

**Vatican II Then and Now:
A Review Essay on John O'Malley, S.J.'s
*What Happened at Vatican II***

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I

AS EVERYONE knows, there has been a vast number of books, articles, studies, memoirs, and the like published about Vatican Council II over the past nearly half a century since the Council first convened. Moreover, these voluminous but still rather scattered writings tend to reflect the differing ideas that emerged at the Council itself concerning what the Council itself was, and what it was supposed to be doing. There was in particular the rather dramatic split that occurred between “liberals” and “conservatives” among the Council Fathers and their supporters.

These terms, “liberal” and “conservative,” as applied to the two broad groupings or tendencies that quickly became manifest at the Council itself, are not exactly analogous to the way these same two terms are generally used in the political world; and it is only too true that people very often get the Church wrong by thinking of her or describing her as primarily a “political”-type entity—she is not that—and hence the use of these terms can be misleading in a Church context. The author under review here does not like them, for example, and prefers to use the terms “majority” and “minority” to describe the two great tendencies that were so evident at the Council. And his usage in this regard is certainly accurate enough for the years of the Council itself.

However, I nevertheless propose to use the two terms “liberal” and “conservative” anyway, since they describe accurately enough the tendencies they refer to. Nobody is going to mistake who I am talking about or what their attitudes and tendencies were, and the terms have the

merit of being applicable to the same tendencies that have persisted since the Council down to the present day.

Just as there were two major camps or tendencies at the Council itself then, so today Catholics continue to be divided in how they view Church affairs, including how they view the Council and its consequences, into the camps of “liberals” and “conservatives.”

Knowledgeable and well-instructed Catholics, of course, understand that the formal acts and decisions of an ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church, when ratified by a pope, become a permanent part of the patrimony of the Church and are binding upon the faithful—and, indeed, are guaranteed as far as faith and morals are concerned by the Holy Spirit, according to the Church’s traditional belief. Vatican Council II was the twenty-first in the long series of ecumenical councils sponsored by the Church over her long history, and hence the Council’s official acts do appropriately “bind” the faithful. Still, one’s opinions about a particular council, including this one, and about how well a particular council may have served the Church—or, in the specific case of Vatican II, about whether one considers it to have been a typical or conventional assembly whose primary meaning is still to be found in its formal acts and decisions, or an unprecedented, open-ended “event” whose “spirit” henceforth changed the course of the Church from what it had traditionally been—one’s opinions about these things can vary considerably. Throughout the entire post-conciliar period, in fact, Catholics have continued to be divided into liberals and conservatives with respect to these and other issues.

The writings that have been published on the Second Vatican Council are many and varied, but for a long time an up-to-date overall one-volume history of the Council has been conspicuously lacking. A reader wishing to acquire a general knowledge of “what happened” over the four years, 1962–1965, when the Council was in session, has been up to now pretty much thrown back on the original “instant” histories that first appeared as journalism while the Council was going on and then were collected into book form. I refer to such collections as the articles that appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine by Father Francis Xavier Murphy, writing under the pseudonym “Xavier Rynne,” which were then published as *Vatican Council II* (1968); or the articles by journalist Henri Fesquet that first appeared in the Parisian daily *Le Monde* and then appeared in book form under the title *The Drama of Vatican II* (1967). Then there was the short but very informative and readable book, *The Rhine Flows into the Tiber* (1967), by Father Ralph M. Wiltgen, S.V.D., who had operated a kind of news service at the Council. From the end of the

Council on, these have remained the kinds of books that enabled interested readers to acquire an overview of “what happened at Vatican II.”

Now comes Georgetown professor John W. O’Malley with a book bearing that very title. His aim, he declares, is to move beyond the partial approaches characteristic of much of the previous writing on the Council—approaches which he recognizes often stemmed from the theological or ideological biases of the writers of whatever camp or school of thought. His approach, however, he says, is to try “to arrive at generalizations about the Council grounded in its narrative contexts and in the vast expanse of the documentation it has left behind” (312).¹ He writes with an advantage that earlier writers did not enjoy, since he is able to draw upon the official documents of the Council, including its ante-preparatory and preparatory phases, which are now available to the historian in many hefty volumes.

