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Melissa J. Wilde: Vatican II

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INTRODUCTION

ON NOVEMBER 29, 1964, the first Sunday of Advent, Roman Catholics walked into their parishes around the globe and, for the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire, participated in a mass that was given largely in their native tongue.¹ Not only did parishioners find themselves responding to the priest in words they spoke every day, but they spoke more often than they had at any Catholic service they had ever attended. Many Catholics saw the strange sight of their priest consecrating the Eucharist facing the congregation rather than the crucifix behind the altar, along with other new practices meant to make the mass and liturgy more participatory by incorporating the “people of God.”

These were just the first of many changes that came out of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church.² Indeed, as the Church was busily figuring out how to incorporate the vernacular language into its services, Roman Catholic leaders around the world prepared for the Fourth (and final) Session of the Council. These preparations were intense and often contentious. Though the liturgical reforms had been approved at the end of the Second Session, many other, even more important reforms remained to be decided.

By the time it was finished, on December 8, 1965, the Council had turned the Church on its head. To name but a few examples: as a result of the Council, the Roman Catholic Church relinquished its claim to be the one true church, and with it, abdicated claims to power in relation to nation-states, by declaring that the only just form of government was one under which people were free to worship as they pleased. The Council relaxed dietary restrictions and requirements regarding confession and attire for the laity, eliminated the Latin mass, and forever changed the character and identities of Roman Catholic nuns and brothers—and their orders. Most importantly, Vatican II changed the way the Church understood itself, as its identity went from being a hierarchical authority to a church conceived of as the people of God.

Together, these changes have had far-reaching effects on the doctrine, practices, and identity of Roman Catholicism. Politically, the Council has been cited as a central factor in the development of liberation theology in Latin America; as an important theological resource for progressive Catholics in the United States; and as a reason why the Church began to engage more actively in public debates over war and peace, capitalism and economic redistribution.³ Everyday life was affected too: the Council

liberalized religious practices as varied as dietary restrictions (Catholics are no longer required to abstain from meat on Fridays), clothing requirements (Catholic women no longer have to wear head coverings during mass), and annulment procedures.⁴

Simply put, Vatican II represents the most significant example of institutionalized religious change since the Reformation. Though sociological opinion is unified in attributing great significance to the Council, few systematic attempts have been made to examine the forces that determined the character and extent of the changes it effected.⁵ This is partly because the council was huge. It took four sessions, three years (1962–65), and the leadership of two popes to complete. More than three thousand bishops, cardinals, heads of religious orders, and theologians (for convenience, hereafter all of the Council delegates are referred to as bishops) from all over the world attended. The daily events of the Council could easily fill the pages of this book. However, such a history has been more than adequately told and it is not the intent of this study to tell it again.⁶

My goal is to take the rich and complex history of the Council, and re-examine it through a sociological lens—to discover the factors that explain its outcome and in doing so, identify the factors that determine religious change more generally. Ultimately, the goal of this book is to answer some theoretical questions about cultural change: Why do some religious institutions adapt to cultural change, while others do not? When religious institutions do change, what determines what changes and what remains constant? In essence: When, why, and how do religious institutions, which are arguably the most rigidly structured and codified institutions in the world, adapt as the societies around them march onward?

Though many theories in the sociology of religion make implicit assumptions about institutional change, and though founding sociologists such as Max Weber and Émile Durkheim examined it, there is surprisingly little theory available to explain how, why, or when religious change occurs.⁷ This is mainly because the sociology of religion, with a few notable exceptions,⁸ has not attempted to explain institutional change but has focused instead on individual participation and its effects, or on religious growth or decline. Such studies, though important, do little to help us understand the organizational resources, forces, and mobilization efforts involved in an event like the Second Vatican Council.

Consequently, though this analysis is informed by these and other important research in the sociology of religion, throughout this book I also draw from theories of historical events, organizational and cultural change, social movements, and even from economic sociology.⁹

Vatican II is an ideal case through which to examine questions about religious change. Change, at least of great magnitude, is not common in Roman Catholic history. Councils are rare events, convened only by the

pope, and occur less than once a century on average. Vatican I, the Church's last council before Vatican II, ended prematurely in 1869 as a result of the Franco-Prussian War and did little of note besides declaring the pope to be infallible. Prior to Vatican I, the Church had not held a council since the Council of Trent closed in 1563.¹⁰

Furthermore, the changes that came from the Council were almost completely unexpected. To appreciate just how remarkable Vatican II was, one must understand that even once the Council had been called, change did not seem likely. The Roman Curia, the men in charge of the Church's administration, who did not favor change, seemed to be at the zenith of their power. For four hundred years, the Curia had determined the pronouncements on theology and doctrine that constituted Roman Catholicism. They frequently used their powers of censorship to curb theologians, ban books, and keep the Church "untarnished" by modern thought. Their vocation was protecting the Church from heresy, something which by all accounts they did quite well. Initially, even the bishops who would rise to the greatest prominence once the Council began expected little more from it than a "rubber-stamp" of the Curia's conservative views.

