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Conference “Vatican II and Catholic Higher Education: Leading Forward”
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PRELIMINARY DRAFT

Vatican II and Catholic Higher Education: Guest in Its Own House?

1. Introduction

Almost exactly sixty years ago to the day, pope John XXIII opened Vatican II, the greatest religious event in the 20th century and an epoch-changing council like only Trent before, with a speech, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, which single-handedly redirected the agenda of the council and arguably also the course of Church history.

Even though Vatican II deserves to be celebrated, anniversaries often have the unstated purpose to administer symbolic sedation. So, this conference is not a celebratory moment, rather an opportunity to reflect on the state of the reception of the council especially in Catholic colleges and universities.

In these remarks, I will try to offer two kinds of reflections, historical *and* theological, from the particular point of observation of Catholic higher education in North America, as a contribution to the history and theology of the reception of Vatican II in the Western hemisphere and in the global Catholic Church. I will try to provide, in other words, not just an *historical* analysis, but also a *theological* analysis with some constructive proposals about Vatican II and Catholic higher education. The first section will be on Vatican II and Catholic universities from Vatican II to today; a second section on the particular situation of today; a final part will suggest some initial proposals for a new phase for Vatican II in Catholic higher education.

2. Vatican II and Catholic universities from Vatican II to the first post-conciliar period

The relationship between Vatican II and universities has been studied mostly for what concerns the participation of Pontifical universities in the preparation of the council, less about the post-Vatican II period in Catholic colleges and universities. In 1959 and 1960, in preparation for the council, theological faculties were invited to submit their proposals for the formation of the conciliar agenda.

During Vatican II, some eminent periti belonged to religious orders (especially Jesuits and Dominicans) and were professors in the institutions of theological formations of their orders, and a number of them teaching at Catholic universities under episcopal control (e.g. the nemesis of John Courtney Murray, SJ: Joseph Fenton at CUA). But other periti (both official and unofficial) were academics in state or public universities (Joseph Ratzinger at the University of Bonn and

later in Tübingen; Karl Rahner at the University of Munich; Giuseppe Alberigo at the University of Florence and later Bologna) or in Catholic universities in a system of non-separation between Church and State (Edward Schillebeeckx at the Catholic University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands; Willy Onclin and Gerard Philips at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium).

Vatican II assumed a robust relationship between theology and academia. The new literary genre of Vatican II texts, that is, non-legislative but narrative, required a sustained effort of cultural mediation between magisterium, the church, and the world that was different from the one of the most similar predecessors of Vatican II, the council of Trent four centuries before. The theology of the laity, the relationship between the Church and the modern world, ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue, and most of all the value attributed to the sciences and cultures – all this had in mind not an intellectualistic Church (see the liturgical reform), but certainly a strong relationship with the world of higher education. The collaboration between bishops and theologians at Vatican II implied a similar collaboration in the post-Vatican II period, and certainly in the USA the *Land O'Lakes Statement* of 1967 inaugurated a new era – but probably more for the idea of Catholic university per se, rather than for theology in Catholic universities.

Then one of the ruptures of the post-conciliar period happened. In July 1968, Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* brought an end to the honeymoon between Catholicism and modern liberal culture in the West. This was the beginning of an age of dissent which took different forms between the laity in the pews, the clergy, and academic theology. It was a dissent that, in its wisest forms, tried to distinguish carefully between different levels of authority of Church teaching. It was the attempt at a loyal or faithful dissent, not an assault on Church teaching or papal authority per se - quite different from the one we have seen in recent years against pope Francis' pontificate. The loyalty of that dissent did not help heal the wounds of that period, which meant personal high costs for some of our colleagues in academia.

It was not only *Humanae Vitae* that overshadowed the *Land O'Lakes Statement* of 1967. In 1975, *Persona Humana*, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faiths' "Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics" (about homosexuality), compounded the rift between the magisterium and Catholic theological academia. Later during John Paul II's pontificate, large parts of the Catholic theological world later adopted a view of 1990's *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (and also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* of 1992) based on the belief that John Paul II and the Vatican were imposing an unacceptably unilateral understanding of Catholicism on Catholic education.

