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Vatican II – 60 Years Young!

By Mary-Anne Lumley

Events & anniversaries

This year commemorates the 60th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council by Pope Saint John XXIII on October 11, 1962.¹ This year also commemorates the 70th anniversary of the coronation of the late Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain. In his introduction to *The Documents of Vatican II* edited by Walter Abbott SJ, Lawrence Shehan writes:

‘a sense of continuity ... inspired the saying, ‘The king is dead; long live the king.’
A similar sense would justify the statement, ‘The Council is over; the Council has just begun’.²

It is likely that in 1966, Shehan’s use of the word ‘continuity’ was uncontroversial. Some sixty years hence, in the context of Vatican II, the word is likely to connote a stance on the Council’s impact.

This paper is a reflection on how *Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC)*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, is core to the whole project of Vatican II. The hermeneutical lens of micro-rupture, as explicated by Ormond Rush, is adopted in the exploration of specific aspects of the Council. Attention is given to the wisdom expressed by the Council Fathers. There is a call to a continuity that is future-oriented: how can the aggiornamento of 1962 continue through 2022 and beyond? Another way of asking the question might be: how can we be contemporary and truly Catholic?³

Ceremony, continuity & innovation

A major event of 2022 was the death of Queen Elizabeth II. The ensuing ceremonies of the accession of the King and the royal funeral were steeped in tradition and ceremonial words, actions and gestures: the slow procession bearing the coffin on a gun carriage; the royal standard draped over the casket; the arrangement of the crown, orb and sceptre; seating arrangements in Westminster Abbey and the Archbishop of Canterbury as presider. Notable were several innovations: the liturgy in Westminster Abbey was filmed and broadcast; the service was ecumenical; while the Archbishop of Canterbury presided, he was assisted by several ministers of other denominations, including women, as well as the Roman Catholic cardinal, Vincent Nichols. Such innovations reflect the culture and sensibilities of this time but would have been unthinkable in

¹ From here on it will be called Vatican II.

² Lawrence Shehan, ‘Introduction’ in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), xv.

³ Vatican II took place while the author was too young to have any memory. During the years after the Council, the author does remember the flush of excitement and renewal as changes were implemented. Resurrection joy in proclaiming the gospel must have infused the liturgy as the author remembers a grandmother’s contemptuous dismissal of ‘all this alleluia business’. Also remembered is the grandmother’s angst at not being able to pray her rosaries, because the Mass in English was too distracting!

previous generations. That Vatican II has had far-reaching effects on Christians other than Roman Catholics has frequently been acknowledged. Robert Gribben, long-time leader and one of the founding fathers of the Uniting Church in Australia remarks, with reference to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, that ‘there can hardly be a more important liturgical document in our time’.⁴ D’Arcy Wood, former chair of the Uniting Church’s Commission on Liturgy reflects that ‘the impact of Vatican II on other Churches, directly on lectionaries and texts, and less directly on the atmospherics of liturgical thinking has been profound’.⁵

Interpretation

In the context of Vatican II, continuity and discontinuity/rupture may be used as interpretive lenses and scholarly works on this topic abound. Although the broader topic of interpretation is beyond the scope of this article, it is helpful to draw on the hermeneutical insights of Ormond Rush who offers the useful terms of micro-rupture and macro-rupture.⁶ According to Rush, it was never the intention of the Council to ‘sever itself’ from ecclesial tradition in a macro-rupture. However, various innovations and discontinuities, which Rush calls micro-ruptures, renewed and ‘rejuvenated’ the tradition while upholding its integrity.⁷ Rush draws on the scholarship of eminent Vatican II historian, the late John O’Malley SJ, who says:

... always keeping in mind the fundamental continuity in the great tradition of the Church, interpreters must also take due account of how the Council is discontinuous with previous practices and teaching traditions.⁸

Rush is adamant that while some minor breaks with a particular style or period (micro-ruptures) are likely to have been intentional, it may never be claimed that ‘the spirit of the Council [can] be conceived as a desire for a macro-rupture within the tradition’.⁹ Rush’s concept of micro- and macro-rupture is a useful hermeneutical backdrop for examining aspects of Vatican II and, in particular, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

