

RECEIVING VATICAN II—INTEREST GROUP

Topic:	The Event of Vatican II
Conveners:	Robert Imbelli, Boston College James F. Keating, Providence College
Moderator:	Christopher Ruddy, Catholic University of America
Presenter:	Joseph Komonchak, emeritus, Catholic University of America
Respondent:	Massimo Faggioli, University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

In his paper, “Vatican II: Texts, Experience, Event,” Father Komonchak entered into the tangled field of how best to interpret the council. He began with Alberigo’s assertion that primacy of attention ought to be paid to the “spirit and dialectic that inspired and characterized the assembly.” Vatican II as “event” matters most; the texts the council produced tell only part of the story, and not the part most interesting or important. For Komonchak such an approach is too one-sided. While any attempt to understand council must account for its drama, that drama produced particular authoritative teachings on a host of significant issues for the life of the Catholic Church. The texts, therefore, are what one must consult when disputing over what is and what is not an authentic interpretation of the council’s work. That said, it would be foolhardy to deny that the council was in fact an event and experienced as such by those involved. The young Ratzinger would employ terms as *Geschehen* and *Aufbruch* to describe the rejection of the prepared schemas during the first session. Yet, the event of the council has often been mischaracterized as a straightforward battle between the good guys and the bad that leaves unexplained, among other things, why certain documents enjoyed wide support while others were very close. In particular, a mere us versus them can make no sense of the disparity of opinions among “progressives” regarding *Gaudium et Spes*—some very critical. Thus, while the texts are essential, their interpretation must account for their having been produced by an event of great, even unsettling, drama. This fact makes difficult Pope Benedict’s simultaneous rejection of a “hermeneutics of discontinuity or rupture” and adoption “hermeneutics of reform.” To speak of reform necessarily includes moments of discontinuity, some, such as the council’s embracing of religious freedom, quite sharp. Indeed, it is in the intent to reform that one finds what is “new,” what is different, about the council.

To treat the council as an event requires placing it in a longer story. But where to begin? After surveying a number of alternatives (e.g., Congar, Ruggieri, Rahner), Komonchak employed Lonergan’s description of modernity as humanity’s recognition of its capacity to constitute its own history. “The Council can be seen as the particular moment in which the Catholic Church became more conscious of its responsibility *for its own self-realization* and eagerly accepted the challenge.” The extent to which that challenge was met with wisdom, short-sightedness, or something in-between is a story still to be told.

Massimo Faggioli agreed that the interpretation of Vatican II must look both backward and forward, and employed this fact to argue against any attempt to constrict the council to its texts. Event has priority over text. In support, he pointed to how contemporary debates between liberal and conservatives over the council’s meaning are inseparable from competing assessment of post- and preconciliar

Catholicism, rendering the texts on their own insufficient for resolution. Indeed, Benedict's address to the curia concerning Vatican II begins with a discussion of the council's aftermath. In any case, Faggioli believes that the "event versus text" debate has run its course. An example of the new approach, which Faggioli terms "inter-textual," recognizes that the council's texts must be read in light of what has happened in the intervening fifty years. An obvious example is *Nostra Aetate*. While the original document contains much new and bold teaching concerning the Church's view of other religions, much has happened in the fifty years which is now part of that document's theological significance. Thus the texts of the council must be interpreted in light of latter texts and latter events.

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