

After Vatican II: The Debates Continue

Martin Marty, the distinguished Lutheran historian and journalist, attended the third session of Vatican II (1962-1965). Commenting this year on the 50th anniversary of the opening of the council, he wrote, "Vatican II was, if not a revolution, at least such a drastic change that the old ways are hard to imagine, even for many who had lived through them. Catholics may argue over the legacy of this council, but they cannot simply go back" (America, June 18-25, 2012, p. 15).

Marty was, of course, right. Catholics cannot go back — and from the 1960s until today they have indeed continued to argue over the legacy of that extraordinary council.

Among the over 2,000 bishops participating in the council, a majority and a minority could be distinguished. While describing the majority as "liberals" and the minority as "conservatives," the actual diversity of positions within each group was substantial. Those groups have continued to exist, but many today would say that the council's minority is slowly but definitely once again interpreting the council according to their own views. John Paul II (1978-2005) and Benedict XVI (2005-) have both worked in a similar way to legitimate a more conservative interpretation of the Council, though both have continued to meet with challenges from those who continue to understand the Council as did the majority of the bishops who attended it. For the

student of history, none of these arguments over the right way to understand the teachings of a council is surprising. It is especially fascinating, however, to witness the unfolding battles over the council's legacy.

To explore those diverse trajectories of interpretation, John O'Malley and I asked a group of Catholic scholars to describe those differences and developments and to evaluate them in the light of their own understandings of the teachings of the council. Efforts by some to split the "spirit" from the "letter" of the council are rejected in the book, as is the assertion of a simplistic opposition between those interpreters of the Council who emphasize continuity and those, like the followers of now excommunicated bishop Lefebvre, who argue that the council actually departed from the truth of the faith.

All the authors of the chapters in this volume see not only both continuity and development after Vatican II, but some distortions and misunderstanding. Moreover, they show how some developments which received support from the Vatican actually undercut what they argue was the intention of the bishops who attended Vatican II.

Jesuit historian John O'Malley, who provides a chapter that frames the entire volume, pinpoints three "issues under the issues." These are **collegiality** (the "center-periphery" issue, or the relationship between centralized and decentralized authority), **change** (or how to understand the relationship between past and present teachings and

practices), and **style** (the new way in which the bishops chose to write all the documents—characterized not by condemnation but by a continuous invitation to a conversation on the meaning of the Gospel today). These underlying issues continue to cause tensions. The chapters of this book explore those tensions on how to speak about the Jews, whether non-Christian religions can lead their followers to salvation, whether moral theology has been enriched or distorted by greater attention to Scripture and history, and why some scholars who lead the majority at the council became highly critical in the years following it.

None of these scholars presumes to give the final word on Vatican II and its ongoing legacy. All recognize that any living tradition continues to unfold. Readers will benefit from their analyses of the major issues under the issues that continue to provoke different interpretations of the council.