3. *Thirty years of reception and oblivion of Vatican II*

What happens in universities cannot be easily separated from what happens in a particular national context - in our case, in the USA. This is important to remember because now, at sixty years from the beginning of the council, it is time to disabuse ourselves from the idea that the problem of the interruption of the reception of Vatican II is only a problem of fringe traditionalism – the SSPX. It is, in fact, a larger and deeper phenomenon, which begins after the Lefebvrite schism and similar groups between the 1970s and 1988. Until the mid-1980s Vatican II still has a prominent role in the documents of the USCCB and still is the common ground (as it continues to be, for example, in Latin American Catholicism). Then something changed and it is inseparable from the beginning of a deeper polarization in American politics in the 1990s.

The 1990s are a central decade to understand today's situation in the Church. It is the decade when the international project for a history of Vatican II is accomplished with a minimal involvement of scholars from the USA and a minimal impact of the national conversation on the council. This happened despite the heroic efforts of Joseph Komonchak, professor at CUA, editor of the English version of that five-volume work published between 1995 and 2001 (between 1995 and 2006 in English), and one of the major influences on Giuseppe Alberigo's and of the international team coordinated from Bologna's implementation of the plan for a comprehensive history of Vatican II with a strong interest in the theological drama of the council, especially ecclesiology. On the other side, the US hierarchy at Vatican II were managers not theologians, and when the Council ended, they did not really engage theologians seriously. So, the episcopal hierarchy is partly to blame if theologians, looking to do something consequential, looked outside the institution for ideas.

In that decade, the 1990s, begins a process of mutual alienation between different Catholic cultures around Vatican II. It is the decade of the rise of the neo-conservative theological and political project also in the Catholic Church in the USA: first in the world of journalism and public intellectuals, and later in academia - a "long march" that will bring its bitter fruits in the new millennium.

In the 1990s two different kinds of re-assessments of Vatican II begin. On the right, there is a theological-political neo-conservative revision of the effects of the council, in the name of an idealized past, in a defense of that recent pre-Vatican II past that many thought Vatican II had made unusable and against a liberal-American interpretation of the conciliar teaching. This happens without, at first, attacking the legitimacy of Vatican II itself (see, for example, *First Things*' founder Richard John Neuhaus defense of the liturgical reform). The rise of neo-conservative Catholicism is defined, at that stage, by a critique of the reception of Vatican II, not a critique of Vatican II per se. But it already expresses a theo-political critique of the conciliar teachings that proceed from a *post hoc, propter hoc* - an identification of Vatican II as the cause of the social and cultural disruption in the USA beginning in the late 1960s.

Later, beginning with the first decade of the 21st century and together with the changes in the national conversation about religion after 9/11, this theological-political revisionism of Vatican II becomes more radical: an attack against the theology of Vatican II, an active attempt of evicting Vatican II from our common home, and later becomes an attack against the teaching of pope Francis in terms that try to delegitimize his papacy. What happened in the last few years shows that the theology of many bishops and power elites (political, financial, in the courts of law) is still stuck at the 1950s.

On the other side of the spectrum, during the same thirty years, begins a process of *hypostatization of Vatican II* in a theological system where often the focus on the post-conciliar comes at the expense of the actual knowledge of the conciliar teaching, of Vatican II itself. It is ignorance not just of the final documents of the council, but also of the historical event. It is not an attack against Vatican II, but a silent decoupling, a process of estrangement from the conciliar tradition in favor of the post-conciliar, in the sense not just of the *post-confessional* but also of the *post-tradition* or *anti-tradition*. This has causes that were both internal to academia (the precarious position of theology in Catholic colleges and universities; the system of academic recruitment and career) and external (understandable frustration with the perceived failure of the Church to deliver on the promises of Vatican II). It is an indirect disqualification of Vatican II which creates a vacuum to be filled by other kinds of theological and academic programs within academia, outside

universities, and in the Church (A completely separate chapter should be devoted to seminaries for the formation of priests and religious).

It was only John O'Malley's *What Happened at Vatican II*, published in 2008 with a publisher like Harvard University Press (and translated in many languages) during the pontificate of Benedict XVI, that helped rescue the theology of the council from oblivion but also from subtle forms of abrogation and delegitimization. Benedict XVI, elected three years earlier, had already given clear indications and taken decisions in the sense of a revision of the institutional interpretation of Vatican II: among others, the famous discourse on the two conciliar hermeneutics of "continuity and reform and of discontinuity and rupture" of December 22nd, 2005, the lecture at the University of Regensburg in September 2006, and the liberalization of the pre-conciliar Mass in Latin with the *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* in July 2007. O'Malley saw, before many of us, that there was a real need—if not an emergency—to make a new and different argument about Vatican II in the Catholic Church, where the memory of the conciliar event was often kept alive by those with a veterans' mentality. This mentality was well-meant but also incapable of reaching newer generations or the peripheries of the post-Vatican II ecclesial establishment.

