

A COUNCIL IN HISTORY

Philippe Chenaux♦

Pontifical Lateran University, Rome

Abstract

This article aims to give an overview of the history of the Second Vatican Council, the most important event in the history of the Church in the 20th century, 60 years after its opening. Similar to *history* in English, *histoire* in French, and *geschichte* in German, the Italian term *storia* has a dual meaning: it refers both to past events and to the knowledge transmitted by historical science. Based on this dual meaning, we will try to answer two questions: what happened in Vatican II? How did historians interpret this event? After reconstructing the history of the council in broad terms, from the announcement of its convocation by Pope John XXIII in January 1959 to its conclusion by Pope Paul VI in December 1965. In the first part, we'll talk about how it became part of history, and in the second part, we'll talk about how it was received. We will see that historians' understanding of the council has not been consistent with Church teaching under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Keywords: Council, history, historiography, hermeneutics.

Like *history* in English, *histoire* in French, or *geschichte* in German, the word *storia* has two meanings in Italian. It refers both to the events that occurred in the past and to the knowledge transmitted by the

♦ Philippe Chenaux is a Professor of Modern and Contemporary Church History at the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical Lateran University (Rome). He is specialised on the history of the Second Vatican Council and the Papacy of the Twentieth Century. Among his main publications: *Pie XII. Diplomate et pasteur* (Cerf, 2003) ; *L'Eglise catholique et le communisme en Europe (1917-1989)*. *De Lénine à Jean-Paul II* (Cerf, 2009); *Il Concilio Vaticano II* (Carocci, 2012); *Paul VI. Le souverain éclairé* (Cerf, 2015). *La fin de l'antijudaïsme chrétien. L'Eglise catholique et les Juifs de la Révolution française au concile Vatican II* (Cerf, 2023). He is member of the Pontifical Committee of Historical Sciences. Email: philippe.chenaux@fastwebnet.it

discipline of history. These two topics – the Second Vatican Council as a historical event and the Second Vatican Council as a subject of historical study – are the focus of this article.¹ We will try to respond to these two questions: What happened in the Second Vatican Council? and how historians have characterised and interpreted the event?

The Historical Event

The Second Vatican Council was the twenty-first council in the history of the Church. The previous council, the First Vatican Council (1869-1870), had been interrupted *sine die* by Pope Pius IX in October 1870 due to the Franco-Prussian War and the entry of *Piedmontese* troops into the capital of the Papal States. This forced interruption had greatly emphasized the power of the pope over the episcopate: the constitution *Pastor Aeternus* (July 20, 1870) on the primacy and infallibility of the pontiff had been voted on, while the drafts on the duties and responsibilities of bishops had not been discussed. In a sense, the holding of a council seemed to have become “pointless.” Some theologians had then prophesied the end of the era of councils. With the new century, the conciliar idea was to regain some relevance. All (almost all) the successors of Pius IX had considered the possibility of resuming the Vatican Council. More detailed projects came to light during the pontificates of Pius XI and Pius XII. The first had the question studied by a group of theologians and consulted the episcopate on this matter. The responses received (about a thousand) were largely positive. But when the Patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Lafontaine, pointed out that a council would imply recognizing the normality of the pope’s situation in the capital, Pius XI abandoned his project. The unresolved “Roman question” made it difficult, if not impossible, to convene a council in Rome. The second pope seriously considered the idea of convening a council. In March 1948, Pius XII decided to entrust the matter to the Holy Office. A special preparatory commission met several times between February and July 1949. In the end, for several reasons not yet fully clarified, Pius XII abandoned his idea.

Unlike his predecessors, Pope John XXIII did not study the matter but announced his decision to convene the council without consultations on January 25, 1959, just three months after his election, in front of 17 cardinals in the chapter hall of the Monastery of St. Paul.

¹ Cfr. P. Chenaux, *Il concilio Vaticano II*, Roma 2012; J. W. O’Malley, *Che cosa è successo nel Vaticano II?* Milano 2010.

The announcement was expected to create a significant echo within and outside the Church, among non-Christian circles, and among diplomats. Overall, the Catholic episcopate was rather slow to react.

