

Introduction to *Dei Filius* and Theology Today

ANDREW MESZAROS
St Patrick's Pontifical University
Maynooth, Ireland

The pandemic year of 2020 quickly torpedoed the modest intentions of formally reflecting on the contemporary significance of *Dei Filius* on its 150th anniversary. Nevertheless, the year's delay proved providential: in holding an online symposium, "*Dei Filius* and Theology Today," on April 22–24, 2021, the symposium was able to reach more participants than could have realistically travelled to Ireland, and was able to end on April 24, the same day Pius IX promulgated the constitution 151 years ago.¹

In what follows, I lay out briefly the rationale for the commemoration and the publication of its proceedings.

The "Spirit of Vatican I"

Perhaps the most consistently disputed theological issue of the last fifty years has been the correct interpretation of the Second Vatican Council. The dispute is often but inaccurately pitched as a tension between the spirit and the letter of the Council. While such a distinction is valid (for one cannot hold that the Council's meaning is utterly exhausted by its texts, nor can one simply collapse the spirit into the text), and while debates over the interpretation of a council in its aftermath is not unique in the history

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of the Church, and while it is not uncommon for historians to attribute something equivalent to a “spirit” or ethos to a given period in the history of the Church, it is noteworthy that few if any contemporary Catholic scholars (whether historians, philosophers, or theologians) seek to identify the “spirit of Vatican I,” let alone do so in order to establish an ecclesiastical program or stake out a “direction” in which to move. Indeed, what would such a “spirit of Vatican I” look like?

For some the spirit of Vatican I might best be encapsulated by the episcopal motto of Vatican II’s killjoy, Cardinal Ottaviani: *semper idem*—“always the same.” In that motto we find, allegedly, all the close-minded, ahistorical rigidity and complacency that Vatican II’s spirit of openness, *aggiornamento*, and reform tried to overcome. Such a caricature of both Councils, however, seems to violate the hermeneutical principle taught by the bishops gathered at the extraordinary synod of 1985, for any *aggiornamento* or reform that moves outside established tradition is an *aggiornamento* or reform that separates the spirit from the letter of the Council.

In the same way, it is not legitimate to separate the spirit and the letter of the [Second Vatican] Council. Moreover, the Council must be understood in continuity with the great tradition of the Church, and at the same time we must receive light from the Council’s own doctrine for today’s Church and the men of our time. The Church is one and the same throughout all the councils.²

An erroneous understanding of a conciliar spirit as an ecclesiastical license for a theological free-for-all might cause one to question the language of “spirit” in relation to a council. But this statement by the bishops suggests that there is a legitimate (and illegitimate) way of attributing a “spirit” to a council. Rightly understood, the spirit of any council is an ethos or shared disposition, catalyzed by that council, according to which the Church seeks to move forward on her pilgrim journey through history—the *temps de l’église*—which will come to a halt only at the second coming of the Son. (One might say that history’s councils are the smaller events that help guide the Church in her mission to communicate the fruits that stem from the ultimate event of salvation history: namely, the dual sending of the Son and the Spirit.) Their doctrinal teaching must be safeguarded (1 Tm 6:20) and their practical directives implemented. It is an ethos, stemming from

² *The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod*, no. 5, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/final-report-of-the-1985-extraordinary-synod-2561>.

a particular historical event, that moves individuals and the Church as a whole to accomplish these tasks in accord with that event.³

To the extent that a council addresses a variety of concerns, both temporal and eternal, the spirit of any council will involve contextually dependent and temporary stimuli (e.g., the Lateran Councils' spirit of reform in relation to clerical abuse), and more perennial stimuli (e.g., the first four councils' spirit of guarding the deposit delivered once and for all to the saints, or Trent's spirit of reform, and Vatican II's spirit of Christian unity). There are, then, elements of a conciliar spirit that transcend the historical-contextual "moment" because they pertain to Christian truth. While addressing a specific disciplinary problem might be relevant only to a particular time and place, the preservation of the deposit and the unity of the Church are values integral to the Church at all times, not simply during a particular era.