O’Malley is able to mine these official sources, and he does so mostly in a competent enough manner, so it is possible to say that he has considered and weighed “the vast expanse” of the Vatican II documentation. He has accordingly produced a narrative which for the most part records what essentially did happen at the Council. This was something the earlier, “instant” historians were not able to achieve completely. They covered the Council as reporters on the spot, and their accounts emphasized the Council’s major actors and personalities and their interactions that they were witnessing personally; but they sometimes came up short in their understanding of *what* was taking place before their very eyes, or what its ultimate significance might be. Many questions remained unanswered and even mysterious at the time, which O’Malley is now sometimes able to explain from the official documents that have since become available.

Thus it must be conceded that he has produced a fairly good general account. I have been reading and writing and speaking about the Council for years, yet I learned new things from these pages. His account is understandably not quite as dramatic or interesting as the earlier journalistic accounts, which focused more on the Council Fathers themselves. In these earlier reportages, one found clear and expressive descriptions of such prelates as a Cardinal Leon-Joseph Suenens of Brussels or a Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV Saigh on the liberal side, or a Curia Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani or a tenacious Bishop Luigi Carli, of Segni, Italy, on the conservative side. These protagonists are mentioned in these pages too, of course, and O’Malley is sometimes able to bring forth new information about these and other Council Fathers; but his whole presentation is

¹ John W. O’Malley, S.J., *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

much more measured and focused on issues rather than on personalities than were the earlier “instant” histories. So while the reader is able to garner from these pages a more or less accurate account of what did happen at Vatican II, it is in some ways a rather bland and colorless account which does not generate the same excitement that the Council once did.

Of course, the subject of the Council is a vast one, and any historian aiming to provide an overview in one volume would necessarily have to pick and choose, as O’Malley has necessarily had to do.

II

While this book provides a more or less accurate account of the main lines of what happened at Vatican II, it must be noted that it is a decidedly *liberal* account. I think O’Malley sincerely tries to be objective, and to some extent he succeeds, but his apparent commitment to the liberal interpretation of the Council sometimes appears to prevent him from even realizing what true objectivity would consist of in the conciliar context. His liberal sympathies tend to come out perhaps more clearly in some of his asides than in his main narrative, but they are unmistakably present. Although his account never degenerates into the kind of cheerleading for the liberal bishops and conciliar *periti* that is found, for example, in Xavier Rynne’s account, where all of the mostly northern European progressive bishops are regularly depicted wearing white hats, while the benighted and reactionary Ottaviani-led conservatives are automatically awarded black hats, his sympathies nevertheless are pretty clearly evident most of the time. They are also especially to be seen in the way that he treats Pope Paul VI’s role at the Council, as compared with the adulatory way in which he, along with nearly all the writers in the liberal camp, treats Blessed Pope John XXIII, the pope who convoked the Council.

His liberal tendencies are further seen in some of the sources that he—sometimes uncritically—relies on. He regularly refers to and cites, for example, the five-volume history of the Council produced in several languages by the team headed by Bologna scholar Giuseppe Alberigo. The version of this work in English is the Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak edited *History of Vatican II* (1995–2006), published by the Maryknoll Order’s predominantly leftist Orbis Press—a publisher not always noted for strict adherence to the Church’s Magisterium, among other things.

With regard to this Alberigo/Komonchak opus, this reviewer has been engaged over the better part of the past year in translating a long, scholarly work by Italian Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, *Il Concilio Ecumenico*

Vaticano II, which will soon be published in English by the University of Scranton Press. In this work, the archbishop severely and effectively critiques the Alberigo thesis that Vatican II disrupted and departed from the Catholic tradition and, by means of what came to be called the famous “spirit of Vatican II,” amounted to a new departure for the Church in which elements once considered integral parts of the authentic Catholic tradition no longer necessarily hold.

According to this Alberigo way of thinking, the sixteen documents of Vatican II in which the Council’s acts and decisions are in fact enshrined, do not necessarily embody or express the ultimate meaning of the Council. Rather, it is the “event” of the Council itself—the “happening” that came about by the very fact that there was a Council convoked by Blessed John XXIII at all—as well, especially, as its famous “spirit,” which must be looked to in order to understand the ultimate meaning of the Council. The Alberigo thesis, in other words, represents a novel, tendentious, and fundamentally mistaken way of looking at the Council and its meaning for the authentic Catholic tradition. Archbishop Agostino Marchetto’s lengthy and detailed critique of the Alberigo school is really quite compelling.