4. *Vatican II in the USA today*

Where does Vatican II stand today? What is its position in academia, in the Church, and in the intersections between academia and the Church, but even before in the larger conversation within and about Catholicism today in the USA.

First, there is a distinction that no longer works or where the lines are blurred: the distinction between *conservative Catholics* (who used to endorse the legitimacy of Vatican II even though criticizing some aspects of its implementation) and *Catholic traditionalism*, as a much more sectarian-like response to the problem of change in the Church rooted in a value-oriented repudiation of the council. This has to do with the rise of vocal groups or influencers (the so-called "ministerial-industrial complex") on the internet (since the mid-1990s) and social media (since the early 2000s but especially from the second decade of the 21st century).

In this sense, due to the influence of technology and information and media systems, the divide between Vatican II sentimentality and the anti-Vatican II sentiment is also a generational phenomenon. The position acquired by new Catholic media (EWTN, Church Militant) has boosted the outreach of this revisionism on Vatican II of both classical traditionalism and new militantism. These voices have developed websites, podcast, and YouTube channels that have expanded their originally marginal outreach beyond the usual circles and beyond North America. The mutation is made possible also by a *development in topics*. All these groups and channels received a boost – ideologically, but also sociologically and demographically - by the continuing abortion debate first, in the 2010s by the debate on same-sex marriage and LGBTQ rights in society, in the law, and in the Church, and in the 2020s by the debate on role of government and science in the health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

But it's not just technology. There is also a pervasive issue of credibility of Vatican II in light of the disruption of the last twenty years – abuse crisis especially. This has benefitted one side of the ideological spectrum. The re-drawing of the lines about Vatican II is one of the ways in which politically conservative Catholicism has aligned itself to one ideological side in our two-party system in the USA, and this entailed deep changes in the ways the new generations of leaders (clerical, intellectual, business leaders) understand the concept of "Catholic tradition". Catholic

public intellectuals (e.g. Catholic convert and NYT columnist Ross Douthat), politicians (in the Republican Party), the business world, philanthropic circles (major donors to universities and Catholic media) are increasingly represented by neo-traditionalist Catholics with a markedly negative or derisive view of Vatican II. One of the paradoxes is that Catholic anti-liberalism gained access to liberal mainstream media thanks to the appeal to ideological “diversity”. In this moment, anti-Vatican II, anti-liberal Catholics have a platform that is denied or is no longer relevant for “Vatican II Catholics.”

5. *Vatican II in the Church and university today*

What happened in the national conversation on Catholicism and politics has not left the Church and Catholic universities untouched. The political and ideological polarization at the national level has effects on the theological dispositions towards Vatican II in our Church and in our universities: a Church whose most influential voices are divided between the conformist 1950s and the radical post-ecclesial – not entirely different from the divide between the two parties.

This made worse the pre-existing situation of the knowledge of conciliar theology and history. The American Catholic academic and ecclesial system did not publish a multi-volume commentary or work on Vatican II in the sixty years from the English-speaking world. There is not a shared version of the English translation of the final documents of Vatican II (some of them clearly problematic but generally used because for free, like the Vatican website version). The *koinè* on Vatican II is not just popularization, but worse, especially on the right side of “brand Catholicism” where conciliar theology is seen as heretical or, at best, as something that must be tamed and understood as purified from a hermeneutic in light of the contributions from the global church and feminist theology. Doing a Google search for videos or lectures “Vatican II” can easily lead to spiritual desolation.

This is part of a larger process of de-theologization of clerical leadership and of growing distance from the university system in favor of other parallel institutions of education. Catholic theological education shaped by neo-traditionalist persuasions in the USA has migrated out of mainstream Catholic colleges and universities, and has established new institutions, funded by private donors (for example, the Augustinian Institute in Denver). In these institutions, the teaching on Vatican II and the theological culture at the basis of their foundations and of the appeal to students represents the insurgency against the mainstream reception of Vatican II in the USA, if not sometimes against conciliar teaching itself.