The papal initiative was better received in the more open circles of Catholicism at that time, in various ecclesial movements (such as the liturgical, ecumenical, and lay apostolate movements) that constituted the “progressive wing” of Catholicism at the time. It somehow seemed to confirm the impression of novelty and change that the pope had given since the beginning of his pontificate. However, questions arose about the nature and purposes of the council: Would it be a new council or simply a continuation of Vatican I as desired by his predecessors? Would it be a council of union following the model of the Council of Florence in 1439, or a Catholic council in the traditional sense of the word? Would it be a council of condemnation, a fight against modernity following the path of all the papal documents of the 19th and early 20th centuries, or a council of reform? When the announcement was made, the pope did not yet have a clear program in mind. As Giuseppe Alberigo wrote in his introduction to the History of Vatican II: “Giovanni XXIII did not give birth to a fully formed council, like Minerva from Jupiter’s brain.”² It would take a few months, with the start of the pre-preparatory phase (May 1959), to see the project taking shape. By the end of July 1959, the pope informed Cardinal Tardini that the council would be called Vatican II: it was therefore a new council.

The preparation of Vatican II began with the decision of Pope John XXIII, which was made public on May 17, 1959, the day of Pentecost, to establish a pre-preparatory commission presided over by Cardinal Secretary of State Domenico Tardini. The pre-preparatory commission had the task of making the necessary contacts with the Catholic episcopate of various nations to seek their advice and suggestions, collecting proposals formulated by the sacred dicasteries of the Roman Curia, outlining the general topics to be addressed in the council, and suggesting the composition of various bodies (commissions, secretariats, etc.) for the preparation of the actual work. This phase of consultation started on June 18, 1959, when a letter was sent to the future council fathers. The letter asked them to give their “opinions, advice, and votes” (*consilia et vota*) for the future council “freely and

² G. Alberigo, *L’annuncio del concilio*, in *Storia del Concilio Vaticano II*, dir. da G. Alberigo, Vol. I: *Il cattolicesimo verso una nuova stagione. L’annuncio e la preparazione*, Bologna 1995, 51.

honestly" (*omni cum libertate et sinceritate*). The pope did not want to attach any questionnaire, as initially thought, in order to leave the bishops completely free to express their opinions. A total of 2,594 diocesan and titular bishops, 156 religious superiors, and 62 faculties of theology and canon law were consulted. In the end, 2,161 responses were collected, which are reproduced in the twelve volumes of the series *Acta et Documenta Concilio Vaticano II apparando*.

A significant work of analysis and synthesis was carried out on these episcopal votes by the French historian Etienne Fouilloux in the first volume of the *History of the Second Vatican Council*.³ His typology proposes three groups of responses. The first group of bishops, known as the "block of intransigence," did not want to "compromise" with modernity. Their purpose was to perfect the work of doctrinal restoration that began at the Council of Trent and to forcefully reaffirm the identity of Roman Catholicism. Alongside this first group of intransigence, there was a second group of bishops who were more open to the demands of renewal and openness towards non-Roman Christianity. According to these bishops, the Church should listen to the contemporary world and seek to respond to its expectations by adapting to its time. Ecumenical concerns were also central to them. A third group included all the non-European episcopates: Brazilian, American, African, and Asian. The characteristic that somehow united all these responses was a greater attention to the surrounding world.

The second phase began with the promulgation of the *motu proprio Superno Dei nutu* (June 5, 1960), which established the preparatory commissions. Among the ten established commissions, the only one that did not correspond to a dicastery of the Roman Curia was the tenth, dedicated to the apostolate of the laity. Each commission was presided over by the prefect of the corresponding congregation. For example, the theological commission was led by Cardinal Ottaviani, the Secretary of the Holy Office. The appointment of members to the various commissions was the pope's responsibility. A total of 842 people were appointed. Over a third, 37%, resided in Rome, and over a quarter, 26%, belonged to the Roman Curia. Above the various preparatory commissions, a central commission was established, presided over by the pope, and composed of around a hundred members personally chosen by him. It included the presidents of the preparatory commissions, all the Catholic patriarchs of Eastern rites,

³ E. Fouilloux, *La fase antepreparatoria* (1959-1960), in *ibid.*, 111-131.

all the presidents of national episcopal conferences, and the superiors general of major religious orders (Benedictine, Dominican, Franciscan, Jesuit). The purpose of the central commission was to coordinate the work of the various commissions and to develop a regulation for the council, which was made public on August 6, 1962, under the title *Ordo Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II celebrandi*. Among the points discussed in the regulation was the issue of the language of the council: should the use of Latin be maintained, or, as some bishops wished, could the use of vernacular languages be authorized? The *Ordo Concilii* stipulated that Latin would be used for all public sessions and general congregations, while the use of vernacular languages was allowed only for the work of the commissions. Latin remained the official language of the council.