John W. O’Malley, however, evidences not a hint in this book that he discerns anything untoward or amiss in the Alberigo interpretation of the Council. He quotes the work of Alberigo and his associates as if it truly represented the last word in historical research on Vatican II. While he himself states in words that the Council’s sixteen documents represent its “most authoritative and accessible legacy,” and while he does more or less describe what these documents generally contain, his heavy reliance on Alberigo-related sources tends to belie his words. He tends to treat the Council as an unprecedented, watershed “event” that supposedly changed the Church forever, for example, when he writes about the

two different visions of Catholicism: 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 withdrawn to integrated, from vertical to horizontal, from exclusion to inclusion, from hostility to friendship, from rivalry to partnership, from suspicion to trust, from static to on-going, from passive acceptance to active engagement, from fault-finding to active appreciation, from prescriptive to principled, from behavior modification to inner appropriation. (307)

Although the Council undeniably adopted some of the new methods and approaches mentioned here, particularly in how the faith might

henceforth be better presented to the world, this passage nevertheless represents a gross exaggeration of the new paths adopted by the Council, and is both simplistic and in a couple of ways flat-out wrong. The Council did *not*, for instance, abandon the “vertical” for the “horizontal,” any more than it abandoned “laws” for “ideals.” Or again, does this author seriously contend or believe that the pre-Vatican-II Church did *not* “serve,” or that she practiced “coercion”? Some of this is simply liberal mythology.

More than that, the author is uncritical generally of works he cites by dissenters from Catholic teaching. These people apparently continue to be valid “Catholic” sources, as far as he is concerned. He cites, for example, open dissenter Dr. John Marshall, a member of the Papal Birth Control Commission, as one of his main sources on that particular topic. On the same subject, he also turns to the tendentious book of Robert McClory. Using such sources is somewhat like citing Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid or House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in order to explain the reasons for the Iraq War.

Why does he make no reference, for example, to the work of another Papal Birth Control Commission member, namely, the late Monsignor George A. Kelly, who thoroughly treated this very same question in his *Battle for the American Church* (1979)? Indeed, Monsignor Kelly also superbly treated a number of the other Vatican II issues covered by O’Malley in what should have been considered a thoroughly mainstream book based on fundamental research and documentation and published by Doubleday. Nevertheless, Monsignor Kelly’s *Battle*, like a number of other solid conservative sources, is nowhere to be found among the “vast expanse” of Vatican II research that O’Malley cites. It is as if the Vatican II writings from this perspective did not exist.

It is not clear from the text whether O’Malley himself is an avowed and open dissenter from Catholic magisterial teaching; but he definitely seems to be what we might call a doctrinal “minimalist,” in that he regularly accepts as valid the testimony of sources who themselves do not accept Catholic teaching *in toto*, and, in some cases, openly dissent from it. It is true, of course, that the American bishops themselves in the post-conciliar era have generally been willing to tolerate such doctrinal minimalists, and sometimes even outright dissenters, generally allowing them to remain “in good standing” in the Church without correction or rebuke—thus inevitably giving the impression that minimalist and even dissenting positions can now somehow pass as acceptable “Catholic” positions. It might be asked why, if the bishops, the official teachers in the Church, can turn a blind eye to positions that fail to reflect the authentic faith, a mere historian should be expected to identify and label as what

they are positions that depart from Catholic teaching. The answer is that the historian, by virtue of his research and study, should *know* that some of the positions he encounters are not in accord with what the Church teaches—what the Council taught—and that same historian therefore has an obligation to the truth to say this plainly.

However that may be, it is unfortunate—indeed it is something of a minor catastrophe—that this most recent and otherwise largely competent contemporary overview of the history of Vatican II should have been influenced to the extent that it apparently has been by the Alberigo school and by other dissenting voices. This is the kind of book that public libraries will stock as authoritative on its subject, and that average readers in search of general knowledge will pick up. I myself checked the book out of the public library in order to read it. It may well be the version of conciliar history that the present generation will turn to for some time to come. But it is not a version that presents the Council—and the Catholic faith—completely, accurately, and authentically. Rather, readers will continue to get the unfortunately now standard liberal presentation.