Sacrosanctum Concilium

The first of the four constitutions to be promulgated was, of course *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, otherwise known as the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. It has been argued that this constitution had a significant impact on the ensuing progress of the Council. Shaun Blanchard, drawing on the work of Massimo Faggioli, contends that the liturgical reform is key to understanding the vision of Vatican II.¹⁰ Referring to SC Blanchard states that it ‘reflects the centrality of liturgical reform to Vatican II’s project of ecclesial renewal’.¹¹ Ormond Rush argues that one of the teachings that was core to the

⁴ Robert Gribben, ‘Editorial,’ *Australian Journal of Liturgy* 13, no. 12 (2012): 50.

⁵ D’Arcy Wood, ‘Vatican II and other Churches: liturgical influences,’ *Australian Journal of Liturgy* 13, no. 12 (2012): 70.

⁶ Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 2004), 7.

⁷ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 7.

⁸ John W O’Malley, ‘Vatican II: Official Norms. On Interpreting the Council, with a Response to Cardinal Avery Dulles,’ *America*, (March 31, 2003): 12, quoted in Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 7.

⁹ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 25.

¹⁰ Shaun Blanchard, ‘This Sacred Council’ – Vatican II at 60,’ *The Tablet*, October 20, 2022, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/22431/-this-sacred-council-vatican-ii-at-60>.

¹¹ Blanchard, ‘This Sacred Council’.

direction of the Council, and how the Council would bear fruit, is recorded in paragraph 14 of SC:¹²

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people' (1 Pet. 2:9), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.¹³

To this frequently quoted paragraph, Rush proposes a renewed imperative. He argues that the faithful's 'fully conscious and active participation' is foundational for later teaching on the People of God, on their mission in the world and their appropriate participation 'in the teaching, sanctifying and governing of church life.'¹⁴ Moreover, Rush believes that 'fully conscious, and active participation' is at the nexus of the spirit and the letter of the Council, and he proffers a paraphrase of the above quote from SC, 14:

The full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit.¹⁵

There is an unequivocal expectation for full, conscious and active ecclesial participation by the People of God.

The 'right and duty' of the People of God is the promise and call of their baptism. It has been noted by Rita Ferrone that the 'right and duty' of participation by the faithful had been taught by Pope Pius XII. However, Ferrone shows that *Sacrosanctum Concilium* emphasises the dignity of Baptism 'at the very outset of liturgical promotion and participation'.¹⁶ Referring to paragraph 6, Ferrone highlights that the faithful are 'plunged into the paschal mystery of Christ' through their baptism.¹⁷ Moore emphasises that among all members of the Church there is 'no dignity or gift greater than Baptism'.¹⁸ The hope that the People of God would be 'led to that fully conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations', enables them to more deeply understand and participate in the mystery of the Church into which they are baptised.

The bold statements in paragraph 14 of SC capture the bold four-fold vision articulated in paragraph 1 of the same document:

... to impart an ever increasing [vigour] to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of [hu]mankind into the household of the Church.¹⁹

¹² Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 81.

¹³ Second Vatican Council, 'Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (hereafter cited as SC), 4 December, 1963,' sec. 14, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

¹⁴ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 82-83.

¹⁵ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 81.

¹⁶ Rita Ferrone, *Liturgy: Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 31.

¹⁷ SC, 6.

¹⁸ Gerard Moore, 'Are We There Yet? Vatican II and the Renewal of Liturgy: Reflections on the Fortieth Anniversary of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy', *The Australasian Catholic Record* 81, no. 3 (2004): 10.

¹⁹ SC, 1.

According to Ferrone, this four-fold aim actually restates Pope John XXIII's own intentions in convoking Vatican II and demonstrates how the reform of the liturgy is aligned to the actual purpose of the Council.²⁰ Blanchard respectively identifies these four aims as inner renewal, *aggiornamento*, ecumenism and evangelisation.²¹ Ferrone celebrates their outward focus, asserting that the goal of liturgy reform is embraced by a Church who 'reach[es] beyond itself'.²²

