

December 2022

## The Contributions of John O'Malley, SJ, to the Ongoing Reception of Vatican II

Massimo Faggioli

*Villanova University*, [massimo.faggioli@gmail.com](mailto:massimo.faggioli@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe>

---

### Recommended Citation

Faggioli, Massimo (2022) "The Contributions of John O'Malley, SJ, to the Ongoing Reception of Vatican II," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 11: No. 2, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53309/2164-7666.1412>

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol11/iss2/9>

This Scholarship is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed Journals at ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact [epublications@regis.edu](mailto:epublications@regis.edu).

## Contributions of John O'Malley, S.J. to the Ongoing Reception of Vatican II

Massimo Faggioli  
Professor of Historical Theology  
Villanova University  
*massimo.faggioli@gmail.com*

### Abstract

This article analyzes the major contributions of John O'Malley, S.J. and the reception of the Second Vatican Council, especially in light of his book *What Happened at Vatican II* but also in the context of his other books on the council of Trent and on Vatican I. O'Malley's contributions are particularly important in the context of what can be called a crisis of reception of Vatican II and of an ecclesial disruption. But it is relevant for Catholic theology and Catholic higher education because the current ecclesial and theological crisis has, among its causes, also a lack of sense of history and of historical understanding of the Church and of the theological and magisterial tradition.

### Introduction

The pontificate of Francis, the first Jesuit pope, has coincided with a revival and a return of attention to the trajectories opened by Vatican II. This has been visible in the theological debate, in intra-ecclesial, ecumenical, and interreligious conversations, and in the magisterial tradition. But there is another Jesuit who has made possible the rediscovery of Vatican II in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even before the conclave of March 2013, and it's the American Jesuit John O'Malley. In this short article, I will focus on two major contributions of John O'Malley to the debate and reception of Vatican II: the recovery of the history of the council, and the link between history and theology in this particular moment—ecclesial disruption but also opportunity for renewal and change.

### 1. O'Malley's Recovery of Vatican II in the Early 2000s

Vatican II has played a key role throughout O'Malley's life as he acknowledged in his memoirs published in 2021.<sup>1</sup> In chapter three, "Trained as a Historian: Harvard and Rome," O'Malley narrates his discovery of Italy, from Venice to Florence to Rome, during a trip from Austria in July 1961. That was the moment of his choice to turn from German religious history in order to embrace Italy. This key turn happened at a crucial time in the history of the Catholic Church as it was preparing for the Second Vatican Council. O'Malley was doing research in Rome and

therefore in the "eternal city" for two of the four sessions of the council celebrated between October 1962 and December 1965. During these moments, his scholarship and life as a Jesuit priest were mutually enriched. The election of Pedro Arrupe as superior general of the Jesuits in 1965 was a turning point in the history of the Jesuits and also of global Catholicism. Vatican II was decisive for O'Malley as a Jesuit and as a scholar who was interested in the different aspects of religious culture of the Renaissance and later of what is known now as (O'Malley's coinage) "early modern Catholicism."<sup>2</sup>

But something different happened forty years after the end of the council. His book *What Happened at Vatican II* was published in 2008 and translated into several languages. This work reopened the debate on the council in the theological guild and beyond.<sup>3</sup> That book received and developed the insights of the historiographical work done on the history of the council and reopened the debate on one major issue—so far underdeveloped—concerning the language of Vatican II.<sup>4</sup> It was not just a re-packaging of previously accumulated knowledge, but an *aggiornamento* of the historiographical tradition on the council at a time and for an audience very different from the previous phases of the reflections on Vatican II.

O'Malley tackled the conspicuous absence of serious studies on two major players, Paul VI and the so-called conciliar minority, in the

historiography of Vatican II—a lacuna that became relevant in the crisis of the reception of the council, especially in the English-speaking world in the last twenty years. O'Malley also identified “the issues-under-the-issues” of the council: the possibility of change in the Catholic Church, the relationship between center and periphery, and Vatican II as a language-event. O'Malley renewed a key argument for a correct hermeneutics of Vatican II: the council deserves and needs to be read in its intertextual character and spirit. His judgment of the outcome of the debates on all the issues-under-the-issues is sharper than others that preceded his. The role of the minority, led by Cardinal Ottaviani and resolutely opposed to any diffusion of curial power to the peripheries, was particularly important.