With this brief consideration of what a conciliar spirit amounts to, we return to the question posed earlier. How would one characterize the spirit of Vatican I? I would submit an alternative "spirit of Vatican I": one that is consonant with the texts *Dei Filius* and *Pastor Aeternus*, but is not reducible to them because it presupposes the entire Catholic Tradition behind it. This spirit can be expressed as "holding fast to the God who speaks" or to supernatural revelation. The theology of Vatican I was concerned to show how right understandings of reason, faith, and revelation all hang together, with implications for the disciplines of theology and philosophy, and ecclesiological implications for the authority with which the Church teaches. Mark McGrath expresses this well:

The core of the whole question is the motive of faith. If we grant that revealed truths come from God and must be accepted on His authority, then the basic principle of rationalism (the rejection of all authority outside of reason) is destroyed, the infallible magisterium bestowed upon the Church by God must be accepted, and it is she, not reason, which determines the truths we must believe. Granted the motive of faith, or the formal object, the truths of faith, or the material object, are made secure. In other words, there will never be

³ Elsewhere, I have argued that keeping the spirit and the letter of a council together means that the "conciliar texts are the minimal negative measure of subsequent theological and pastoral development." One cannot implement a council by contradicting or ignoring what is affirmed in the texts. Andrew Meszaros, "Vatican II as Theological Event and Text according to Yves Congar," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 22, no. 1–2 (2015): 78–92, at 91.

any danger of false evolutions of dogma if our faith rests truly upon the authority of God and of His Church; but there will always be if our faith (not its proemia, but faith itself) rests upon any merely human reason.⁴

In short, *Dei Filius* is the Church's dogmatic reaffirmation of the supernatural order. To reduce the spirit of Vatican I to "papal supremacy" or "ecclesial centralization" is to miss the deeper point: ecclesial authority derives from *God speaking*. If there is no divine revelation given to a visible community (i.e., if what we call "divine revelation" is simply a human construct), then that visible community requires no divinely assisted visible center of unity that assists it in preserving revelation from the tumults of human innovation and infidelity. Ecclesial authority, then, is at the service of maintaining the object of faith *as divinely revealed*. What makes *Pastor Aeternus* necessary is the teaching contained in *Dei Filius*. While it would take another symposium to begin to unpack that statement, the assertion itself merits consideration and suggests the importance of commemorating *Dei Filius* on its 150th anniversary.

Why Study *Dei Filius*?

Conciliar hermeneutics also determines the relative attention we give to *Dei Filius* (DF). In contemporary discussions on revelation, faith, faith and reason, and doctrinal development (to mention only some), DF is at times understood to be irrelevant, the obsolete and displaced utterance on the matter. We infer this from its absence from texts where one might expect a reference to it. Worse, DF can become the negative foil against which subsequent teaching is juxtaposed. Accordingly, DF is not enhanced or embellished by subsequent Tradition, but surpassed by it.⁵

This is lamentable because many of the intellectual ills we face today were also, in general terms, faced by Vatican I. Though reform and an update of discipline were not absent from Vatican I's agenda, there was a consensus that, while there was no particular or single heresy of the day, a general

⁴ Mark G. McGrath, *The Vatican Council's Teaching on the Evolution of Dogma* (Rome: Pontificium Athenaeum Internationale Angelicum, 1960), 121.

⁵ This tendency is by no means universal. Many instructors teach *Dei Filius* in their classes, and many a good theological text appeal to the Constitution at crucial moments. See, e.g.: Guy Mansini, *Fundamental Theology*, Sacra Doctrina (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018); Frederick C. Bauerschmidt and James J. Buckley, *Catholic Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

rationalism and its consequent denial of the supernatural order required some ecclesial response because, with them, erroneous interpretations of Catholic doctrine proliferated. As much of the material that this response would work with was already familiar to the drafters through previous magisterial interventions—interventions to which they themselves were privy or in which they might have had a hand—the Council fathers had the advantage of not having to be overly creative, but could rather be selective and prioritize issues in such a way that would allow for the most coherent and effective presentation of the Catholic faith. While the document bears its nineteenth-century imprint, its perennial content, coupled with the thoughtfulness that went into its drafting, renders it worth our attention today. Dom Cuthbert Butler, writing between the Vatican Councils, even went so far as to aver that, far from it being a second-fiddle constitution thrown hastily together in order to get on to the real business of papal infallibility,

perhaps never in the history of the world has any legislative act been subjected to a discussion more free, or a sifting more thorough, or a criticism more searching, or a weighing of objections more painstaking, or a transformation more complete, than found place in this Vatican dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic faith.⁶

