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How Novel Was Vatican II?

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The Second Vatican Council is recognised by the Roman Catholic Church as the twenty-first ecumenical council. The largest in terms of participants and one of the longest-running, it also covered the widest range of topics and produced the largest volume of documents and decrees. This article, based on the text of the ninth Lyndwood Lecture, examines a number of characteristics of Vatican II in comparison with previous councils, arguing that, while in many ways Vatican II was novel, in its composition, agenda, influence and reception one can discern parallels with past councils back as far as the first ecumenical council at Nicea in 325.[1]

Keywords: ecumenical councils, Vatican II, Roman Catholic Church

In the list of councils traditionally recognised as ecumenical by the Roman Catholic Church (see the appendix to this article), Vatican II comes as the twenty-first and last, so far. This simple statement requires some unpacking. The word 'ecumenical' comes from the Greek for house, 'oikos', and so by extension refers to the whole 'housed' or 'inhabited' world. Ecumenical councils, accordingly, are those representing the whole Christian community worldwide. Seven councils are recognised as ecumenical by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches and usually – though with less emphasis as to their binding authority – by the Protestant Churches of the Reformation: Nicea I in 325, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, Constantinople II and III, and Nicea II in 787. The eighth is the controversial Constantinople IV. The remaining thirteen, from Lateran I (1123) to Vatican II, are recognised as ecumenical by the Catholic Church but not by the Orthodox and Protestant Churches, coming as they do after the beginning of the East–West schism in 1054. Some Catholics prefer to call the councils of the second millennium 'general' rather than 'ecumenical' councils.

1 This article is the text of the ninth Lyndwood Lecture, delivered on 4 October 2012 under the auspices of the Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland and the Ecclesiastical Law Society. A substantially similar text, with the same title, was published in the journal *Asian Horizons: Dharmaram Journal of Theology*, vol 6, no 3 (September 2012), and was subsequently given as a lecture at the Conference on Vatican II that was held at Dharmaram College, Bangalore, India, 31 January–3 February 2013. To accompany the present article, and for fuller context, readers may find helpful Norman Tanner's most recent book, *New Short History of the Catholic Church* (London and New York, 2011).

Vatican II comes, therefore, as the latest in the long and venerable list of councils traditionally recognised as ecumenical by the Catholic Church. Here there is continuity rather than novelty. But within this continuity there are several remarkable features.

NUMBERS

First, the size and worldwide nature of Vatican II. At any given time during the four years 1962–1965, there were some 2,500 full members (sometimes called 'fathers') of the council, principally the bishops of the Church. Vatican I, the next largest, numbered some 700 members. Moreover, while all five continents were represented at Vatican I, the bishops were largely of European extraction; at Vatican II, in contrast, the other four continents were much more fully represented with indigenous bishops.

Yet paradoxically (if you like playing with numbers) Vatican II was, in a sense, the least representative of the ecumenical councils. How so? At the first ecumenical council, Nicea I in 325, there were present some 250 bishops – 318 according to the traditional number – representing a total Christian population estimated at around 20 million: approximately one representative for every 80,000 Christians. At Lateran IV in 1215, when the Catholic population stood at around 50 million, several hundred bishops and other members participated; and over 200 at Trent (1545–1563) when the Catholic population approached 70 million. The French bishops at Vatican I estimated that the world's population stood at around 1.2 billion, of whom 200 million were Catholics.[2] In 2010, according to the official Vatican statistics,[3] Catholics numbered 1,166 million out of a total world population of some 7 billion. Even allowing for a smaller figure in 1962–1965 than 2010, it looks as though Vatican I was more representative of the Catholic population – numerically – than Vatican II.

MEN AND WOMEN

In terms of gender, Vatican II remained largely a male preserve. The bishops and other full members were all men. Altogether, 23 women were invited to attend the council as Auditors (observers). They and other women who were consulted on particular decrees played some minor role in the composition of the decrees; their story was written up by Carmel McEnroy.[4] This female contribution may have been greater at Vatican II than at Vatican I, Trent and the mediaeval councils. However, it does not compare with the role of two women at the

2 *Collectio Lacensis*, vol 7, cols 845–846.
3 *The Tablet*, 27 February 2010, p 31.
4 C McEnroy, *Guests in their own house: the women of Vatican II*, (New York, 1996).

