

VATICAN I 151 YEARS LATER: FRESH  
PERSPECTIVES – SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Vatican I 151 Years Later: Fresh Perspectives  
 Convener: Kristin Colberg, St. John’s University / College of St. Benedict  
 Moderator: Amanda Osheim, Loras College  
 Presenters: John O’Malley, S.J., Georgetown University,  
 Kristin Colberg, St. John’s University / College of St. Benedict  
 William Portier, University of Dayton

Drawing on recent scholarship that emerged in anticipation of Vatican I’s sesquicentennial, these three papers examined multiple forces that shaped the council in its own historical and theological settings while considering the ways that the council’s teachings continue to shape the church today. In his paper, “The Limitations of Vatican I’s Prophetic Mode,” John O’Malley, S.J., explored the motivations that fueled Vatican I’s defensive posture towards modernity. Perceiving the threat of manifold evils in the world, the council understood itself as mandated to denounce modernity and to act as a force to destroy it. O’Malley noted that a majority of the council fathers believed that they could “turn back the clock” and return the world to the order and stability it craved. However, despite Vatican I’s efforts, not only did the modern world not go away, it turned out to be the matrix for one of the most creative periods in the history of the church.

Kristin Colberg’s paper, “Vatican I 151 Years Later: Towards a Renewed Understanding of Primacy and Synodality,” built on O’Malley’s presentation of the council’s historical and theological setting by arguing that a deeper appreciation of Vatican I’s context opens the door for more flexible interpretations of its documents. Colberg engaged Pope Francis’ vision of greater synodality in the church and his assertion that key to this initiative is a maturing of the relationship between synodality and primacy. The paper then unpacked Vatican I’s notion of primacy as less rigid than is often presumed, arguing that it is rooted in a broader ecclesiology which sees the church as a part of God’s plan of redemption and papal authority within that horizon. The paper concluded by identifying three ways that primacy must be envisioned in a more fully synodal church: 1) as complementary with other modes of authority, 2) as fundamentally pastoral even in its juridical dimensions, and 3) as primarily as a ministry of unity.

In “New Receptions of *Pastor Aeternus*: From Chapter 4’s Dead Letter of Infallibility to Chapter 3’s Beginnings of Supranational Autonomy for the Church in a Voluntary Political Culture,” William Portier shifted attention to the political dynamics that served as a critical backdrop for the council. Portier noted that while Vatican I scholarship has largely concentrated on the fourth chapter of *Pastor Aeternus*, which contains the definition of papal infallibility, it is really the third chapter that serves as the heart of the document. Vatican I was impacted by the political landscape of the long-nineteenth century and can be seen as the church’s effort to reimagine itself as a social factor in a post-Westphalian, voluntary political culture. Portier noted that, lacking a clear vision for the future, Vatican I strove to secure the pope’s and the church’s complete independence from former European confessional states. This

initiated a shift which continues to exert a tremendous impact on ecclesial self-understanding today.

The conversation that followed connected the three presentations in interesting ways and put the presenters into dialogue with one another as well as the members gathered. Considerable conversation was devoted to the question of how the primacy can be seen as a means of supporting efforts to become more fully a “listening church.” Part of this conversation focused on how the church can create structures that habituate listening. Portier noted that canon law is a key piece of this process. Also critical is that the papacy empower various authorities to listen and act on the results of communal discernment. Another source of discussion compared Vatican I’s understanding of change with Vatican II’s. While Vatican I sought to “turn back the clock” and reject modern developments, by the time of Vatican II it was clear that this was impossible and the church would have to engage modern developments. These dispositions were compared to current efforts to promote or oppose ecclesial reform.

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