III

Moreover, the problem with this author is not limited to his using or citing sources that are questionably not always accurately or authentically Catholic. He himself espouses some views that are themselves questionable. We need to take note, for example, of what he takes to be the Council's position on "conscience." He claims that the Council gave "primacy . . . to conscience over ecclesiastical authority," and he writes that "in the last analysis the Council affirmed that the moral norm that everybody is obliged to obey is their own conscience."

This is not the case. First of all, conscience, by itself, is in no way a "moral norm." This seems to be a notion that the author may have picked up from some of his questionable sources. Furthermore, the "primacy" that the Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*, gives to conscience has to do with "freedom from coercion in civil society. . . . [No one may be forced] to act contrary to his conscience" (*DH* §1, 3). The Declaration precisely *does not* free conscience from "obedience to ecclesiastical authority." On the contrary, the Council's most significant statement about conscience teaches that:

in forming their consciences the faithful must pay careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ and, at the

same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself (*DH* §14).

This same Vatican II document further specifies that “all men are *bound* to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and his Church, and to embrace and to hold it” (*DH* §1; emphasis added); and it further states that “it leaves intact the *moral duty* of individuals and societies towards the true religion and the one Church of Christ” (*ibid.*).

Thus O'Malley gets it wrong about Vatican II and conscience, and, in contrast to what the Council does say about conscience here, as we have just quoted it, he rather lamely writes that “in forming . . . moral judgments, individuals must give *proper consideration* to the teachings of the Church” (emphasis added). Only “proper consideration”? When the Council plainly characterizes the teachings of the Church as “sacred and certain” and to which the faithful must pay careful attention?

What we apparently have here, along with this author's idea that conscience is some kind of a “moral norm,” while the faithful in forming their consciences are only supposed to give “proper consideration” to the Church's teaching, is substantially the same erroneous position espoused by the theological dissenters from Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, who quite effectively managed to indoctrinate a whole generation and more of Catholics in the idea that they could just make up their own minds about birth control; no longer were they “bound” by Church teaching; they only had to give it “proper consideration,” which is to say, not much serious consideration at all, since it was supposedly no longer actually binding.

This erroneous view of conscience and of what Church teaching requires of the faithful is the situation we are essentially still living with in the Church today. But it surely does *not* go back to any teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Rather, it seems to resemble what we once formerly thought was “Protestant” private judgment—which the 1968 dissenters essentially adopted when they denied the binding character of the Church's magisterial teaching. A whole generation and more of Catholics has been effectively persuaded to abandon the Church's Magisterium in this way. It is sad that nobody even seems to ask any longer how the *souls* of all these contemporary Catholics might be affected by their now very widespread erroneous belief and practice in the area of birth control. But then these people have been indoctrinated in their erroneous belief and practice from sources within the Church, so perhaps the old idea of “invincible ignorance” can still be invoked to cover their case—but then that idea too is no longer mentioned or thought to be necessary!

IV

Just as he fails to treat properly how the Council dealt with conscience, so *a fortiori* does O'Malley fail to treat properly how the Council handled the always controversial question of birth control itself. Initially, Pope Paul VI wanted to withhold this question from conciliar consideration entirely, along with the questions of clerical celibacy and the reform of the Roman Curia. The reason given was that birth control was being considered by the Papal Birth Control Commission, which Blessed Pope John XXIII had appointed.

However, since birth control was already a burning question in those days—the contraceptive “pill” had just been introduced, and the topic was inescapably on everybody’s mind—some of the Council Fathers did not respect the pope’s wishes, but instead openly and quite pointedly raised the question of birth control in some of their conciliar interventions. These prelates included Belgian Cardinal Suenens and Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV Saigh as well as others. O'Malley himself recounts how Cardinal Suenens was obliged by Pope Paul VI to disavow the speech he had delivered, sensationally reported at the time, comparing the birth control question to another potential “Galileo case” for the Church. This incident, in fact, marked a break in what had been the earlier close relations between the Belgian prelate and the pontiff.

But not only in individual conciliar interventions did the subject of birth control get raised. The drafters of what became the Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, since they were including a major section on the family, at the very least had to mention or touch upon the question of birth control, if only to say that it was being handled by the Papal Birth Control Commission. But in fact, an intense debate was going on at the time between liberals and conservatives on the subject of the ends of marriage. Those of the liberal persuasion were determined to do away with the distinction, then current in Catholic moral theology, between the “primary” and “secondary” ends of marriage, the primary end being “the procreation and education of children,” while what we now refer to as the mutual love of the spouses was relegated to the status of secondary end. And a substantially complete draft of *Gaudium et Spes* included language effectively dethroning the procreation and education of children as the primary end of marriage.