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councils of the first millennium. Empress Pulcheria played a crucial role in the summoning and conduct of the Council of Chalcedon, which gave the Church its long-lasting teaching on Christ's divinity and humanity; Empress Irene played a similarly crucial role at Nicea II, which established the Church's teaching in support of religious art.

INFLUENCES BEYOND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

In terms of direct influence, Vatican II was more open than most previous councils to the Christian community beyond the Catholic Church. The council invited various Christian churches and communities to send representatives as 'Observers', who attended the conciliar debates in St Peter's church even while they did not vote on the decrees. The response of the Lutheran and Anglican Churches was especially positive and their representatives made significant contributions to several decrees, most notably that on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*. Some Muslims were important, in a more informal way, in persuading the council to extend the decree on Judaism to cover other world religions. As a result, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are all treated individually in the final decree on non-Christian religions, *Nostra aetate*. By comparison, Lutherans were invited to the Council of Trent and, rather more successfully, Orthodox representatives were invited to the mediaeval councils of Lyons II and Florence.

In terms of indirect influence, Vatican II finds itself alongside most of the major ecumenical councils in that it was deeply influenced by developments beyond the Catholic Church. That is to say, most of the ecumenical councils of the first millennium, as well as Trent in the sixteenth century, had to respond to doctrinal and disciplinary teachings that were ruled incompatible with Catholicism. Some of the challenges came from Christians who were judged heterodox, others came from outside the Christian world. As a result of these various challenges, there was doctrinal development or clarification within the Catholic Church. In the case of Vatican II, the development and clarification came about through internal digestion rather than through condemnations such as occurred in the early councils and at Trent, but it was very real nonetheless. It is to be found in varying degrees in almost all the sixteen decrees of Vatican II, most notably in those on the liturgy, Eastern Catholic Churches, ecumenism, non-Christian religions, religious freedom and the Church in the modern world.

LENGTH AND STYLE OF DOCUMENTS

The sixteen documents of Vatican II – distinguished, in descending order of authority, into four 'constitutions', nine 'decrees' and three 'declarations',

though usually called generically 'decrees' – run to some 125,000 words. The decrees of Trent, the next most lengthy ecumenical council in terms of word count, run to somewhat less than half this figure. The invention of printing in the West, in the late fifteenth century, permitted these much longer documents. Indeed the texts of Vatican II, in words, amount to twice the length of all the first seven councils taken together.

The topics covered in Vatican II's sixteen decrees were very wide-ranging, as their titles indicate: liturgy, mass media, the Church, Eastern Catholic Churches, ecumenism, bishops, religious orders, priestly formation, education, non-Christian religions, revelation, the laity, religious freedom, missions, priests, the Church today. By contrast, some previous ecumenical councils focused on one or two issues that were particularly controversial at the time: Ephesus on Mary's title of Theotokos, Nicea II on religious art, Vatican I on the relationship between faith and reason and on papal authority. Other councils, however, were similar to Vatican II in considering a wide range of issues: Trent covered a very wide range of doctrinal and disciplinary issues in dispute between Catholics and Protestants; Lateran IV issued 70 decrees that were wide-ranging in their treatment of Catholic practices.

Perhaps the council that most parallels Vatican II in combining concern for both doctrine and lifestyle is Nicea I: thus the latest ecumenical council parallels the first. Vatican II had plenty of concern for doctrine – rebutting those who claim that it was 'merely' a pastoral council – as instanced by its 'Dogmatic' constitutions on the Church and on revelation, as well as by plenty of doctrinal teaching in other decrees. At the centre of Nicea I, correspondingly, lies the doctrinal creed that forms the basis of the 'Nicene creed', the profession of faith that is recited at Mass on most Sundays. But Nicea I also promulgated twenty disciplinary canons, which address a wide range of practical issues facing the early Church. These canons parallel, in more succinct form, the teaching of Vatican II on many moral and pastoral issues confronting Catholics in the late twentieth century.