Aggiornamento

Aggiornamento is the term most frequently associated with Vatican II. The word itself is Italian and an internet search will reveal its meaning as 'bringing up to date' or 'updating'. By definition, then, *Aggiornamento* might indicate renewal and dynamism. Karl Rahner observed that Vatican II was 'the beginning of a beginning'.²³ The sentiment is mirrored by Pope Paul VI: '*aggiornamento* will mean for us an enlightened insight into the Council's spirit and a faithful application of the norms it has set forth'.²⁴ The Pope was addressing the Council in November 1965 as it looked ahead to the ongoing work of the Council, beyond the final meetings. This attention to the future is included in what has been called the reception of the Council.²⁵ As described by Rush, the reception and interpretation of the Council is dynamic and ongoing. Rush cites Walter Kasper's remark that the impact of the Council 'will depend on the people who translate it into real life'. Similarly, Joseph Ratzinger had indicated that 'the whole Church participates in the Council'.²⁶ This places responsibility on the entire People of God, both lay and clergy; both now and into the future. The ongoing need for a new reception of the fruits of the Council requires ongoing renewal of the faithful's full, conscience and active participation in all aspects of church life.

Signs of the times

Vatican II sought to interpret and respond to the signs of the times in order to proclaim the gospel. Attentive listening and open dialogue were to characterise relations within the Church as well as those beyond the Church.²⁷ The call to look into the signs of the times was originally a challenge to discernment from Jesus: 'you know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times' (Matt 16:3). Jesus gives the challenge of discerning the signs of the times to his followers then and now. Signs of the times may appear to be positive or negative. A positive sign of the times, according to Rush, is recognised as something new that is 'of God'; conversely, a negative sign of the times is 'an indicator of the things that are impeding the reign of God'.²⁸ Clearly the task for a community of 'creative receivers' is to be lovingly attentive

²⁰ Ferrone, *Liturgy*, 19.

²¹ Blanchard, 'This Sacred Council'.

²² Ferrone, *Liturgy*, 20.

²³ Lucien Richard, ed., *Vatican II: The Unfinished Agenda* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 1.

²⁴ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, ix.

²⁵ Rush's scholarship here is informed by a 'hermeneutic of reception' that considers three aspects of a communication event: author, text and addressee. In discussion of Vatican II, these terms respectively refer to the Fathers of the Council and what they wished to communicate; the documents themselves; and those who receive and interpret the Council and its effects.

²⁶ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, xi.

²⁷ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 29.

²⁸ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 80.

to signs of the times that are negative as well as positive. A compelling perspective is offered by Giuseppe Ruggieri, that attending to the signs of the times makes it 'possible to rediscover the youth of the gospel'.²⁹ The youth of the gospel! What fruits! Of course, this is the work of the Holy Spirit who 'makes the Church keep the freshness of youth' and continually 'renews it'.³⁰

Ruggieri names as *locus theologicus* human experiences throughout history, but especially of whatever is of the present time.³¹ Eloquently expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*, the attentiveness to human experience becomes, in the Eucharistic Prayer for use in Masses for Various Needs III, an explicit intercession to God:

Keep us attentive to the needs of all
that, sharing their grief and pain,
their joy and hope,
we may faithfully bring them the good news of salvation
and go forward with them
along the way of your Kingdom.³²

These words are preceded by another petition for those present to maintain their commitment to proclaiming the gospel:

Grant that all the faithful of the Church,
looking into the signs of the times by the light of faith,
may constantly devote themselves
to the service of the Gospel.³³

That believers are actually empowered to pray these intercessions through and with Christ in the liturgy reflects the profundity and graced dignity of their baptismal right and duty, as articulated in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

Vatican II was 60 years ago. Why are you still talking about it?

This question, from a millennial, is as challenging as it is provocative. On the one hand, perhaps the question could be interpreted as: why the talk, rather than action? The question also implies a singular event of the past. Further, any 'updating' from the sixties and seventies is already history! Lucien Deiss observed some thirty years ago that young people 'did not know the liturgy before the Council' therefore the reform of the liturgy is of no interest.³⁴ Of greater relevance to young people is the form of the liturgy of their time: is the spirit of *aggiornamento* at work?³⁵ Also important to young people is their awareness of social justice, and many are quick to point to any lack of congruence between words and actions. Such sentiments may be expressed through memes, a current sign of these times. If the Eucharist celebrates the life, death and resurrection of Christ through bread broken and wine poured out, there is still some work to be done to ensure the liturgy is not isolated from life and from the needs of the world. According to Ferrone, the 'call to *aggiornamento*' came from the urgent 'moral

²⁹ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 30.