In this situation, Pope Paul VI found himself obliged to intervene to insure that the final text of this important Council document would accurately reflect the teaching of the Church. Only a little more than a week before the end of the Council, he insisted on some modifications and

additions to the text which, after some negotiation with the conciliar sub-commission, amounted to the following: (1) the phrase “contraceptive practices” was added to a list of contemporary abuses disfiguring marriage included in the text (GS §47); (2) following language that marriage is indeed ordered to the procreation and education of children, a sentence was added describing children as “the *supreme* gift of marriage” (GS §50; emphasis added), thus restoring in a different way by the inclusion of this superlative the idea behind children as the “primary” end of marriage (in other words, this idea was *not* finally dropped by the Council!); (3) in another section listing certain evils (including abortion!) and referring also to “the regulation of births,” a sentence was added stating that the faithful are “forbidden to use methods disapproved of by the teaching authority of the Church” (GS §51); (4) and, finally, footnotes were added referring specifically to recent magisterial documents in which birth control had already been morally condemned by the Church, including, especially, Pope Pius XI’s 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii* and Pope Pius XII’s 1951 “Address to Midwives” (note 14 to GS §51).

Author John W. O’Malley becomes practically unhinged in describing this intervention of Pope Paul VI in the drafting of *Gaudium et Spes*. Actually, he is quite critical of virtually all of the instances in which this pope felt obliged to intervene in the work of the Council. The pope, after all, only had the responsibility of ratifying and promulgating all of the Council’s documents—surely he had some responsibility to insure that the Council got things right! Nevertheless, according to this historian (and to the school of thought he represents), the pope was apparently not to be accorded any right or responsibility for how the Council decided and acted—as if the pope were not also a Catholic bishop, as he in fact attested in placing his signature on all of the Council’s documents.

However, by insisting that the text of *Gaudium et Spes* dealing with the family had to include certain essential features of Catholic teaching concerning the family, Pope Paul VI incurs this author’s ire, who demands, querulously:

How could the Council make a pronouncement on an issue the pope had removed from its competence? How could it make a pronouncement on an issue it had not discussed? How could it make a pronouncement when another body appointed by the pope himself was examining the matter? How could the sub-commission at this last minute present for a final vote a text in which such a radical statement had been made? Why did the letter come only at this late date, this last minute? If the Council made a statement, would that not render the Papal Commission superfluous? (284–85)

Considering what these questions insinuate about the pope and the nature of the conciliar process, they deserve firm and clear answers, as follows: Although the pope had tried to remove the subject of birth control as such from the competence of the Council, some of the Council Fathers had not respected that papal wish and, in treating of the family in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council was necessarily going to get into the subject anyway, and did. Therefore what the Council said or touched upon on the matter had to be right—which was not the case with regard to the text that Paul VI was confronted with at the last minute. Nor is it the case that the subject was not discussed at the Council; it was widely and publicly discussed. The fact that the Papal Birth Control Commission was also studying the issue did not prevent either individual Council Fathers or the conciliar sub-commission from mentioning it as well. And does this author truly believe that the pope's insistence that the Church's traditional position on the matter be correctly stated somehow represents a *radical* statement or change? The pope's insistence came late only because the sub-commission had failed to produce a text that was complete and correct. And the Council's brief statements in no way rendered superfluous the more in-depth statements that the Papal Birth Control Commission was presumably going to be making.

The way in which, absent the papal intervention, the drafters of *Gaudium et Spes* apparently planned to treat birth control as a morally neutral issue suggests a liberal mind-set probably wedded to the hopes and expectations of the day that the Church's teaching on birth control was going to be changed. That a Catholic historian writing about the issue nearly a half century later, after the firm proof provided by *Humanae Vitae* that the Church's teaching was *not* going to be changed, can still reflect the same morally neutral mind-set on this issue, a cast of mind apparently unable to understand that this teaching of the Church *cannot* be changed because it just happens to be *true*, is really quite remarkable. That this author can still write in this same vein even after Paul VI proved, with the issuance of *Humanae Vitae*, that the Church's teaching was not going to be changed, is little short of amazing, in fact. It appears to be yet another example of what we have termed doctrinal minimalism. It apparently afflicts many minds today, certainly that of this author. It can thus surely be said of today's Catholic liberals such as O'Malley, what was once said of the aristocratic *émigrés* from the French Revolution, namely, that "they have learned nothing and forgotten nothing."