Moreover, there are the changes in what stands for “Catholic” in many Catholic universities – the influence of journalism, the monopoly of the Catholic appeal by disciplines other than theology, the think-tankization of scholarship. To the fragmentation of the initiatives corresponds today a pulverization of research, teaching, and academic cultures. At the very delicate junction between Church and university, Catholic theology finds itself in a system of global research and teaching, and in particular in the Western world, which is more and more selective and competitive; it presupposes a growing schizophrenia between micro-specializations and grandiose visions; requires faith in the corporate mission and none in the transcendent; designs everything and quantifies everything. The challenge for Catholic universities is enormous, more so as boundaries are falling (that at least in the Western world where they have long structured minds and spaces): between public and private universities, between profit and non-profit, between confessional and non-confessional, between advocacy and supposedly neutral academic entities.

Then there are other theological enterprises (like the Lumen Christi Institute at the University of Chicago) who admirably have decided to steer clear of the culture war traditionalism, but also to stay away from Vatican II Catholicism – from what it is or from what it has become. This “non-conciliar, and non-anticonciliar” culture has taken roots also in mainstream colleges and universities and in specialized, para-university institutes populated by Catholic thinkers. “Non-conciliar, and non-anticonciliar” may be a solution to avoid the culture wars, but it has long-term costs for the understanding of the tradition because it tries to isolate a particular slice of the “Catholic intellectual tradition” and treat it as somehow untouched by the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Church over the past century.

Within the Church, Catholic universities reflect a growing plurality and fragmentation. There is no longer a clear crossroads between the withdrawal option and the engagement – or better, that crossroads exists, but it does not overlap with our usual theological-political fault lines. Some Catholic colleges and universities are tempted by appealing to a more coherent identity as a persecuted minority, or they identify with one particular cultural or political movement, with a religious order, with a particular ecclesial agenda. Other Catholic universities, the majority in the mainstream, are attracted to another direction: the attempt to merge the contradictory identities of all. But this attempt to keep the “Catholic” as *universal* has become much more complicated in a culture that rewards *identity*. The very definition of a “Catholic university” has become increasingly difficult to spell out and generate consensus among the very ones who work in them and support them.

At the intersection between academia and the Church, the crisis of Vatican II is a symptom of the crisis of a select minority in the Church, intellectuals, that has never been very good at talking with people in the pews, but lately has also stopped talking to the clerical and episcopal elites who are not eager, in return, to see theologians as part of the ecclesial conversation (as we saw for the “synodal process”).

And then there is the papacy. Pope Francis has revived Vatican II in many ways and on many issues. But now within the Church, the Catholic theological project finds itself, in terms of church politics, between the Scylla of the German pope, criticized on the one hand as the theologian who stifled theological debate, and the Charybdis of the Argentine pope, criticized by others as the “street priest” from the Global South who mortifies intellectual precision. Catholic theology pays the price of a largely still ultramontane Church which considers the popes (one pope only, of their choosing) the legal executors of the will of Vatican II.

6. *A few initial proposals*

In his “last lecture” at Boston College on September 23, 2022, Richard Gaillardetz made three major points about how to pursue “meaningful and lasting ecclesial reform”: 1) starting a re-engagement with the institutional dimension of the Church, 2) finding a “reflective equilibrium” between trust and suspicion of the tradition, and 3) realizing the “sense of the faithful”.

These three points about the theological academic discourse on institution and tradition are close to what I think it is necessary for a rediscovery of Vatican II for Catholic higher education. I will outline here these three points that echo Gaillardetz’s proposal.