The first schemas that attempted to summarize and respond to nineteenth-century errors, taking Pius IX's *Syllabus* as a cue, but in the form of a dogmatic constitution, came from the pen of Austrian Jesuit Johann Baptist Franzelin (1816–1886), a member of the pre-synodal commission. The second of Franzelin's schemas was the first to be discussed at Council, entitled *De doctrina catholica contra multiplices errores*. The shortcoming of Franzelin's draft was not substantive but stylistic: it began with a condemnation and erred on the side of thoroughness, explicitly condemning materialism, pantheism, rationalism (chs. 1–2), and treating revelation, its sources, and necessity (chs. 3–5), matters concerning faith and credibility (chs. 6–9), the right relationship between faith and human science (ch. 10), and the immutability of dogmatic meaning held by the Church (ch. 11); the rest of the schema amounted to a summary of orthodox Catholic teaching on doctrines which had been denied or deformed

⁶ Dom Cuthbert Butler, *The Vatican Council: The Story Told from Inside in Bishop Ullathorne's Letters*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (London: Longmans and Green, 1936 [originally 1930]), 1:187.

by nineteenth-century (semi-)rationalism: God (ch. 12), the Trinity (ch. 13), Christ (ch. 14), human nature (ch. 15), the supernatural state of original justice (ch. 16), original sin and its consequences (ch. 17), and the supernatural order of grace gained by Christ's redemptive work (ch. 18). The schema ran more than fifteen columns, not counting Franzelin's explanatory notes.⁷

Franzelin's schema was deemed too long, too technical, at times abstruse, and lacking focus with its condemnation of bygone errors (rather than focusing on attacks on the foundations of the faith) and its lack of positive Church teaching from the beginning. Like *De fontibus revelationis* at Vatican II, *De doctrina catholica contra multiplices errores* was

sent out to the deputation de Fide to be remade: "mangled and pulled to pieces," and "bleeding in every limb," as [Bishop] Ullathorne put it. The fate of the schema came as a surprise to the theologians and the Curia and the Presidents and the Pope himself; it had been taken for granted that the prepared schemata would go through easily and quickly with little amendment; it was not anticipated that the bishops were going to take things so seriously.⁸

With this schema and task in hand, the Deputatio fidei went about creating a subcommission consisting of bishops Victor-Auguste-Isidor Deschamps (Malines), Louis-Édouard-François-Desiré Pie (Poitiers), and Konrad Martin (Paderborn), the last of whom chose one of the principal (and most well-informed) critics of nineteenth-century rationalism and fideism, and spearhead of the neo-Scholastic revival, the German Jesuit Josef Kleutgen (1811–1883), to do the lion's work of the schema's recasting.⁹

⁷ "Schema constitutionis dogmaticae de doctrina catholica contra multiplices errores ex rationalismo derivatos partum examine propositum," in *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (1759), ed. Ioannes Dominicus Mansi, vol. 50 (Leipzig: H. Welter, 1926), cols. 59–74. His *adnotationes* in the form of forty-three notes run through col. 119!

⁸ Butler, *Vatican Council*, 1:198.

⁹ As the bulk of philosophical errors stemmed from Germany, it was Martin who took the lead in the redrafting. Kleutgen was also an old friend of Martin's from their student years (see John O'Malley, *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontaine Church* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2018], 166–67). Kleutgen is perhaps most well known for his works *Die Philosophie der Vorzeit* and *Die Theologie der Vorzeit*. He was also instrumental in drafting *Pastor Aeternus* (1870) and *Aeterni Patris* (1879). Some of the rumors of Kleutgen's scandalous (and lurid) behavior have been confirmed. The most thorough but not always sober account of the scandal

Kleutgen's re-working of Franzelin's schema was radical only in appearance. Franzelin's original schema—four times as long as *Dei Filius*—was essentially distilled into a prologue, four chapters, and several canons for each chapter, following Trent's template. McGrath observes:

The doctrine [in Kleutgen's draft] remains the same [as in Franzelin's], and the return in the final formulation to some of Franzelin's phraseology, omitted in the first alteration of his schema, is proof that the Fathers and theologians kept his original schema before them during their subsequent deliberations.¹⁰

Given the gravity of the nineteenth-century context, it was crucial for the council fathers to craft a clear, coherent, and concise summary of the Catholic faith. Three drafts later, the final constitution, presented on April 12 and voted on and promulgated on the 24th, was the product of a thoughtful and meticulous process. Butler comments further:

Almost every word has had its special discussion, and consequent modification. It is so compact, that each sentence, however short, strikes at one or more errors or heresies, and the uninitiated will require a guide through them.¹¹

Herein lies yet another reason for these proceedings. They do not constitute a full-fledged commentary. Nor do the contributions in any way attempt to offer an exhaustive treatment of all the historical-contextual theological issues at stake in each chapter of *DF*. Rather, the contributions here serve as an introduction to the text that takes the reader beyond it into contemporary philosophical and theological issues. In short, they lay hold of the ongoing relevance of Vatican I's *Dei Filius* for philosophers and theologians today.