After the initial surprise wore off, the Second Vatican Council had become, through the work of the preparatory commissions, an essentially “Roman” event. Despite the efforts made by the bishops to keep the attention of their faithful, the interest of the general public in the upcoming event “had been diminishing.”⁴ However, initiatives to inform public opinion were not lacking despite this relative indifference. Vatican II was a media event that involved the press from around the world. All the major headlines of the international press had their correspondents in Rome who closely followed the council proceedings and published articles every day. The relationship between the council assembly and the mainstream media was ambiguous: on one hand, the council fathers, upon reading the newspapers, did not hide a certain irritation at how the issues and debates were portrayed; but on the other hand, many of them sought to use the press to exert pressure on the council assembly.

The Second Vatican Council opened on October 11, 1962, with a lengthy celebration lasting seven hours. There were over 2,000 council fathers present, including cardinals, patriarchs, archbishops, residential bishops, titular bishops, auxiliaries, and superiors of religious orders and congregations. Never before in history had such a large assembly with deliberative power been seen. From this perspective, the increase compared to the last two ecumenical councils was considerable. At the Council of Trent (1545-1563), only a few dozen bishops were present, mostly Italians and Spaniards. The First Vatican Council (1869-1870) had around 700 fathers, mostly of

⁴ R. Aubert, *La preparazione*, in *Storia della Chiesa. Vol. XXV/1: La Chiesa del Concilio Vaticano II (1958-1978)*, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano) 1994, 155.

European origin. The global dimension of the council assembly was another noteworthy characteristic. Europe represented no more than one-third of the assembly, while for the first time, the other continents were also widely represented. There were 196 bishops from the United States, 76 from Canada, 171 from Brazil, and 346 bishops from other Spanish-speaking Latin American countries. Africa and Asia were also represented by over 500 fathers, although many of them were of European origin serving as missionary bishops. While there were 47 Chinese bishops and 15 Japanese bishops (all of Japanese nationality), there were 11 Korean bishops present at the first session (one apostolic vicar, 3 residential bishops, 7 titular bishops), a ratio that would be maintained in subsequent sessions.

The inaugural address delivered in Latin by Pope John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* (The Mother Church Rejoices), was resolutely optimistic. The pope stated, "Let us dissent from those prophets of doom who always announce the worst, as if the end of the world were imminent." The path to follow was clearly that of *aggiornamento*: "The deposit of Faith, that is, the truths contained in our venerable doctrine, is one thing; the way in which they are expressed is another, though always in the same sense and with the same meaning." The pastoral council desired by John XXIII excluded any form of condemnation: "In our times, however, the Bride of Christ prefers to use the medicine of mercy rather than severity." Two days after the solemn inaugural session, on Saturday, October 13, 1962, during the first general congregation, the election of the ten conciliar commissions was scheduled. Each commission was composed of 24 members, of which 16 (two-thirds) were elected by the assembly and 8 (one-third) appointed by the pope. During this second day of the council, a real turn of events occurred: Cardinal Liénart, the Bishop of Lille and a member of the Presiding Council, took the floor without permission from Cardinal Tisserant, the president. He stated that it was not possible to proceed with the election of the commission members and that the election should be postponed for a few days to allow the assembly to elect the most qualified candidates. The request of the elderly French cardinal, immediately supported by Cardinal Frings of Cologne, was met with a long applause from the assembly.

The first day of the council had lasted less than 50 minutes. By requesting and obtaining the postponement of the election of the commissions, the council assembly expressed its intention not to ratify a council that was already predetermined. The outcome of the first session may have seemed meagre. None of the documents discussed

in the assembly (in the following order: the schema on the liturgy, the two sources of revelation, the schema on social communications, the schema on the Church) had been adopted. In fact, many of them had been rejected by the majority of the assembly. Pope John XXIII's decision to refer the schema on the two sources of revelation (*De fontibus revelationis*) to a mixed commission for a complete revision appeared as a significant rejection of the preparatory work. Despite the apparent fruitlessness, the result of this first "trial" session was more than positive: the bishops had learned to work together, and a "conciliar consciousness" had developed within the Church.