When Pope John XXIII announced that he was calling a council, he had only been in office for three months, was seventy-seven years old, and was expected to be an "interim" pope—a placeholder who mollified progressives but made conservatives feel secure because of his age and "simple" nature. The resources, power, and confidence of the Roman Curia had perhaps never been greater. Though upset by John's announcement, they had almost complete control over the Council's preparations, proceedings, and agenda.

Given this situation at the start of the Council, many saw the unexpected and sweeping changes that came from it as nothing short of miraculous. Popular explanations of the miracle focused on one man: Pope John XXIII. In 1962, before any Council reforms had yet been solidified, but after the First Session had already signaled that Vatican II would not rubber-stamp the policies and views of the Curia, *Time* magazine declared John "Man of the Year," with the following justification:

[1962 saw] the beginning of a revolution in Christianity, the ancient faith whose 900 million adherents make it the world's largest religion. . . . It began on Oct. 11 in Rome and was the work of the man of the year, Pope John XXIII, who, by convening . . . Vatican II, set in motion ideas and forces that will affect not merely Roman Catholics, not only Christians, but the whole world's ever-expanding population.¹¹

In contrast to such explanations of the Council, I do not see the pope as the primary reason why the Council took the turn that it did.

There is no question that Pope John XXIII is an essential part of why Vatican II happened at all; it takes a pope to call a council.¹² Thus, John

provided the “political opportunity” necessary for reform to occur.¹³ But he died just weeks before the Second Session of the Council was to start, after only one of the hundreds of reforms which would come from it had passed. Thus, the overwhelming progressive outcome of the Council cannot be attributed to John.¹⁴ Furthermore, John’s successor, Paul VI, proved to be more conservative than John.¹⁵ In fact, it would become clear that, on a number of issues, the Council was disposed to make much more progressive reforms than Paul desired.

Thus, even though they were certainly necessary, neither of the popes is a sufficient explanation of how and why Vatican II became the watershed event that it was. This in is large part because though there were a number of ways that John and Paul could play a role in the Council,¹⁶ there were few moments when either of them actively intervened. Intervening in the proceedings of the Council was difficult for the pope because the purpose of a council is to call all of the bishops of the world together so they can discuss their views with their colleagues. By definition, if such discussion was not needed, a council would not have been called. Once it was under way, the bishops expected to decide what issues needed to be addressed and how to address them, and anticipated doing so with some autonomy. Thus, though the pope provided the opportunity for change, with rare exceptions the bishops decided the direction and extent of that change. Ultimately, they decided to change a great deal. The purpose of this book is to figure out why.

WHAT DOES NOT EXPLAIN THE COUNCIL

The Council’s overwhelmingly progressive outcome cannot be explained by such traditional sociological factors as power, resources, interests, or even popular pressure. At the beginning of the Council, conservatives had, through the Roman Curia, more formal power than did progressives¹⁷ and more of almost every type of resource we can imagine: money, institutional access, staff, even printing presses. And they had these resources concentrated precisely where the central decisions about the Council would take place, namely, the Vatican. If power and resources could explain the outcome of the Council, nothing much would have come from it.

Interests, at least those associated with money, power, or keeping the laity happy, also cannot explain the outcome of the Council. The Declaration of Religious Freedom, a key reform that came from the Council, abdicated the preferential status the Church had enjoyed in many countries (and the money and power which came with it). It is difficult to envision an interest-based explanation which can account for such a move. Finally, as much as popular accounts of the Council emphasize its focus on the

“Church as the People of God,” Vatican II is also not a story of a religious institution responding to pressure from below. Many of the reforms that came from the Council were almost entirely irrelevant to lay concerns, and the reform that was the most central to the daily lives of laypersons, birth control, was tabled.

PART I: EXPLAINING THE COUNCIL

The first part of the book presents my explanation of the Council’s outcome through three distinct analytical chapters. Chapter 1 answers a research question which is necessary for all of the later chapters. That is: Given the way things looked at the start of the Council, with the Curia in control, how did any change occur?

The answer to this question lies in key moments of the First Session which helped to eliminate the initial disadvantages progressives faced. These events began on the very first day of the Council, when a few progressive bishops organized and decided to reject the Curia’s agenda for that day by refusing to elect members to the conciliar commissions. These progressive leaders argued that they needed more time for deliberations among themselves and within their national conferences. And, to everyone’s surprise, they won.