On the final outcome of the council the minority left more than a set of fingerprints, which means that it left its mark on the three issues-under-the-issues. On the center-periphery issue the minority never really lost control. It was in that regard so successful that with the aid of Paul VI the center not only held firm and steady but, as the decades subsequent to the council have irrefutably demonstrated, emerged even stronger.<sup>5</sup>

Two elements are important here to understand the importance of his contribution. The first is that in *What Happened at Vatican II*, O'Malley built on his scholarship on language and literary genres in the history of Catholic culture and specifically of the Roman/Vatican milieu since the Renaissance.<sup>6</sup> O'Malley came back to this aspect of the “style” of Vatican II in the 1990s when the international project for a five-volume *History of Vatican II* was underway.<sup>7</sup> He was able to identify the missing link between the historical and theological premises of that five-volume *History of Vatican II* conceived between the 1980s and the early 1990s, and the ecclesial and intellectual audience interested in or concerned with the council in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The importance of the “style” of the council was an insight that was widely received by many other scholars of Vatican II.<sup>8</sup> What O'Malley gave the international community of scholars (including non-theologians, non-historians, and non-specialists on Vatican II) was a foundational

contribution for the present and future studies of Vatican II. The emphasis on Vatican II as a “language event” revived the interest in the Council from a historical and cultural perspective in a deeply changed ecclesial and global situation. In some sense, O'Malley's emphasis on language and style foreshadowed the “Francis effect” in the debate on Catholicism today. More profoundly, O'Malley prepared the ground for the opening of Catholicism to a new phase of inculturation of its message in a moment shaped by the rise of non-European and non-Western traditions (intellectual, theological, ritual, and aesthetic). Catholic traditions in their own right began to take form in the wider context of the post-colonial and/or de-colonial turn in theology.

Second, the importance of *What Happened at Vatican II* can be understood in the context of the ecclesial and theological debate on the council in the particular moment when O'Malley wrote and published the book, during the pontificate of Benedict XVI.<sup>9</sup> John Paul II's interpretation and application of Vatican II had been criticized and scrutinized by some historians and theologians, but even Wojtyła's critics recognized his role in the defense of the legitimacy of the Council, especially from anti-Vatican II, schismatic traditionalism. This had changed significantly with the conclave of April 2005. The papacy of Benedict XVI, the last participant at Vatican II (not as a council father but as a theological *peritus*—and one of the most important), coincided with something like a policy review of the reception and application of Vatican II. This included more concessions to those who saw in Vatican II the beginning and the cause of the crisis in the Catholic Church. This had been evident since the 1980s with Joseph Ratzinger's influence, as cardinal prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on a wide range of issues.<sup>10</sup> This became eminently visible in July 2007, a little over two years after Benedict's election, with the *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* liberalizing the celebration of the liturgy in an “extraordinary form” with the pre-Vatican II missal.

O'Malley seized the moment and helped, in a unique way, to rescue Vatican II from oblivion but also from subtle forms of abrogation and delegitimization. Abrogation occurred in the sense

of minimizing the wide-ranging implications (especially on ecclesiology) of the decisions on the liturgical reform of Vatican II. Delegitimization occurred because O'Malley started talking about Vatican II again, when there was a wide (and sometimes naïve) consensus in academia that the reception of the council was a done deal, settled, and unchallenged—no matter what the magisterium and the neo-traditionalist wave in Catholicism said about it. O'Malley implicitly defied that naïve assumption of something like the “end of history.” He saw, before many of us, that there was a real need, if not an emergency, to offer a new and different argument about Vatican II in the Catholic Church. The memory of this conciliar event was often reduced to standard interpretations that were well-intended but incapable of reaching the new generations and the peripheries of the post-Vatican II ecclesial establishment.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. The Joining of Church History and Theology: Vatican II in the Conciliar Tradition

The key contributions of O'Malley to an understanding of Vatican II in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century was not just that he reached large audiences beyond academia and beyond Catholic readers. His success was also reaching a transversal audience in academia, at a time of separation between disciplines that are all essential to study, understand, and teach Vatican II—especially history and theology. This separation is especially dangerous at a time when Catholic theology has taken a new turn toward political theology, political theory, and identity politics. But this turn often lacks historical consciousness, the awareness that the *status quo* has a history, a view of the Church based on a naïvely progressive stereotype of the Christian past as either evil, banal, or irrelevant. This allows, on the other side of the ideological spectrum, anti-Vatican II or non-Vatican II views of the Christian and Catholic tradition that give simplistic answers and mis-readings of contemporary life and try not just to ignore Vatican II, but also and above all to neutralize it.