The first intersession was of crucial importance to the point that some historians speak of a true "second preparation" of the council.⁵ It witnessed a complete reorganization of the council's work, and the number of schemata to be discussed was reduced from twenty to seventeen: revelation, the Church, the Virgin Mary, bishops, ecumenism, priests, religious, the apostolate of the laity, Eastern Churches, liturgy, pastoral care (*cura animarum*), marriage, priestly formation, Catholic schools, missions, social communications, and schema 17 on the Church in the modern world. The most striking event of this first intersession was the death of Pope John XXIII (June 3, 1963) and the election of his successor, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini, who took the name Paul VI (June 21, 1963).⁶

Shortly after being elected pope, Paul VI announced that the great task of his pontificate would be to continue and conclude the Second Vatican Council (radio message to the world, June 29, 1963). He not only set the dates for the resumption of the council's work but also worked to create the conditions for a successful resumption of the council. Among Paul VI's first decisions, three were true innovations: the promulgation of a new version of the council's rules, the establishment of a committee of four cardinal moderators, and the appointment of lay auditors. Unlike his predecessor, John XXIII, who did not want to set a program for the Council, Paul VI wanted to be the "moral guide" of the assembly, the "captain" of Vatican II.

The second session opened on September 29, 1963, with a lengthy speech by Pope Paul VI. While the tone of the speech may have appeared "less optimistic" (highlighting the absence of the churches of

⁵ J. Grootaers, Il concilio si gioca nell'intervallo. La "seconda preparazione" e i suoi avversari, in *Storia del concilio Vaticano II*, dir. da G. Alberigo, Vol. 2: *La formazione di una coscienza conciliare ottobre 1962-settembre 1963*, Bologna 1996, 385-557.

⁶ Cfr. P. Chenaux, *Paolo VI. Una biografia politica*, Roma 2016.

silence and the growing spread of atheism) compared to the one delivered a year earlier by Pope John, the fundamental inspiration remained the same: the predominantly pastoral purpose of Vatican II was essentially confirmed. The pope assigned four objectives to the council: deepening the Church's doctrine (the Church pronounces on what it thinks of itself); renewing the Church through a return to its most "authentic and prolific" traditions; re-establishing unity among all Christians; and opening a dialogue with the contemporary world. After this inaugural speech, the council's work resumed with the discussion of the schema on the Church (*De Ecclesia*). Three points were debated: the nature of the Church, the role of the episcopate, and the restoration of the permanent diaconate. The debate on these last two points was intense and passionate to the extent that, after several days of great tension, it was decided to proceed with an orientation vote (October 30, 1963), which resulted in a large majority in favour of collegiality (around 90%) and in favour of the permanent diaconate (75%). On December 4, 1963, during the closing session, the first two documents of Vatican II were promulgated: the decree on social communications *Inter mirifica* and the constitution on the liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

Many bishops began expressing concerns about their prolonged absence from their respective dioceses. The need to develop a plan for a drastic reduction in the number of schemas to be discussed arose, with the aim of concluding the council after the third session. This task was entrusted to one of the four cardinal moderators, Cardinal Julius Döpfner, the Archbishop of Munich. The so-called "Döpfner plan" involved examining only the most important issues: the Church, bishops, and the governance of dioceses; revelation; the apostolate of the laity; ecumenism; and the Church in the contemporary world (formerly Schema 17, now Schema 13). The reduction project was presented to the coordinating committee during the December 1963 and January 1964 sessions. The plan was accepted in its broad outlines, and instructions were immediately given to the various conciliar commissions. In September 1964, the council resumed the examination of the schemas on the Church and the pastoral office of bishops. It also began discussing new texts developed during the intersession, including the text on religious freedom, the declaration on Jews, the apostolate of the laity, and the text on the Church in the contemporary world. The discussion of these texts generated serious moments of

tension that culminated in mid-November in the so-called “Black Week” of the council.⁷