I have emphasised Vatican II's similarity with Nicea I because some participants at Vatican II, as well as many commentators subsequently, have pointed to the dangerous novelty of Vatican II in entering the shifting sands of transient practice rather than keeping to moral principles of absolute value and unchanging formulation. But these critics may be in a time warp, thinking only of the two councils before Vatican II, namely Vatican I and Trent, which did indeed treat practical issues in a largely timeless fashion. They forget the councils of the early and mediaeval Church, which legislated on many practical issues in a manner that was consciously provisory and never intended to be invariable in every detail for all time. In this way, both Vatican II and these earlier councils had the courage to help Christians with advice and instruction on many pressing problems of their age.

DIVISIONS WITHIN THE COUNCIL

There were significant differences within Vatican II between the large majority of fathers who were broadly – even enthusiastically – in favour of the decrees that eventually emerged and a small minority who had serious reservations about them. Such divisions show both novelty and normality in comparison with other ecumenical councils.

Internal divisions were most apparent in the councils of the first millennium. Some bishops were opposed to the Nicene creed of 325; a substantial group of bishops left Constantinople I rather than accept the proposed teaching on the Holy Spirit; Chalcedon began with the trial and deposition of one of its most prominent members, Bishop Dioscorus of Alexandria; Nicea II had to be convoked twice on account of divisions between iconophiles and iconoclasts. In contrast, most of the mediaeval councils give an appearance of unanimity partly because voting was normally by acclamation rather than by individual voting. Trent saw differences between those who sought to incorporate the better elements of Reformation teaching and those who were adamantly opposed to accommodation, but the conciliar decrees were eventually approved unanimously. Vatican I saw a split between the majority in favour of the proclamation of papal infallibility and a sizeable minority who opposed the definition or thought it inopportune, though in the final voting only two fathers voted against the definition and they quickly accepted the result as did the substantial number of fathers who had absented themselves from the final voting.

Despite the differences of outlook among the fathers of Vatican II, their final voting was overwhelmingly in favour of the conciliar decrees. Moreover, all the fathers accepted them when they were formally promulgated by Pope Paul VI at the end of the council. Only later did Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre break from this unanimity and lead a small community into partial rejection of the council. This unanimity is very remarkable and something for which we can be hugely grateful. It puts Vatican II alongside Vatican I and Trent and in contrast to some councils of the early Church that resulted in long-lasting and damaging schisms.

This unanimity at Vatican II was due both to the good sense of the fathers and to the skill and accommodation of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI in their conduct of the council. Some felt that Paul VI accommodated the minority too much, over-fearful that the so-called conservatives might reject the decrees and a schism would result.

REJECTION OF THE DRAFT DECREES

The dramatic first weeks of the council, in October 1962, saw the assembly reject the seventy decrees that had been drafted by the preparatory commissions. As a

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result, the council had to begin again more or less from scratch and it took four years, rather than the ten weeks originally planned, to conclude the council. The sixteen decrees that eventually emerged contained many of the themes that were to be found in the seventy draft documents, but the tone and presentation as well as much of the material was substantially different.

This rejection of the prepared programme was unique in the history of the Church's ecumenical councils. Strife in the early councils was rather different. It was not that a clearly prepared programme was turned down; rather there was controversy as the council gradually composed its decrees. Much the same could be said of those mediaeval councils which proved contentious. Trent lasted a long time because extensive decrees had to be composed more or less from scratch, not because decrees that had been drafted before the council were rejected.

The draft decrees were prepared for Vatican II with the backing of the highest authority, namely Pope John XXIII. The pope had established ten preparatory commissions, led largely by the leading personalities of the Roman Curia, to compose draft decrees for the council. But Pope John did not indicate a precise agenda for the council, so the preparatory commissions were working somewhat in the dark. They did their best in the circumstances. A questionnaire was sent to members of the forthcoming council and to some institutions, such as Catholic universities, soliciting their proposals. The responses made various suggestions but, unsurprisingly, they did not indicate a clear programme for the council.