For the properly instructed Catholic, however, Paul VI's actions in this whole affair seem to constitute proof positive once again that the pope as the supreme teacher is what the Church says he is and he acts accordingly

to guarantee the integrity of the faith. To take one more example, imagine how the campaign by the liberals at Vatican II to eliminate “the procreation and education of children” as the primary end of marriage would have served the votaries of so-called same-sex marriage today, if the conciliar liberals had in fact been successful in eliminating it; leaving children out of what essentially constitutes a marriage is exactly what lends superficial plausibility to the claim that homosexual liaisons might somehow be considered to be “marriages.” Pope Paul VI by his intervention effectively headed off *that* particular possibility at Vatican Council II.

V

We have already gone on at too great a length on two issues—conscience and birth control—that were not actually major conciliar issues. We have dwelt on them here mainly to illustrate the typical approach to his subject matter of the particular historian of the Council under review here. We could well have selected other subjects to be examined in the same way. There is, for example, another subject that was very important at the Council; indeed, it was central to the Council’s concerns. The subject in question is “collegiality,” the relations of the Catholic bishops with each other and with the head bishop, the bishop of Rome, the pope. Collegiality *was* one of the principal issues debated and decided about at Vatican II. In treating the subject, the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, provides what is probably not only the Church’s definitive statement on collegiality but what may well be the Church’s best description of her own nature and structure to be found in her entire history.

Since the Church’s governing or leadership structure is based on the pope and the bishops—successors to Peter and the other apostles in the original “college” of apostles—the same body consisting of pope and bishops can be said to constitute a “college.” How the members of this college should relate to and interact with one another, and, especially, how they should relate to and interact with the head bishop among them, the pope, constitutes the subject matter of collegiality and it is all carefully laid out in *Lumen Gentium*. The episcopal or synodal Church leadership structure described there should receive special recognition by the Eastern Orthodox, since it substantially describes what they have traditionally considered to be *the* proper and correct Church leadership structure (minus, of course, as far as the Eastern Orthodox are concerned, the primacy of the bishop of Rome, which *Lumen Gentium* naturally does insist on, often in the same language employed by Vatican Council I).

Among other things, *Lumen Gentium* settled the question that the Catholic bishops are not delegates of the pope but derive their power and authority directly from their episcopal ordination; *Lumen Gentium* expressly says they receive it “from the Lord” (LG §24). Catholic dioceses are not “branches” of the diocese of Rome but genuine local Churches in the full sense of the word: the “Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which, insofar as they are united to their pastors, are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament” (LG §26). Contentious and confusing as the debate on collegiality may have seemed at the Council, Vatican II nevertheless got collegiality resoundingly right in the end.

The Catholic Church possesses a unique structure, in fact, in which the bishop enjoys what in modern democratic parlance we style executive, legislative, and judicial authority all rolled into one. This plenary authority is nevertheless not absolute, since the bishop must always act in conformity with the law of the Church and of the Gospel. In particular, the bishop must always act with and under the authority of the head bishop in the college, the pope, the successor of the head apostle, Peter, who enjoys the same plenary authority over the whole Church that the individual bishop enjoys over his diocese.

In describing this unique organizational structure as it is laid out in *Lumen Gentium*, O'Malley appears to believe, and quite consistently appears to represent the Council Fathers as believing, that the principal issue in the whole conciliar debate on collegiality was primarily to decentralize “power” in the Church, giving the bishops more power to act independently of Rome, and at the same time curbing the power of the pope, seen as excessively centralized in Rome. Supposedly, the whole idea, in other words, was to introduce a measure of American-style political “checks and balances” into the relationships between the pope and the bishops. All of O'Malley's objections to the interventions of Pope Paul VI in the work of the Council appear to be based on his apparent view that the pope was not respecting the Council's independent status (as a separate “branch” of Church government?). He objects, for example, to Paul VI's creation of the Synod of Bishops as merely advisory to the pope, enjoying no independent (legislative?) authority separate from that of the pope.