Three decisions made by the pope and communicated to the assembly were poorly received by the majority because they seemed to signify a step back from the line of *aggiornamento* (updating). The first decision was to precede the third chapter of the constitution on the Church with a preliminary explanatory note (November 14, 1964), which appeared to diminish the significance of the text on episcopal collegiality. The second decision concerned the postponement of the vote on the text on religious freedom to the next session (November 19, 1964). The third decision involved introducing a certain number of modifications (19) to the decree on ecumenism (November 19, 1964). In his closing speech, Pope Paul VI announced his decision to confer upon the Virgin Mary the title of “Mary, Mother of the Church” (*Maria Mater Ecclesiae*), a title that the conciliar commission responsible for drafting the chapter on the Virgin had not wanted to recognize despite the pressure from some Spanish and Polish bishops. The pope’s decision could have given the impression of “blame” inflicted on the council, which might have raised doubts about Paul VI’s intention to continue in the direction of *aggiornamento*. However, despite appearances, the balance of this third session was largely positive: the shift in favour of *aggiornamento* was firmly confirmed, and three new documents were solemnly promulgated (November 21, 1964): the decree on the Eastern Churches (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*), the decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), and the dogmatic constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*).

After the conclusive votes of the second and third sessions, there remained eleven texts to be revised. For some of them, it involved a complete reworking: the apostolate of the laity, missions, religious freedom, and especially the schema 13 on the Church in the contemporary world. During the third intersession, as much as during the first two, there was intense work by the conciliar commissions and sub commissions, assisted by a large number of experts in various fields, not only theologians and canonists but also sociologists and pastoral workers. In his opening speech, Pope Paul VI made two important announcements: he would establish a Synod of Bishops, and he would visit the headquarters of the United Nations (UN) in New York on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary. During this final

⁷ L’espressione è utilizzata la prima volta da G. Caprile, *Il Concilio Vaticano II. Terzo periodo 1964-1965*, Roma 1966, 474.

session, the assembly resumed the examination of the schemas, particularly those on religious freedom and the Church in the contemporary world. All the texts under discussion were approved and promulgated: the decree on bishops (*Christus Dominus*), the decree on religious life (*Perfectae Caritatis*), the decree on priestly training (*Optatam Totius*), the declaration on Christian education (*Gravissimum Educationis*), the declaration on non-Christian religions (*Nostra Aetate*, October 28, 1965); the dogmatic constitution on revelation (*Dei Verbum*), the decree on the apostolate of the laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, November 18, 1965); the pastoral constitution (*Gaudium et Spes*), the decrees on missions (*Ad Gentes*) and the priesthood (*Presbiterorum Ordinis*), and finally the declaration on religious freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*, December 7, 1965).

The Historiographical Reconstruction

At the end of the 1980s, a major project on the history of the Second Vatican Council was initiated by the Institute of Religious Sciences in Bologna, in collaboration with an international team of researchers and scholars from leading Catholic universities in Europe and America. This project led to the publication of five large volumes, almost simultaneously translated into various Western languages such as English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, and Russian. This monumental work is titled “*Storia del concilio Vaticano II*” (History of the Second Vatican Council) and was published between 1995 and 2001. During the first two decades after the council, the primary focus of the editorial production was on publishing chronicles of the four sessions and monographs or collective works dedicated to the study of the different conciliar documents, mostly the four constitutions, in the form of commentaries.⁸ However, it was only in the second half of the 1980s that the study of the council began to be approached from the perspective and with the methods of history.

The conviction underlying the project was that it was impossible to write the history of Vatican II based solely on the official documents of the council. In 1967, concerned about the potential for partial interpretations, Pope Paul VI established the Office of the Archive of Vatican II, which was entrusted with three objectives: to collect and organize all the documentation of the council, to publish its proceedings, and to collaborate with specialized scholars. For over

⁸ Per un bilancio di questo periodo, si veda Fr. S. Venuto, *La recezione del Concilio Vaticano II nel dibattito storiografico dal 1965 al 1985. Riforma o discontinuità?* Torino 2011.