This unanticipated occurrence began a shift in expectations in which many bishops began to believe that real change was possible from the Council. This shift was furthered by the second key moment of the First Session: when it became clear that liturgical reforms—the first issue the Council debated—were supported by the vast majority of the bishops, and that the schema would have an easy passage. Though the issue was not contentious, it demonstrated to everyone that the vast majority of bishops were willing to undertake real changes and do more than rubber-stamp the Curia’s opinions.

The possibilities for the Council were finally cemented during the contentious debate on the sources of revelation. In a very close vote, a majority, but not the needed two-thirds majority, voted to reject the conservative schema. Though it looked like the Curia was going to triumph, Pope John intervened and mandated that the schema be sent back to committee because such a large majority of the bishops rejected it. This act was interpreted by many as legitimating the power of the bishops’ votes over the procedural rules and regulations established by the Curia.

Together, these occurrences are an essential part of explaining why, even though they had greater resources and power at its start, conservatives were not able to dictate the agenda or outcome of the Council. However, though the shift that occurred during the First Session is crucial to

understanding why any change occurred at the Council, it is also true that Vatican II did not change everything it might have. Indeed, in the end it would become clear that the Council left some very important but difficult issues alone, in particular, birth control, priestly celibacy, and the ordination of women. And thus, a crucial question arises: Once the opportunity was present, what explains why some things changed and others did not? This is the comparative question which motivates the remainder of the book and is addressed by a very simple, but necessary, preliminary question in chapter 2. That is, who wanted what, and why?

When we examine the various priorities of the bishops at the Council, four distinct groups of bishops emerge: those from European Catholic monopolies such as Italy and Spain, who wanted no change; those from non-monopolistic countries (meaning either non-Catholic countries or Catholic countries with a formal separation of church and state) in Europe and North America, who prioritized ecumenism (or bettering relations with Protestants); those from Latin America, who prioritized economic justice and reaching the poor and unchurched in their countries; and those from Africa and Asia, who had a full range of ecumenical outreach and social-justice concerns oriented toward helping the Church grow in their missionary countries. Comparisons between these four groups of bishops allow us to isolate the factors that directed the bishops' priorities at the Council, and ultimately understand the factors that affect religious leaders today.

The fact that bishops from Italy and Spain steadfastly fought against any accommodation with the modern world is consistent with current theories in the sociology of religion, which argue that religious diversity creates more accommodationist religious organizations by creating competition. The complete lack of diversity left bishops from monopolistic countries unconcerned about losing constituents and unwilling to engage in changing their institution.

Though it initially seems difficult to explain within current theories, the fact that bishops from Latin America were overwhelmingly progressive despite the seemingly monopolistic situation of the Church in Latin America can be explained by the key difference between the Church in Latin America and the Church in Italy and Spain. The Latin American Church was in decline, their monopoly was unstable. Leaders of unstable monopolies make every attempt to staunch the flow of their losses and become much more open to change than their counterparts in stable monopolies.

Finally, while they were certainly more willing to change their church than their colleagues from monopolistic environments, the fact that bishops from non-monopolistic European countries prioritized bettering relations with Protestants suggests that current theories need some tweaking. It seems that religious diversity causes religious leaders not only to care

about their constituents but also to care a great deal about legitimacy. This is the case because bettering relations with Protestants entailed addressing a number of important legitimacy critiques being made against the Church at the time. Ecumenically oriented bishops focused on addressing these critiques (two of which, the Church's stance on religious freedom and Catholic devotion to Mary, are described in detail in the case studies), even at the expense of their constituents' wishes, as their neglect of the issue of birth control, which is examined in chapter 6, suggests.

These findings provide insight into the factors that direct religious change more generally. In particular, they suggest that religious institutions, like other organizations, respond as much to concerns about legitimacy as they do to concerns about efficiency. Whether legitimacy concerns become paramount depends upon the characteristics of a particular environment, most importantly, whether it is stable and whether it contains other prominent institutions that can provide leaders with a reference point and with specific legitimacy challenges. Religious leaders who are insulated from other religions and the legitimacy concerns they pose, like the bishops from Italy and Spain during the Council, will most strongly and successfully resist change.

Chapter 2 also demonstrates that Latin American bishops initially had difficulty embracing their Northern European colleagues' goal of improving relations with Protestants. This finding thereby raises the final analytical question addressed in the book. That is, given the initial divisiveness ecumenical reforms created, but the overwhelmingly ecumenical tone of the Council in the end, *how* did progressive leaders from Northern Europe and North America develop compromise positions that the majority of the rank and file bishops would support?