O'Malley made the argument for an interdisciplinary approach to Vatican II, a key moment in the life of the Church that is often

easily dismissed as “institutional Catholicism.” Further, the success and reception of *What Happened at Vatican II* made possible the beginning of a trilogy of books on the history of the councils in the early modern and modern era. O'Malley's 2013 book on the council of Trent provided many valuable insights into the parameters of the debate on Vatican II in terms of “tradition,” “continuity,” and “change,” with respect to a council that surprisingly (and historically speaking, unjustifiably) has become the symbol of the immutability of the Church—especially in relation to the liturgy.<sup>12</sup>

After his book on Trent, in 2018 he published a book on Vatican I.<sup>13</sup> This book was significant given the fact that in the Catholic Church there has been a reluctance to engage with the history of Vatican I. In part this is because Vatican I is essential for the maintenance of the papacy in the Church of today. Reluctance in scholarship on Vatican I also stems from selective interpretations of Benedict XVI's emphasis on the “hermeneutics of continuity and reform” as opposed to an “hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture” with the past. Finally, there is reluctance because Vatican I is one of the foundations for the ecclesiology of Vatican II, especially the constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*.<sup>14</sup> As a Church historian, O'Malley was not afraid to engage the history of Vatican I and specifically its preparation that was tightly controlled by the pope, the Curia, and the ultramontanist movement, as well as the leadership style of Pius IX. O'Malley followed the lead of other major historians of Vatican I such as Giacomo Martina, Klaus Schatz, and Ulrich Horst, but he offered an unparalleled synthesis that puts Vatican I in the context of conciliar history and of the contemporary Church. Once again, O'Malley rediscovered the past in order to talk to the present. There are, for example, very interesting parallels between the neo-traditionalist movement in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Catholicism and the ultramontane movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as the role of converts to Catholicism and of the Catholic media. From the point of view of the history of political theology, Vatican I constitutes a pivotal moment in the history of the attachment to Rome and the papacy as response to the civilizational crisis of the West. In this sense, Roman Catholicism lives today in the theological

paradigm of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II, and not just of the post-Vatican II, post-1960s period.

After completing his trilogy on the councils of the modern era which prompted a new interest in conciliar history and on Vatican II in 2018, John O'Malley's 2019 book offered a new synoptic view of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II. This book, *When Bishops Meet*, was in some sense the completion and extension of that trilogy on the councils of the modern era. It is a chronological extension that presents a comparison between different kinds of councils (from the beginning of church history until Vatican II). It is also a theological extension in the sense of actualizing the meaning of conciliar history for the possible role of councils of bishops in the global Catholic Church of today and tomorrow. It is particularly relevant in the context of Pope Francis' view for a synodal church. In the conclusion of *When Bishops Meet*, O'Malley repeated the defining feature of these councils: bishops, in communion (albeit in different ways) with the pope, different degrees of participation and control by the Roman Curia, and vastly different degrees of participation by theologians and the laity—male and female.

All of this constitutes a list of questions for those who want to imagine the conciliar tradition of the future. For O'Malley, Vatican II is the culmination of conciliar history in the sense of a certain uniqueness. There is also in O'Malley a clear appreciation of the priority of the theological and kerygmatic vision of Vatican II over ecclesiastical or socio-political concerns:

Vatican II was not a legislative-judicial meeting whose primary purpose was securing public order in the church and isolating the church from outside contamination. It was, rather, a meeting to explore in depth the church's identity, to recall and make operative its deepest values, and to proclaim to the world its sublime vision for humanity.<sup>15</sup>