³⁰ Second Vatican Council, 'Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November, 1964,' sec. 4, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

³¹ Ruggieri, 'Towards a Hermeneutic of Vatican II,' 7, quoted in Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 30.

³² The Roman Missal (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2010).

³³ The Roman Missal, 2010.

³⁴ Lucien Deiss, *Celebration of the Word* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1993), 144.

³⁵ Deiss, *Celebration of the Word*, 144

imperative' to proclaim the good news in the real world, and to truly love others as neighbours, and is only authentic when celebrated for and with the life of the world.³⁶ Young people reveal many signs of the current times, and the task of discernment is as critical as it is urgent. Much more could and needs to be said in other forums about catechesis for young people and the educators and leaders who work with the young.

In my language

One of the most immediate and obvious changes in the reformed liturgy was the use of the 'mother tongue'.³⁷ The purpose was to ensure that:

... the intrinsic nature and purpose of [the liturgy's] several parts ... may be more clearly manifested, and that devout and active participation by the faithful may be more easily achieved.³⁸

Four decades on from the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and amid the revised translation of the Roman Missal according to *Liturgiam authenticam*, Gerard Moore observed that:

... the test of our translations is their acceptance by the worshipping community as worthy of prayer, beautiful and facilitative of full, conscious and active participation.³⁹

Gerald O'Collins argues that the revised translation with which English-speaking Catholics 'were saddled' lacks beauty and hospitality.⁴⁰ O'Collins provides examples of what he calls transpositions that use unnecessarily outmoded English words, for example: instead of repentance, compunction is used; instead of praise, laud; and instead of prayer, supplication.⁴¹ This would seem to be at odds with the *aggiornamento* spirit of the Council. O'Collins refers to the 'so-called English' of the texts and yearns for liturgical texts in the mother tongue of good English.⁴² He refers to a letter written to Pope Urban IV by Thomas Aquinas which advises against word-for-word translation in which 'perplexity concerning the meaning of the original sometimes occurs'.⁴³ While there are great differences in the cultural and religious contexts of the worlds of Aquinas and that of today, Aquinas' words have a contemporary ring. In Australia today young people – and not so young people – have access to a world of knowledge. However, in an increasingly secular and fast-paced society, their vocabulary most likely does not extend to archaic words or metaphors, and their use in the liturgy is likely to cause perplexity.

Pope Francis' 2017 *Motu proprio, Magnum Principium*, emphasises the aspect of mystery inherent in the sacred rites, requiring translations that 'must be congruent with sound doctrine'.⁴⁴ Concomitantly, Francis seeks hospitality in the texts, stating that

³⁶ Ferrone, *Liturgy*, 109.

³⁷ SC, 54

³⁸ SC, 49

³⁹ Moore, 'Are We There Yet,' 6.

⁴⁰ Gerald O'Collins, *Lost in Translation: the English Language and the Catholic Mass* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2017), vii.

⁴¹ O'Collins, *Lost in Translation*, vii.

⁴² O'Collins, *Lost in Translation*, viii.

⁴³ O'Collins, *Lost in Translation*, 115.

⁴⁴ Francis, *Magnum Principium*, *Motu Proprio*, Vatican Website, September 9, 2017, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/09/09/170909a.html>.

‘without doubt, attention must be paid to the benefit and good of the faithful’.⁴⁵ In making some modifications to canon 838 of the Code of Canon, Law Francis emphasises the necessity of:

... vigilant and creative collaboration full of reciprocal trust between the Episcopal Conferences and the Apostolic See [in] the task of promoting the Sacred Liturgy.⁴⁶

In this 60th Anniversary year of the opening of Vatican II, it is very encouraging that the Australian Church’s Plenary Council has given voice to the yearnings of the faithful, noting the power and importance of language in the liturgy. The Plenary Council requested that:

... the Bishops Commission for Liturgy ... prepare a new English translation of the Roman Missal that is both faithful to the original text and sensitive to the call for language that communicates clearly and includes all in the assembly.⁴⁷