It is surely to the credit of the council that it was able to alter course quite radically, to accommodate the new mood that became apparent soon after the council convened. Pope John navigated these early stages of the council with great skill. He accepted the rejection of the draft documents and went some way towards preparing the ground for the new decrees that would eventually emerge. Likewise Pope Paul VI acted with great skill in leading the council to its successful conclusion. Credit all round? Well, one should not exaggerate. Some in the conservative minority, including some members of the Roman Curia, remained uneasy about the outcome of the council and made its reception difficult.

RECEPTION

The continuing relevance of Vatican II comes as no surprise. The modernity and comprehensiveness of its sixteen decrees effectively guaranteed the long-term vitality of the council. It has proved a doctrinal and pastoral lodestar for the Roman Catholic Church, and indeed for the wider Christian community, for the last half-century and it looks set to remain so for some time to come. As an 'event' too, with such worldwide participation and interest, the council contributed greatly to the Catholic Church's impact upon the modern world.

The difficulty of Vatican II's reception may be interpreted as both good and disappointing. Other major councils, such as Nicea I or Chalcedon, had laboured receptions precisely because of the importance and challenging nature of their teaching. So too with Vatican II. But this council also witnessed obstruction, which was disappointing and hindered the council's effectiveness and the unity of the Church. Some were uneasy with the results of the council, as mentioned earlier, and were half-hearted in implementing the decrees. Others were irresponsible in their enthusiasm for the council and pressed for measures that went beyond its teaching. The danger of polarisation within the Catholic church remains; indeed, it seems to have increased in the last two decades.

A particular difficulty was that the council, in emphasising the importance of decentralisation and local initiative within the Church, rendered the implementation of the decrees somewhat haphazard. In this respect Vatican II differed from other major councils – such as Lateran IV or Trent – which expected and received much more direct implementation by the papacy and Roman Curia. Vatican II's decrees, moreover, were long and somewhat discursive in style, so interpretation of them, and of how much weight should be given to particular phrases and sections, could vary considerably. Even so, there are some advantages. A council that is too much imposed from above can lead to lasting imbalances and resentments. Vatican II has certainly taken time to digest, but the lasting results may be all the more fruitful.

ANOTHER COUNCIL SOON?

It may be tempting to want another ecumenical council to tie up the loose ends of Vatican II and to produce fruits for the twenty-first century. My own sentiments are cautious. We have not yet properly digested Vatican II and it is dangerous to force results before they are ripe. We tend to think that all ecumenical councils have been successful and so forget those that went awry. Ephesus II in 449 and Hieria in 753 were thought by many at the time to be genuine ecumenical councils but were later judged to have issued heterodox decrees and so were disowned by the Church. Even among those that have retained their ecumenical status, such as Constantinople II in 553 or Vienne in 1311–1312, the Church might have been better without some of their more abrasive decrees.

Nobody except Pope John XXIII seems to have been thinking of a new council when he convoked Vatican II in January 1959. Although he gave some reasons for calling the council, he emphasised above all that he felt impelled by the Holy Spirit. So too for the next ecumenical council, while human factors are surely important, divine inspiration remains paramount.

APPENDIX: LIST OF ECUMENICAL COUNCILS ACCORDING TO THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Nicea I (325)
Constantinople I (381)
Ephesus (431)
Chalcedon (451)
Constantinople II (553)
Constantinople III (680–681)
Nicea II (787)
Constantinople IV (869–870)
Lateran I (1123)
Lateran II (1139)
Lateran III (1179)
Lateran IV (1215)
Lyons I (1245)
Lyons II (1274)
Vienne (1311–1312)
Constance (1414–1418)
Basel–Florence (1431–1445)
Lateran V (1512–1517)
Trent (1545–1563)
Vatican I (1869–1870)
Vatican II (1962–1965)

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