This is to misconceive the nature of the authority that the Church has from Christ. There is a very important sense in which authority, the power to command, cannot be divided; it is indivisible. The basic truth of this is aptly expressed, for example, in the famous statement of President Harry Truman that “the buck stops here.” This is particularly the case

when the authority in question is the kind that Christ gave to the apostles and their successors, namely, the power to declare the *truth* and command *obedience*.

O'Malley's position, however, like that of most Catholic liberals, appears to be that the papal or Roman "buck" needed to be carved up in some fashion and parceled out to the bishops—as if the bishops, again, somehow represented another independent "branch" of the Church's government. Vatican II did, in fact, restore the proper authority of the Catholic bishop, which had been somewhat eroded by various practices. This was one of the more important things that happened at Vatican II. But the Council rightly saw that the bishop must act with and under the head of the episcopal college, the pope.

What is somewhat ironic from where we stand nearly a half century later, however, is how little and how relatively ineffectively the Catholic bishops of the world have made use of their restored authority in the post-conciliar era. For as few suspected at the time—although everybody knows all about it today—the post-conciliar era was destined to be a time of turmoil and confusion, when among other things Catholic doctrine would come to be contested from within the Church in a way that was almost unprecedented in the entire history of the Church.

This came about some three years after the Council, when Pope Paul VI issued his 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, reaffirming the Church's traditional teaching that any use of matrimony must remain open to the transmission of life. Although this had been the constant teaching not only of the Catholic Church, but of all of Christianity up until the year 1930, what probably constituted a majority of the working Catholic theologians of the day openly and publicly dissented from the teaching of Pope Paul's encyclical, and, equally openly and publicly, called upon the Catholic faithful to reject the teaching as well. For these dissenting theologians, as well as for those of the faithful who responded to their call, the Catholic Church was evidently *no longer* "the teacher of truth," as Vatican II had taught (*DH* §14).

Pope Paul VI, for his part, called upon the bishops of the world to give their support to what, after all, was the authentic teaching of the Church. A few of the bishops' conferences unenthusiastically did so; others, in effect, "damned the encyclical with faith praise" by their obvious lack of enthusiasm for the papal teaching; still others simply remained silent and presumably indifferent. Hardly any theological dissenter from *Humanae Vitae* was ever rebuked or corrected by any bishop or bishops' conference. In the few instances where any disciplinary action was taken at all, with few exceptions it was usually left to Rome to take it. Most dissenters

simply remained “in good standing” in whatever position they happened to occupy within the Church’s structure in spite of their dissent. This pretty much remains the case today.

The faithful could hardly mistake the message that all this conveyed, namely, that their shepherds were apparently far from being foursquare behind the pope on the subject of birth control. In any case, it was clear that the bishops were certainly not going to do anything about it, whatever they may have actually thought about it. The inevitable conclusion that was massively drawn by the faithful was that the encyclical need not be followed. It quickly became a dead letter and remains so today for the most part. Statistics consistently tell us that more than eighty percent of married Catholics employ “methods disapproved of by the teaching authority of the Church” (GS §51).

More than that, once the faithful have come to believe that the Church can be wrong on any one of her solemn teachings, they are henceforth easily disposed to believe that she could be wrong on other teachings of hers as well. And so today we have, for example, the public spectacle of prominent Catholic politicians and other public figures tranquilly defying the Church on, for example, support for legalized abortion, while the faithful in majority Catholic areas such as parts of New England routinely return those same pro-abortion Catholic politicians to office with their votes.

What all this denotes, from the perspective of Vatican II, is the *failure* of collegiality so far in the post-conciliar era. According to *Lumen Gentium*, “all the bishops have the obligation of fostering and safeguarding the unity of the faith and of upholding the discipline which is common to the whole Church” (LG §23); or, again, “with watchfulness they ward off whatever errors threaten their flock” (LG §25). Since the Council, the Catholic bishops, at least in the Western world formerly known as Christendom, have mostly left these—perhaps admittedly unpleasant—tasks to Rome. In other words, faced with the first great practical test of the collegiality described in *Lumen Gentium*, which came shortly after the end of the Council, when the bishops were called upon to support the teaching of the Church against those who were challenging it, the bishops failed the test. Collegiality was not observed; the pope was left to uphold the teaching on his own to the extent that it was upheld.

