

December Book Recommendation

Summary by Dan Brent

What Happened at Vatican II by John W. O'Malley, (Belknap-Harvard, 2008, \$29.95).

If you were one of the (now seniors) people who relished the Xavier Rynne articles on Vatican II published in the *New Yorker* magazine in the early 1960's, you'd love this book! For others, it's a fascinating historical account of the infighting that shaped the documents of the Council and the Catholic ecclesiology and practice as we know it today.

Sides quickly formed at the first of the four sessions of the Council. "Liberal" bishops who hoped for profound changes were startled to discover that they were the majority – and by a very wide margin! The "conservative" bishops found themselves vastly outnumbered. Final votes typically were in the neighborhood of 2100 to 50.

Each session lasted for about three months in the fall. Imagine trying to run a meeting of 2400 men – each used to being deferred to in his own arena. "Maximos IV led the small, tight-knit group from the Melkite church that had an impact on the council well beyond their numbers." (p.124) Lay people (including women) and representatives of other faith traditions were invited to be observers.

The pope himself attended only the formal proclamation sessions. But insiders from both the conservative and the liberal groups of bishops beat paths to the pope's quarters constantly during the sessions. The mechanics for controlling the agenda, the debates, and the votes were poorly constructed but were made to work. The drafting was done behind the scenes. Documents were shaped by the oral arguments, written suggestions, the input of theological experts (*periti*), and occasionally manipulation by the pope. Pope John XXIII died in 1962 after the first session. He was succeeded by the ambivalent Paul VI who was prone to vacillate between keeping his hands off and wanting to control the Council. Paul was so cautious that he withheld three topics from the bishops: clerical celibacy, birth control, and reform of the Curia.

Seats for the Council fathers and observers were set up in the main area of St. Peter's Basilica. Each morning began with mass which was followed by business: presentation of document drafts, speeches for or against, and preliminary votes. The afternoons were used for study, consultation, drafting and redrafting documents, and meetings of committee groups or national conferences.

An aside. Bishop Lawrence Casey was Rochester's auxiliary bishop at the time of the Council. He attended all four sessions (1962-65). The ordinary, Bishop Kearney, was in poor health and attended only the first couple weeks of Vatican II. Bishop Casey's friends say that he went to Rome expecting to rubber stamp a few Curial documents and get quickly back to work in Rochester. In fact, he became totally engrossed in the proceedings, got an updated and intensive reeducation in theology, and returned to Rochester very excited about the new vernacular liturgies, the sharing of ministries with lay people, and the democratization of church decision making.

There were at the council, the author documents, three key issues that ran as undercurrents to the Council's decisions. One was a return to the outlooks that shaped early Christianity. The Council fathers were especially anxious to shed the anti-Protestant defensiveness of the Council of Trent. But Curia cardinals were fearful that any changes in anything risked sending a message to the faithful that the enduring church and its teachings were, in the end, changeable. "In fact, 'development of doctrine was *the* issue under all issues' according to John Courtney Murray." (p.39)

A second issue was the contentious question about authority in the church. A majority of the bishops wanted to articulate a collegial spirit in the church's administration with local bishops and national conferences of bishops receiving much expanded powers. The minority – led by the cardinals of the Curia (the pope's bureaucracy) – wanted to protect and expand the pope's authority over the church. Papal power had soared to historic heights with the proclamation of infallibility at the Vatican I Council. This conservative minority also wanted to protect the status quo lest any Catholic think that long-held convictions of the church appear to be subject to change, suggesting past mistakes.

The third undercurrent related to what the author calls "style" or "visions" for Catholicism. The majority of the participating bishops wanted to move the church "from commands to invitations, from laws to ideals, from definition to mystery, from threats to persuasion, from coercion to conscience, from monologue to dialogue, from ruling to serving, from exclusion to inclusion, from suspicion to trust." (p.307)

Great, great effort was made throughout the Council to create consensus for the positions it would take. This required the liberal majority to work constantly with the vastly outnumbered conservative minority of bishops. Resolution of issues was often delayed, but nuances built into drafts as compromises often made for stronger documents.

O'Malley gives a short history of past councils. And then he notes the dramatic change in the style of Vatican II. "It issued no canons, no anathemas, no verdicts of 'guilty as charged'. In so speaking it marked a significant break with past councils." (p.45)

The Council defined the church as "the people of God" and emphasized the centrality of our call to holiness. It encouraged more prominence for the scriptures and more active roles for laity. It tore down walls to ecumenism. It described the church as more mother than disciplinarian. It established the permanent diaconate and allowed married men to be included in it. It took the side of religious liberty and spoke to the supremacy of conscience as opposed to the old position that "error has no rights." It emphasized the relationship dimension of marriage, downplaying some the reproductive responsibility.

Paul VI, John-Paul II, and now Benedict XVI have in some measure put brakes on the "liberal" momentum of Vatican II. Benedict, for example, has moved to encourage revival of the Latin mass. But their own basic premise (We never make a mistake that we need to change) makes it awkward for them to roll back the decisions of the Council. So we live and worship now in a Vatican II church.