The interpretation of *Dei Filius*, like that of any conciliar text, is not always straightforward. The careful reader must identify what the Council fathers are teaching formally and what is included—whether authoritative

is Hubert Wolf's *The Nuns of Sant'Ambrogio: The True Story of a Convent in Scandal* (New York: Vintage, 2016). For a brief assessment of the affair that contains both honest acknowledgement and much-needed theological perspective, see Ulrich Lehner's helpful review of the book in "Prurient History," *First Things*, March 2020, [firstthings.com/article/2020/03/prurient-history](https://www.firstthings.com/article/2020/03/prurient-history).

¹⁰ McGrath, *The Vatican Council's Teaching*, 116.

¹¹ Butler, *The Vatican Council*, 1:300 (my emphasis).

doctrine or argumentation—alongside that formal teaching. Unlike the documents of Vatican II, however, *Dei Filius* has the virtue of the canons, which not only help explain the content of the text, but also indicate the formal intentions behind the text.

The Proceedings of the Symposium

The proceedings consist of seven contributions followed by the actual text of *DF* (in both Latin and Norman P. Tanner's English translation). First, Patrick Gorevan gives a general overview of the two intellectual extremes to which the Council—and *DF* in particular—was responding: (semi-)rationalism and fideism. The next three contributions are dedicated, one each, to the first three chapters of *DF*: Rudi te Velde offers an interpretation of *DF*'s teaching against pantheism in chapter I that simultaneously avoids a God–world dualism while maintaining the fundamental “distinction” between God and creation. Simon Gaine, O.P., reflects on chapter II's teaching on our natural and supernatural knowledge of God, its teaching on Tradition and Scripture and the latter's canonicity and inspiration, with pertinent attention to the meaning of *teneo*, showing that, unlike contemporary usage, the constitution's usage extends to both teachings *de fide* and so-called “secondary” objects of infallibility, thus requiring care in interpreting the contents of all that chapter II contains. Gaven Kerr shows how Cartesian anthropology issues in either rationalism or fideism and that the Catholic understanding of the act of faith found in chapter III, is founded on a fundamentally different anthropology.

The last three contributions are dedicated to different aspects of the longest chapter of *DF*, chapter IV. Cajetan Cuddy, O.P., identifies the unique feature of this chapter in its attention to both principles and objects, a distinction which establishes not only a twofold order of knowledge, but also the mutual but differentiated aid that faith and reason provide each other. Conor McDonough, O.P., examines theology in *DF* IV with particular attention to the discovery of the connections between the mysteries of faith (*nexus mysteriorum*). Finally, Andrew Meszaros argues that, far from being obsolete, the chapter's teaching on the development of dogma, with its appeal to St. Vincent of Lérins, is more relevant than ever in a theological climate permeated by neo-rationalism.

The topics of the contributions aim at capturing the spirit of Vatican I proposed here: the reaffirmation of the supernatural order. Read in this key, the way in which the seminal parts of the document hang together becomes clearer. There is no doctrinal development without theology that

explores the revealed mysteries of faith. There is no theology without reason illuminated by supernatural faith. There is no supernatural faith without a revealed object, and no revealed object without a God who reveals; and there is no God who reveals without God. That is why we, following the order of *Dei Filius*, proceed with reflections on (1) God, (2) revelation, (3) faith, (4) faith and reason, (5) theology, and (6) development.

The point of any commemoration is to recall, to mark, and to celebrate precisely with a view toward the present and the future. These proceedings are not definitive commentaries, but catalysts for *further* study. It is for this reason that a modest bibliography is appended to the end of the proceedings. As one reads the contributions, one will quickly notice that *DF*'s length and theological density are inversely related: despite the brevity of the constitution, there are many more issues to consider. There is more work to be done. N·V