The Plenary Council has been a journey, over more than four years, of praying, listening and discerning what the Spirit is saying to the People of God in Australia, and surely can be seen as an example of ongoing *aggiornamento*.⁴⁸

Holy Spirit whisperer

Pope Francis and others have said that it takes a century for the work of a council to become grounded and that Vatican II is still very much a work in progress. Referring to the Council, Rush argues for a ‘constant re-reception, effected in the Spirit’, as the responsibility of the entire People of God.⁴⁹ Rush states that:

... [a]ccording to a hermeneutics of reception, a text is dead until it is read. Vatican II is not achieved until it is received.⁵⁰

For Rush the dynamism of reception draws on the Spirit of God who ‘hovered over the chaos’; who inspired the prophets of old; who came upon Jesus and, later, the apostles ‘to guide them in their adaptation of the Gospel’; and who came upon Christians as they gathered throughout history.⁵¹ Rush proposes that the Holy Spirit brings the baptised together in dialogue, guiding and ‘urging’ and ‘whispering into our ecclesial ear’, whether at the level of parish or ecumenical council.⁵² Once again, in responsiveness to the whispering of the Spirit, is the call to the People of God to be fully conscious and active. Rush does not shy from the great responsibility, as well as the privilege, of this call: to ‘[be] active, creative, imaginative receivers of revelation – for God’s sake’.⁵³

Such responsibility also requires being informed and it is encouraging to see Pope Francis promoting the re-reception of Vatican II. News sources including Crux and Catholic News Service have reported that, in preparation for the Holy Year of 2025, Francis is encouraging Catholics to engage with the texts, particularly the four

⁴⁵ Francis, *Magnam Principium*.

⁴⁶ Francis, *Magnam Principium*

⁴⁷ Fifth Plenary Council of Australia, ‘Communion in Grace: Sacrament to the World 9 July, 2022,’ sec. 14, <https://plenarycouncil.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/FINAL-Decree-5-Communion-in-Grace-Sacrament-to-the-World.pdf>.

⁴⁸ See Angela McCarthy’s report in this edition of Pastoral Liturgy.

⁴⁹ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 75-76.

⁵⁰ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 55.

⁵¹ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 77.

⁵² Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 77.

⁵³ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 79.

constitutions. It is also heartening to hear that ‘user-friendly’ study resources will be prepared. Although many Catholics are aware of the some of the teachings of Vatican II, it is frequently more by osmosis than direct engagement with the texts themselves and the intentions behind the texts. Referring, again, to the hermeneutic of reception elucidated by Rush, it is crucial for the People of God to engage with the texts in order for the Spirit of Vatican II to be received and breathed. And if it is the ‘right and duty’ of people to be informed, it is also incumbent on their leaders to promote, facilitate and encourage the activity of gathering and formation. It is hoped that materials produced will indeed be user-friendly and clear and that groups of Christians around this nation will gather, prompted by the whisperings of Holy Spirit.

Two decades ago, Rush proclaimed that Vatican II was, and is, the ‘light on the hill’, and that ‘the wind of the Spirit of the Council will not allow its own beacon to be extinguished’.⁵⁴ *Aggiornamento*, of its nature, calls for dynamic renewal. Prior to each Council meeting, the Fathers prayed together and, according to Abbott, the prayer text was derived from an ancient prayer of St Isidore of Seville. Part of the prayer reads:

We are here before you, O Holy Spirit ...
Come and abide with us ... penetrate our hearts.
Be the guide of our actions, indicate the path we should take ...
May you be our only inspiration and overseer of our intentions.
May you, who are infinite justice, never permit that we be disturbers of justice ...
[May we] be one in you ... and in nothing depart from the truth ...
So that our judgements may not be alien to you.⁵⁵

In 2022 and beyond the People of God might continue to pray this prayer, so that the ‘breeze’ of the Spirit ‘continues to flicker the flame and make it alive’, and they can say with conviction: ‘the Holy Spirit was with them; the same Holy Spirit is with us’.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 85.

⁵⁵ ‘Prayer of the Council Fathers’ in *The Documents of Vatican II*, xii.

⁵⁶ Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 85.