytelnikowi, zamiast odsyłać go jedynie do komentarza autorstwa Langkammera (2020).

Drugie pytanie dotyczy prezentowania alternatywnych tłumaczeń danego sformułowania lub słowa. Nie jest jasne, czy Autor przedstawia wszystkie możliwe tłumaczenia słowa, czy tylko takie, które uznał za pasujące do kontekstu. Przykładem niech będzie tłumaczenie i komentarz do wersetu trzeciego z Prologu. Autor tłumaczy (s. 27) słowo παιδεία jako ‘formacja’ i notuje, że można przetłumaczyć je jako ‘wychowanie’ czy ‘naukę’. W komentarzu (s. 29) pisze, że oprócz znaczenia ‘formacja’ „grecki termin *paideia* może oznaczać także ‘wychowanie, kształcenie, nauka’”. W tym fragmencie na pewno są to znaczenia prawie synonimiczne. Jednak dla Syracha παιδεία ma także inne znaczenie – ‘karcenie’, które jest użyte w innych fragmentach (np. tłumaczenie Syr 1,27 i komentarz do tego wersetu)¹². Czy byłoby ono odpowiednie w tym fragmencie, czy nie?

Pomimo uwag krytycznych uważam, że recenzowany komentarz do Mądrości Syracha jest cennym wkładem w rozwój polskiej biblistyki. Co istotne, książka, ze względu na przystępny język zrozumiała nie tylko dla specjalistów, jest dostępna dla szerokiego grona czytelników, co stanowi jej niewątpliwą zaletę. Autorowi z całą pewnością należą się podziękowanie i słowa uznania za wykonaną pracę i jej owoc.

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¹² Czasami jednak Autor unika użycia tego słowa, co skutkuje zatrważającym tłumaczeniem, jak w przypadku Syr 4,17c. Grecki tekst και βασανίσει αὐτὸν ἐν παιδείᾳ αὐτῆς Autor oddaje jako „torturować go będzie swoją **formacją**” (s. 57) (podkreślenie moje). O podwójnym znaczeniu παιδεία (jako proces wychowania i jego owoc) zob. np. Ska 2022, 37–40.

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