This question is the focus of chapter 3, which argues that a great deal of the Council's progressive outcome can be explained by a relatively simple sociological fact: because progressives built a far more extensive and flexible organization than their conservative counterparts, they were more successful at developing compromise positions the vast majority of bishops could support. These organizational differences derived from different cultural understandings of the nature of authority in the Roman Catholic Church. Progressives believed in the doctrine of "collegiality," which stated that the bishops convening together have the same teaching authority as the pope—a doctrine that conservatives saw as threatening the authority and primacy of the pope. Consequently, while progressives built a highly effective, consensus-based organization as soon as the Council began, conservatives were much slower to mobilize, and when they did so, formed a hierarchical organization which never developed into much more than a letter-writing campaign to the pope.

Vatican II is thus a story of the process through which individuals changed their institution, and thereby history, by enacting their beliefs and cultures.

PART II: THE CASE STUDIES

The second part of this book, which consists of the three final empirical chapters, narrows the focus of the analysis to three specific Council proposals. Of these three, one passed, the Declaration on Religious Freedom, and two failed, conservative attempts to further elevate the status of the Blessed Virgin Mary and progressive attempts to allow the laity access to birth control. Together, these chapters illustrate how the eventfulness of the First Session explored in chapter 1, the variations in the bishops' priorities explored in chapter 2, and the progressives' organizational advantages explored in chapter 3 determined the success or failure of particular conciliar reforms.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Declaration on Religious Freedom, one of the most important reforms to come from the Council. The declaration in essence stated that the best form of secular government is one that allows people to worship as they please. The story of the declaration illustrates how legitimacy concerns were communicated to and understood by the bishops and theologians from Northern Europe and North America prior to the Council and ultimately led them to fight for the reform in the Council Hall.

Chapter 5 turns to the first of the two failed reforms examined in the book, an attempt by conservatives to further elevate and emphasize Catholic devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, long an essential part of Catholic worship in many parts of the world. A document on Mary that would assert her central and almost independent importance to Catholicism was proposed at the beginning of the Council. Further elevation of Mary's status within Roman Catholic doctrine would have essentially ended ecumenical dialogue. Progressive bishops therefore fought tenaciously to keep the Council from emphasizing Mary's importance, or indeed from officially bestowing on her any additional titles or accolades. In one of the hardest-fought battles of the Council, during which the pope was squarely allied with conservatives, progressives, largely because of their organizational advantages, succeeded in voting down the separate document and avoided most of the terms Protestants saw as problematic.

In the long run, the Council's decision about Mary resulted in a de-emphasis of Catholic devotion to her. Those most against de-emphasizing Mary (mainly bishops from Italy, Spain, and Portugal) claimed that doing so would be an affront to the laity in their countries. However, the final

case study, presented in chapter 6, demonstrates that lay pressure was certainly not a definitive motivator for either conservatives from monopolistic environments like Italy and Spain or progressives from Northern Europe and North America. Both groups had ample evidence that their laity were very interested in birth control reform, but neither fought for it.

The fact that progressives from Northern Europe let the issue die, despite strong lay interest, demonstrates that ecumenical concerns really were at the forefront of their agenda. Protestants considered birth control to be a matter “internal to the Church.” Feeling little ecumenical pressure to bring about birth control reform, progressives protested very little when Paul removed the issue from the Council’s agenda.

THE DATA

A wide variety of primary and secondary sources helped me develop this explanation. Though the primary materials are described in detail in the appendices, because of their importance it is worth briefly describing them here. The first primary data source consists of transcripts of interviews with more than eighty of the most important bishops and theologians at the Council. The interviews were conducted by Rocco Caporale during the First and Second Sessions of the Council as part of his dissertation research in sociology at Columbia University. Using snowball sampling (and nine languages), Caporale asked respondents to identify five of the most important people at the Council and stopped when no new names were being volunteered.

I also use archival materials from six collections (see appendices A and B), which were in seven languages. The majority of these materials focus on progressive and conservative leaders and include formal minutes from meetings, letters and other personal correspondence, petitions, and other documents.¹⁸

Because both the archival and interview data admittedly omits the perspectives of the more than three thousand “rank and file” bishops who ultimately decided the outcome of Council reforms with their votes, I obtained the records of these votes from the Vatican Secret Archive (Archivio Segreto Vaticano), and had them entered into an electronic database. The vote tallies identify individual bishops, their dioceses, and their votes on ten of the most contentious council reforms. With these data I assess national trends that were previously obscured because the Vatican had only made summaries of the votes available to the public.

By the time it was over, the Council had enacted a wider variety of reforms than had ever been envisioned at its start. This is in no small part

because a small group of progressive bishops stole the day, convinced the majority of bishops not only that change was needed but that it *was possible*, and, ultimately, turned Vatican II into the most significant religious event of the twentieth century. We now turn to the first few days, during which they accomplished this crucial goal and ensured that Vatican II would not be, as many had predicted, a rubber stamp Council.