VI

Nothing of the tumult, controversy, and contestation which followed Vatican II—especially after *Humanae Vitae* was issued—is covered in *What Happened at Vatican II*. The encyclical *Humanae Vitae* rates exactly one

reference in the index of the book. Turning to the page indicated, we learn that Paul VI “settled” the birth control question “in favor of the teaching of Pius XI and Pius XII”—*not*, mind you, “in favor of the traditional and long established teaching of the Catholic Church,” which precisely happened to be the case. Historian O’Malley, however, as seems to be the case with Catholic liberals generally, appears to regard this papal teaching not as a truth taught by “the teacher of truth,” the Church, but rather as a kind of opinion dependent merely on the will of not very well advised successive pontiffs. Nobody holding this view of Catholic teaching was ever going to be able to get the Council entirely right, of course, and that is what we find in the case of this book.

Only by deciding not to look at or refer to in any way the post-conciliar era that actually followed Vatican II is a conciliar historian such as O’Malley able to maintain the myth propagated by the Alberigo school among others that the Second Vatican Council was supposedly an “event” that liberated the Catholic Church from her sometimes embarrassing history (as the liberals see it) and now allows her to be presented as a champion of some of their favored liberal causes (while, again, they simply leave aside and ignore those teachings and features of the Church that they do not like and that in their view continue to embarrass; as they see things, Vatican II, according to the Alberigo viewpoint, *allows* them to leave these unwanted teachings aside).

Properly instructed Catholics, by contrast, in spite of some of the questionable developments that undeniably followed the Council, nevertheless can and do accept the official acts and decisions of the Council—as they are found in the sixteen documents of Vatican II—as an integral and permanent part of the Church’s patrimony, and, indeed, as henceforth constituting our “marching orders” as Catholics for now and on into the future. It is nonetheless true that the Council has proved disappointing in many ways up to now, and only now, in fact, nearly a half century after the Council, are we finally getting past many of the missteps, wrong turns, and confusion that followed the Council, so that the Church can now move on into the future implementing the true positive message of the Council.

This is not how John W. O’Malley appears to see things; he sedulously avoids even adverting to what happened *after* Vatican II, namely, all the 1960s-style turmoil and agitation that was already starting to engulf the Church before the Council was even over. For him we still seem to be back at the point where Blessed John XXIII, in his famous Opening Address to the Council, announced to the world that “nowadays the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather

than that of severity.” Some of us are old enough to remember how excited we too were at the prospects the jovial pontiff was announcing for the Church in that Opening Address. We did not yet have any idea of how things were actually going to turn out. In those days, even a Xavier Rynne had reasons to believe that Blessed John XXIII’s vision represented what the actual history of the Church was going to be.

In the ensuing years and decades, however, some of us have noticed that the actual application of the “medicine of mercy” policy has not always been the unalloyed success that Blessed John XXIII so fondly hoped for. The pope had also declared in his Opening Address that “the greatest concern” of the Council was that “the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously”—a “concern” that eventually seems to have gotten lost in some quarters at least; it is certainly not prominently to be found in this book. Author O’Malley, as we have seen, is clearly a minimalist where Catholic doctrine is concerned, and he also seems not to have taken much notice of some of the results of the “medicine of mercy” policy either. In some ways he still seems to be back there cheering for John XXIII’s vision as if nothing had happened in the interim to affect the original plans and dreams of Vatican II.

He is still indignant, for example, that some of the Catholic theologians and *periti* prominent at the Council had been *silenced* back then; perhaps he prefers the situation today where *hundreds* of Catholic theologians have confidently assured the faithful that they need not follow the teaching of the Church and have *not* been silenced. Nor does it seem to occur to him anywhere in his history of what happened at Vatican II that perhaps some of the warnings of the despised conservatives at the Council may have had some merit.

In sum, his book can be read for some of its facts, which are mostly researched and presented with reasonable care. We *cannot*, however, rely on his interpretations of the Council, which mostly turn out to be the conventional positions of today’s liberal Catholicism. Chicago Cardinal Francis George not too long ago characterized liberal Catholicism as an “exhausted project.” If this book provides any indication, however, it is far from exhausted as yet.