

JOHN W. O'MALLEY, *What Happened at Vatican II*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA/London 2008/2010, xi + 380 pp. ISBN 978-06-74-03169-2 (hb.), ISBN 978-06-74-04749-5 (pbk.). US\$ 29.95; US\$ 20.

The more time passes after Vatican II, the more important the interpretation of the council gets. The last decades saw an increasing number of attempts to divert the course of its results and to tone down the significance and the radical character of the changes it brought.

Some years ago, John W. O'Malley (Georgetown University) wrote an article titled 'Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?' (*Theological Studies* 67 [2006], 3–33), which in 2007 grew into a book with the same title (New York, 2007) with the intention of showing that Vatican II did indeed significantly change (or tried to change) many things and to explain why and how it did this. O'Malley's current book *What happened at Vatican II* needs to be seen as a continuation of this series in which he tries to back his arguments historically and expands them theologically. Though O'Malley concedes that "shelves are filled to overflowing with books about Vatican II" (p. 1), it is my opinion that this book deserves its own place in one's overfilled shelves.

This book is well-written, very objective, and, most important, fully impartial. The author's goal is not only to move beyond "proof-texting techniques that lift sentences or paragraphs out of context," but also "to move beyond loaded labels like conservative/reactionary and progressive/liberal, which are the ways the council has until now consistently been approached and interpreted" (p. 312).

The author of this book was not present at the Vatican II sessions himself, but at the same time he was in a way indirectly present as he lived in Rome during the council's years (p. ix). This enabled him to get this unique perspective of the council, which he then later enriched and expanded throughout years of research. Consequently, the book contains a well-balanced combination of official texts, verified gossip, and personal insights from the participants' diaries. His intention while writing the book was not "to provide a detailed theological commentary" but to "put the documents [of Vatican II] into their context to provide a sense of before and after" (p. 3), in which he succeeded.

Putting the council into context actually requires the entire first third of the book (Chapters 1 and 2) and although this might have been done in a more compact form, it is in no way superfluous. Very good knowledge of the general history of councils enabled O'Malley to put Vatican II in a historical and comparative perspective (pp. 25–27). As a result, he sees the council as an attempt to heal the traumatic experiences the Roman Catholic Church has had since the French Revolution (p. 4). Despite all continuity with previous councils, it is evident that in O'Malley's eyes Vatican II needs to be profoundly set apart from them. In dealing with the council's original intentions, he correctly identifies it as one of the rare

councils in church history which had no agenda in fighting against something, but instead tried to give a positive message (pp. 17–18).

In the author's eyes, Vatican II not only breaks with the past methodologically but also substantially: it moved from Vatican I's declaration of papal infallibility to the position that the body of the people cannot err (p. 296), from textbook theology conditioned by canon law to a living theology, which is aware of the world around it and does not see this world as something negative and corrupted, but as God's creation, and finally from the authoritative Church with the pope as an absolute monarch in Bismarck's terms to the principle of collegiality as "enhancement of papal primacy and an aid to its proper functioning" (p. 303).

Although O'Malley is obviously a sympathiser of the 'progressive side,' he does not fail to appreciate the contributions of the 'conservatives,' which were "more keenly aware than their opponents of possible negative consequences of decisions the council might make" (p. 293). If the Church consisted only of progressives, it would rush too fast in decisions that it would eventually regret. This balance of left and right is what makes the Church think through all of its decisions and what makes a constructive discussion possible, maintaining continuity while, at the same time, bringing change to the Church by using that what O'Malley identifies as three fundamental principles of the Council: *aggiornamento*, *development*, and *ressourcement* (pp. 299–300).

This is a book written for a wide academic readership interested in the most significant event for the Catholic Church in the twentieth century. Apart from precise historical facts, very useful statistical data, and interesting financial information (pp. 24–25), the reader will also gain insight into the context in which these took place.

Vladimir Latinovic
Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen
vladimir.latinovic@me.com