

READING DOCUMENTS WILL INFORM VATICAN II DEBATE

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Recent liturgical reforms, ongoing debates about the nature of authentic Catholic identity – of late expressed in relation to the work of Caritas International – and the forced early retirement of Bishop William Morris of Toowoomba have seen passions and convictions over the meaning and implementation of the Second Vatican Council deepen and divide. Issues of authority, the universal and local church, the priorities of mission, and the spirit of liturgy are at play and consternation among clergy and laity has often given way to disillusionment and charges of “restorationism,” even “repression.”

Many would acknowledge that the past fifty years or so since Vatican II began have been anything but an unmitigated success. Some point to the decline in priestly and religious vocations and diminishing Mass attendance in Australia and abroad as clear signs of the misinterpretation or otherwise misapplication of the Council’s teachings (a very small minority would dismiss the legitimacy of the Council outright).

Others have pointed to the fact that at Vatican II the Church was only just beginning to engage with the modern world as the modern world was fast becoming the post-modern world. According to this narrative, the decline in the vitality of the Church’s life can be attributed, at least in part, to factors *ad extra*. The increasing individualism, fragmentation and consumerism of Western society and culture at large has made it ever more difficult for the social dimension and demands of the Gospel to be heard, including by Catholics themselves who live in this world and not outside of it.

Of course, there have been wide ranging gains since the Council, including the promotion of a renewed baptismal appreciation, the recognition of a universal call to holiness, the renewed significance of the Scriptures in Catholic life and liturgy, a greater commitment and concern for ecumenism, and increased opportunities for theological education and formation for the laity.

The somewhat uneven reception of Vatican II that has been the experience of the last few decades is understandable given the lack of historical consciousness that tended to mark Catholic theology and culture before the Council. Without a lived memory or awareness of change, implementing the reforms of Vatican II was never going to be an easy or even orderly task.

Significantly, the tendency for the Church to act as a ‘counter Church’ in the wake of the Reformation and the Enlightenment also meant that Catholics were not wholly used to disagreeing with others, or one another for that fact, without condemning the other party. The polarisation within the Church in the post-conciliar era is not, I think, completely unrelated to this history.

It seems clear that any stance on the Council's teaching and implications has to be grounded in the conciliar texts themselves. Like all texts, the documents call for active interpretation and for reading within the context and tradition of the community from which they emerged.

It has to be admitted that many Catholics, even those well engaged in the missionary and ministerial life of the Church, have yet to pick up and read the conciliar texts for themselves. The quality and tenor of debate over the Council would surely be better for a wider reading of these texts.

Take the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #36, for example, which taught, for better or worse, that Latin was to be retained as the mother tongue for Roman Catholic liturgy. Read with, and not against, #14 which encouraged “full, conscious and active” participation are we left to choose *between* Latin or “participation,” or does it in fact point toward both, schooling in the former with prudent and due consideration to the latter which admits the vernacular? Are there other possibilities than bringing forth simply one at the expense of the other? Without attention to the content and context of the Council’s teachings, there is a danger that the debates and questions over the Second Vatican Council become homeless.

Of course, a wider reading of the Council documents will never in itself lead to a Church devoid of conflict or tension. This is to be expected. Tension in the Church’s life, it must be said, is preferable to indifference and inertia, what Rahner memorably described as ‘the peace of the graveyard’. The tensions in the current ecclesial landscape often express a deep love for, and commitment to, the Church on all sides rather than being the result of disloyalty or recalcitrance on just one.

Of course, the resort to polarising accusation, whether that of “restorationism” or “laxity,” inevitably erodes any recognition of shared commitment to the vitality and authenticity of the Church’s life. The long standing path of communion within our Church, of course, is the commitment to listen, and, notably, the willingness to listen to ‘the other’ with the expectation that ‘the other’ actually has something to say.

As concurrent members of multiple communities, whether they be religious, purely social or indeed electronic, we can recognise that expressing our voice does not always guarantee the outcomes we would prefer. Membership of any community will mean entering into a life which is beyond our exclusive control. However, the disappointment of our personal preference is always easier to hear in the context of a relationship.

Ultimately, it is these relationships that, as either an expression of the communion that God is or else a contradiction to it, will determine the legacy of the Second Vatican Council. The fruits of the Council, in other words, are not independent of human involvement and its teachings can be received as a launching pad for further division and separation or else an invitation of the Spirit to ‘work out our salvation’ in God, intelligently, passionately, and imaginatively, and to ‘work it out’ together.