### **3. Why O'Malley's Version Is Important in the Current Ecclesial and Theological Crisis**

O'Malley understood that the debate around Vatican II needs to be part of a long-term understanding of Church history and of the

history of the ecumenical councils. At the same time, this debate must speak to the language and the style of 21<sup>st</sup> century Catholicism, and to a particularly critical moment in the history of the global reception of Vatican II. This is particularly important for Catholic higher education because O'Malley's version re-proposes an Erasmian approach to the religious tradition: "Myron Gilmore had instilled in me a love of Erasmus, and I soon came to see in Erasmus the model scholar I wanted to be. On a deeper level, I recognized in him a theological and spiritual vision that had long been mine. Erasmus helped me by giving expression to the vision. I think that at heart I have always been an Erasmian Catholic."<sup>16</sup> O'Malley did this at a time when the dialogue between church and world, or between faith and culture, is not aided by a view of cultures that sees them as radically internally hybridized or contingent—so hybridized and contingent that dialogue becomes impossible. O'Malley asserts his interpretation of Vatican II in a dialogical perspective (intra-Catholic, ecumenical, interreligious, and intercultural), but he is conscious of the specific attributes of the Catholic theological and magisterial tradition.

O'Malley was present in Rome at the time of the council but not as one of the fathers of Vatican II. But surely he can be called one of the fathers of the post-Vatican II period. His scholarship on Vatican II emerged not just from his previous works on early modern Catholicism, but also from his experience, as a Jesuit and a member of the post-conciliar Church, of the difficulties of the reception of the conciliar message. Also important was his experience as a member of the Society of Jesus (his participation as an elected delegate to the General Congregation 32 of the Society of Jesus in 1974-1975).

For Catholics, O'Malley's contribution to the scholarship on Vatican II is the example of a member of the Church who was born, raised, and educated in Catholicism before the "culture wars" became the dominant paradigm. This occurred when confessional boundaries with Protestant were clear, but probably more passable than today's intra-Catholic trenches. For church historians and theologians, for academics young and old, O'Malley's work is evidence of the success of a struggle: it is the story of when

church history was still struggling to be accepted as an integral part of the theological canon. This is far from a settled struggle today and points to the

work to be done by Catholic students and scholars of history and theology. 

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> John W. O'Malley, S.J., *The Education of a Historian: A Strange and Wonderful Story* (Philadelphia: St. Joseph's University Press, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> John W. O'Malley, S.J., *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> John W. O'Malley, S.J., *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Rohan Michael Curnow, "John O'Malley on Vatican II and Bernard Lonergan's Realms of Meaning," *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2010): 188-203; Catherine Clifford, "Style Is Substance: Origins of John W. O'Malley's Contribution to the Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 79, no. 4 (2018): 745-760; Festo Mkenda, "Il Mestiere Dello Storico: L'esperienza di John O'Malley," *Civiltà Cattolica* (6 agosto 2022), <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/il-mestiere-dello-storico/>.

<sup>5</sup> O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 311.

<sup>6</sup> O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450-1521* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979); *Four Cultures of the West* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006). Recently see also O'Malley, "Theology before the Reformation: Renaissance Humanism and Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2019): 256-270.

<sup>7</sup> John W. O'Malley, S.J., "Erasmus and Vatican II: Interpreting the Council," in *Cristianesimo nella storia. Saggi in onore di Giuseppe Alberigo*, ed. Alberto Melloni et al. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), 195-212. The multi-volume standard history of the council is still *History of Vatican II*, 5 vols., ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, English version edited by Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995-2006).

<sup>8</sup> *Vatican II Comme Style. L'herméneutique Théologique du Concile*, ed. Joseph Famerée (Paris: Cerf, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> For the context created for theology by the Vatican in the early 2000s, see the memoirs of Gerald O'Collins, S.J., *On the Left Bank of the Tiber* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" *Theological Studies*, 67 (2006): 3-33.

<sup>11</sup> The contributions of O'Malley played no small part in making possible what almost fifteen years ago became *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, eds. Catherine Clifford and Massimo Faggioli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, with a chapter by O'Malley himself on the historical-theological transition from Trent to Vatican II).

<sup>12</sup> John W. O'Malley, S.J., *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 335.

<sup>13</sup> John W. O'Malley, S.J., *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium, Encyclical Letter* (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_an\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_an_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

<sup>15</sup> John W. O'Malley, S.J., *When Bishops Meet: An Essay Comparing Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2019), 223, 213-214.

<sup>16</sup> O'Malley, *The Education of a Historian*, 117-118. In this book of memoirs, O'Malley mentions Erasmus's name fourteen times. He published widely on Erasmus, included as editor and co-editor of volumes of the *Collected Works of Erasmus* (for a total of some eighty volumes, a project nearing completion today) published by University of Toronto Press.