The first: it is urgent a re-engagement with the institutional dimension both of the church and the university. The current anti-institutionalism is not like the one typical of the 1970s; it is integral part of the Catholic disruption that we see in the daily news feed about the sexual abuse

crisis, the financial scandals, and the cultural and pastoral lack of awareness in many in Church leadership – and something similar could be said for the sentiment towards universities’ administrators. But both anti-Vatican II and non-Vatican II Catholicism have a narrative and a strategy about the necessity of institutions (in the church and in the university) that we need to take seriously as a challenge to which we need to respond. The price for ignoring this may well be that theology (not just Vatican II) will return to what it was until a few decades ago: the preserve of a self-interested and self-absorbed clerical clique – only, now with very few ordained clerics in its ranks. But it could also mean more generally leaving Vatican II to the mercy of an institutional Church and a university system growing more and more withdrawn and alienated from theology. This is one of the prices to pay for Catholic scholars (theologians and historians) whose disciplines are more and more tempted to turn away from anything that sounds “institutional” and are inclined to swim with the tide of anti-institutionalism where everything that wants to be relevant has to be shaped as “cultural studies”. The current pattern of detachment and disengagement is not sustainable, in the long run. And just to be clear: re-engagement does not mean for Catholic academic theology to become catechesis, or the voice of the institutional Church, or go back to old neo-Scholastic apologetics.

The second: we need a new synthetic vision around Vatican II, the old ones are gone. There is the opportunity for a new phase of fundamental education on Vatican II as something important to understand the whole of the Catholic tradition: the *et et* instead of the *aut aut*; the old together with the new; the paradoxical and the fragmented; the universal and the particular; the metaphysical and the historical; continuity-reform and some degrees of discontinuity. Until John Paul II it was thought that doctrinal and liturgical questions were settled, and both anti-Vatican II traditionalists and post-Vatican II progressives were excluded from the “definitive” (that is, not “infallible”) magisterium. But now we are at the end of that “end of history”. History has restarted, and what were once marginalized groups have challenged even the minimal consensus created by John Paul II around Vatican II. Historical consciousness has evaporated, hermeneutical nuances have been lost. A view of cultures that sees them as radically internally hybridized or radically contingent has made dialogue between church and world or faith and culture not just impossible, but pointless. The Catholic theological guild’s turn toward political theology, political theory, and identity politics now often tends to avoid the fundamental questions: what is the point of believing? Why be a disciple? And this is not even to mention the reduction of ecclesiology to “ecclesiodicy”, in light of the identification of the Church by default with evil—from patriarchal abuse to cultural genocide.

The third: a rejection of the hypostatization of Vatican II in order to leave behind progressive apologetics of the conciliar teaching and event. There are teachings of Vatican II that clearly require augmentation and development. Some of it has taken place already, some not (especially on women and ministry in the Church). More than the return of an anti-Vatican II or pre-Vatican II Catholicism, the real problem is “non-Vatican II, non-conciliar Catholicism” in the form of denial of the tradition. “Non-Vatican II” does not mean simply ignoring Vatican II, but above all neutralizing it, considering the trajectories of Vatican II concluded and exhausted, and its promises empty. This rejection of the hypostatization of Vatican II begins in our scholarly conversations as well as in our classrooms. We are called to distinguish carefully between different forms of criticism of Vatican II. Not all criticisms of Vatican II are anti-conciliar, not all endorsements of Vatican II are conciliar.

7. Conclusions

In 1996, Carmel Elizabeth McEnroy published a book on women in the Church of Vatican II, titled *Guests in Their Own House*. It was almost thirty years ago, and the issue of the role of women in the Church has not made visible changes, although lately there have been signs of hope especially in the context of synodality and the “synodal process” (from which Catholic universities and colleges in the USA have been largely absent – not entirely their fault).

But there is an interesting paradox here. While some post-Vatican II issues have made progress in the Church (care for creation, women in the Church, a less Europe- and Rome-centered Catholicism, etc.), the theology of Vatican II itself seems to be more and more a guest in its own house. But without a theology of Vatican II supporting those advancements, they could have a very short life.

This is a problem not just for Vatican II theologians. It is a problem for a healthy sense of the tradition that we do not want to fall in the denial of historical development as a Catholic form of receiving God’s Revelation. But it is a problem also for those progressives who think Vatican II is *passé*, in the no-man’s land between the Middle Ages and post-modernity, and that conciliar teaching is an *adiaphoron*, something neither forbidden nor required, because they have embraced social justice Catholicism. In other words, a *non-Vatican II* or *a-Vatican II* theology could put in danger those same social-political issues (especially diversity and inclusion) about which the Catholic theological academic establishment cares deeply about.

The question is: how sustainable are the post-Vatican II advancements in our understanding of the Gospel, without a firm anchoring in Vatican II itself? What happened in the last few years, during the pontificate of pope Francis especially in the Catholic Church in the USA, has something to tell us.

Massimo Faggioli