thirty years, the office was headed by Monsignor Vincenzo Carbone, who also edited the publication of the council's acts, totalling 62 large volumes divided into two main sections: *Acta et Documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando* (related to the "ante-preparatory" and "preparatory" phases, Series I and Series II, respectively), and *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (related to the general congregations, the council's governing bodies, and the General Secretariat). After Monsignor Carbone's retirement in 2000, the documents were transferred as a "special collection" to the Vatican Secret Archives, where an inventory work has been undertaken under the responsibility of Prefect Monsignor Sergio Pagano.⁹ However, studying the council based solely on the official documents was not enough; it was necessary to complement the Roman documentation with other sources, especially regarding the work of the conciliar commissions. This meant engaging in extensive research and cataloguing of the so-called "local sources" of Vatican II, to be sought out everywhere, particularly in the archives of those who had been the protagonists of Vatican II (the fathers, the theologians) and who had preserved material to be rediscovered and inventoried. In this perspective, several research centres on Vatican II were established at major Catholic universities in Europe (Leuven, Paris) and the Americas (Washington, Laval/Quebec, Brazil). The most important, still today, is the Institute for Religious Sciences in Bologna. Together with the Vatican II Archive, it undoubtedly represents the main documentation centre on the council, as it preserves a rich heritage of various collections, although not all containing original documents, but sometimes photocopies sourced from various centres around the world.¹⁰

The Centre for Studies and Research on Vatican II at the Pontifical Lateran University is the "newest" among the institutions dedicated to the history of the council. Its semi-annual journal, *CVII. Studies and Research*, is the only scientific journal entirely dedicated to the in-depth study and updates on Vatican II.¹¹ The desire to ensure a certain "pluralism" in research was undoubtedly the main reason for the

⁹ S. Pagano, *Riflessioni sulle fonti archivistiche del concilio Vaticano II*. In margine ad una recente pubblicazione, in *Cristianesimo nella storia*, 24 (2003) 773-810; P. Doria, *L'Archivio del Concilio Vaticano II: storia e sviluppo*, *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia*, 21 (2012), 135-155.

¹⁰ M. Faggioli e G. Turbanti, *Il Concilio inedito. Fonti del Vaticano II*, Bologna 2001.

¹¹ Ph. Chenaux, *Il Centro Studi e Ricerche sul Concilio Vaticano II*, *CVII. Studi e ricerche*, 6 (2012), 9-15.

establishment of our Centre in 1998 by the then Rector of the Lateran University, Monsignor Angelo Scola, within the Faculty of Theology of the Lateran University, with the aim of “contributing to the systematic deepening of the letter and spirit of Vatican II.”¹² The lack of a centre pursuing such objectives had often been noticed by Vatican II scholars.¹³

Founded by Clement XIII in 1773, when the Society of Jesus was suppressed (in the brief *Commendatissimam* of November 24, 1773), the Lateran University (known until 1913 as the *Apollinare Athenaeum* before its promotion to the rank of University by John XXIII in 1959) sought to establish itself as the spokesperson for Roman theology against the dangerous tendencies of the “nouvelle théologie” from France, in full continuity with the teaching of Pius XII. The so-called *vota* (approximately 273 pages) of the professors of the Lateran expressed the “defensive” concerns of Roman theology before the council: the defence of the primacy and its prerogatives, the defence of Thomism, the defence of the traditional method in exegetical matters. Evidence of the pre-conciliar activism of the Lateran can be found in Father Congar’s *Journal*: “The professors of the Lateran, Piolanti and Garofalo, would like to attribute to themselves a kind of magisterium of orthodoxy, judging everything” (November 13-16, 1960).¹⁴ Some of them (Salvatore Garofalo and A. Romeo) went on the “offensive” in December 1960 against the too open positions of the *Biblicum* in exegetical matters. This proved that they were right. In October 1963, during a visit to the Lateran, Paul VI asked for an end to those sterile controversies. As a defence of Catholic orthodoxy, the Lateran gave the conciliar minority most of its reference theologians.

The historicization of the Second Vatican Council implied a work based not only on the research of sources - although this is absolutely indispensable since the historical method by definition works with sources, and thus history is made with documents - but also on the interpretation of the same sources, the so-called conciliar “hermeneutics.” In other words, the historians who conceived this project of the history of Vatican II have “thought” the council. There are two criteria of interpretation that guided their work: the council as an “event” and the council as a “rupture.” The category of “event” is central, fundamental: the Second Vatican Council was first and

¹² CVII. *Ricerche e documenti*, gennaio 2000, 3-5.

¹³ M. Faggioli, *Council Vatican II: Bibliographical Review 2005-2007*, *Cristianesimo nella storia*, 29 (2008), 569.

¹⁴ Y. Congar, *Diario del Concilio*, I, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano) 2005, 82.

foremost an “event” that, as Giuseppe Alberigo rightly affirms in the introduction to the first volume of the *History of Vatican II*, cannot be reduced to the sixteen approved documents: “It is increasingly relevant to recognize the priority of the conciliar event even in relation to its decisions, which cannot be read as abstract normative dictates, but as an expression and prolongation of the event itself.”¹⁵ The main goal of historians was therefore to reconstruct “the phenomenology of the conciliar work” based on the rigorously critical analysis of all preserved sources (oral and written, official and informal, collective and individual, internal and external). For the creators of this project of the “historicization of Vatican II,” the question to be asked of these sources was not, “how did we arrive at the approval of the corpus of Vatican II decisions?” but rather, “how did Vatican II actually unfold, and what was its significance?” The reconstruction of the council as an event, in its internal and external dynamics, appeared as the indispensable condition for a proper interpretation of the conciliar texts. If the council was first and foremost an event, it is because it marked a sort of rupture in the history of the Church. There truly exists a “before” and an “after” Vatican II: for Christianity, in fact, the council marked the end of the post-Tridentine era, if not even the post-Constantinian era.¹⁶ Without denying the elements of continuity with the preceding period (for example, in the field of liturgy or the apostolate of the laity), these historians emphasized that what has changed with the council is not so much the ideas and the individuals, but rather the judgment formulated about them, what the French historian Etienne Fouilloux calls “the clear reversal of signs brought about by the event.”¹⁷ The theologians who were considered suspect or even condemned a few years earlier (the prominent figures of the “nouvelle théologie française”: Congar, de Lubac, Daniélou, Chenu) had become the teachers of thought in the conciliar renewal. This interpretation of the council as a rupture is not devoid of ideological assumptions. Undoubtedly, objectively, it is an interpretation that underlies the projects and expectations of those who continue to refer more to the “spirit” of the council than to the “letter” of the conciliar

¹⁵ G. Alberigo, *A trent'anni dal Vaticano II*, in *Storia del Concilio Vaticano II, Vol. I: Il cattolicesimo verso una nuova stagione*, 10.

¹⁶ Cfr. M.-D. Chenu, *La fin de l'ère constantinienne*, in *Un concile pour notre temps*, Paris 1961, 59-83.

¹⁷ E. Fouilloux, *Histoire et évènement: Vatican II*, *Cristianesimo nella storia*, 13 (1992), 530.

documents, which have often been the result of a compromise between the positions of the majority and the demands of the minority.

The History of Vatican II, despite its significant merits recognized by all (especially in terms of research, with extensive work on cataloguing sources), has been judged quite severely by some scholars.¹⁸ The interpretation of the council proposed by the “Bologna school,” which is almost hegemonic in historiography in the absence of a true alternative reading based on the method of history, is not the one indicated by the Magisterium of the Church under John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The interpretation that the Magisterium of John Paul II sought to propose, especially starting from the extraordinary synod of 1985, is one of a council that is in continuity with the tradition of the Church. In his address to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2005, Benedict XVI made a distinction between two interpretations of the Council: the first, erroneous, defined as the “hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture” in the history of the Church, which “caused confusion;” the second, correct and fruitful, defined as the “hermeneutics of reform, of renewal in continuity” that “bore fruit.” Referring explicitly to the programmatic opening speech of John XXIII, the Pope stated that it was an “extremely demanding program, just as the synthesis of fidelity and dynamism is demanding.” With the pontificate of Francis, the Second Vatican Council has entered a new phase of its reception. The need felt by his predecessors to defend doctrine against all post-conciliar innovations has given way to the pastoral need to reach out to all existential peripheries of the world in the name of a “theology of the people.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Cfr. A. Marchetto, *Il Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II. Contrappunto per la sua storia*, Città del Vaticano 2005.

¹⁹ Cfr. G. Vian, *Le pape François et Vatican II. Un aperçu*, *Rivista di storia del cristianesimo*, 13 (2016), 302-321.