

INTRODUCTION

Since its publication, *Reclaiming Vatican II* has been reviewed in numerous circles among Catholic, Protestant, and secular outlets. Furthermore, in addition to the average reader, we have received letters from bishops, seminary faculty, chancery offices, theologians, and historians around the world expressing their support and gratitude, while offering insights to their local experience of the Church. Even more edifying is the number of requests to provide study materials for the text so that parishioners and individuals alike might come to a better understanding of Vatican II and its true mission. It was the frequent request for such materials that has led to the publication of this study guide. In addition to overwhelming the author with a spirit of thanksgiving, these communications have revealed the real-world consequences of the book and how it is affecting people's lives.

After reading thousands of messages, two reoccurring themes emerged. Firstly, many people were not aware of the distinction between the council and the paracouncil. They knew something wasn't quite right about the general reception and implementation of Vatican II, but they couldn't name it nor explain its origins. Learning about the paracouncil and its influence on the so-called "Spirit of Vatican II" was an epiphany that helped them distinguish between popular narratives about the council and the true intention of the council per se.

The second theme was an appreciation of the overall tone of the book and its way of addressing different topics, especially certain sensitive subjects such as the liturgy and traditionalism. Rather than striking the usual tone of defensiveness or aggression so commonplace in the realm of social media, *Reclaiming Vatican II* discussed flashpoints of controversy with an air of freedom,

respect and objectivity recognizing that every Christian, no matter where they fall on the religious spectrum, is still trying to love Christ and the Church. This appreciation for the attitude of the text betrays an underlying exhaustion prevalent in our society with the inability to dialogue civilly and respectfully. The moment we turn on the news, we are hammered with polemics and theater. It is difficult to find integrity and a genuine desire to communicate. It is refreshing to see someone sincerely trying to make a point while honoring the other perspective.

These observations reinforced by thousands of readers show that *Reclaiming Vatican II* is starting a different kind of conversation about the council, one which many people did not even realize needed to happen, namely, the distinction between Vatican II, paraconciliarism, and traditionalism. Nowadays, many commentators approach the council from opposite sides of the spectrum: Either (1) they applaud the council *carte-blanche* invoking its name when convenient to support certain initiatives and programs, but without catechizing on its foundational teachings, or (2) they renounce it as a new-age phenomenon that has splintered the Church and needs to be wholly revoked. Neither of these perspectives hold water.

The tension between these two camps—inappropriately labeled “liberal” and “conservative” Catholicism—has disproportionately influenced the last fifty years of theological conversation and liturgical praxis. As a result, the council remains a hotbed of discrepancy for certain members of the Church while the vast majority of Catholics in the pew remain indifferent about Vatican II. However, there is another way to understand the council, one that is not bound to polarizing tensions. That was the purpose of *Reclaiming Vatican II* from the get-go. To lay aside the past decades of conflict and pick up the teachings of the council with a humble heart seeking only God’s will by trusting the Church.

That leads to one last point about the overall response to *Reclaiming Vatican II*, namely, it reveals that there are tens-of-thousands of Christians willing and able to embrace the council anew.

This is especially true among Millennials and Zoomers (also known as Gen Z). It is surprising and inspiring to see the number of young Catholics who are reading the book. Unlike their predecessors, they did not live during the time of the council nor did they experience the immediate implementation phase. They approach Vatican II topics typically deemed “controversial” by Boomers and Gen X (for example, Latin, *ad orientem*, sexuality and marriage, social justice, and so on) with a kind of sincerity that is uninfluenced by agendas and unrestricted by baggage. Younger generations discuss these issues much more freely and review Church tradition without the anxiety of being “pre-Vatican II” or “post-Vatican II.” Those terms are meaningless to Millennials and Zoomers. Confronted, as we are everyday by the obstinacy of secularism, our main concern is the essential nature of the Church and the foundational principles of Christianity. Likewise, we are open to expressing the faith in whatever modes are most effective whether they be from the sixteenth century or the twenty-first makes little difference. Truth is timeless, and some things just work no matter what year they are utilized. In that regard, an increasing number of younger Catholics are beginning to read and study Vatican II with fascination, finding in the documents a bedrock on which to launch a new age of missionary discipleship rooted in tradition and evangelization.

As we provide this study guide for *Reclaiming Vatican II*, it is done with great hope for the future of the Church. The enthusiasm with which our readers have endorsed the book is both touching and inspirational. We want to thank the many readers and supporters who have helped bring this most recent project to fruition. Your feedback and counsel have proved invaluable.

As readers work through *Reclaiming Vatican II* and this study guide, they may find that they would like to take notes on what they’ve learned, whether through study or reflection. We have provided pages in the back of this guide for that very purpose. We encourage the reader to discern ways in which the Lord is calling them to fulfill the vision of the Council in their own lives.

We pray that this study guide will build on the momentum of renewed vigor for a deeper knowledge of the council documents so that we might be the generation who works to reclaim Vatican II to the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Praised be Jesus Christ, now and forever!

Your servant and priest in Christ,

Fr. Blake Britton

CHAPTER 1

THE PARACOUNCIL: WHAT HAPPENED?

Chapter Summary

Vatican II is a point of contention for many within the Church. Tensions permeate social media and other places of discourse with so-called “traditional” and “liberal” Catholics disagreeing about Vatican II’s supposed implications. But both sides are laboring under some serious misunderstandings. As outlined in the introduction of *Reclaiming Vatican II*, both liberal and traditional camps are responding to what Henri de Lubac calls “the para-Council”—a poor caricature of what the council really taught. Thus, before we can reintroduce ourselves to Vatican II’s true spirit and begin to reclaim its legacy for the Church, we need to get a better handle on what led to its misimplementation in the first place. There are three main sources for the paracouncil: 1) The council of the theologians, 2) the council of the media, and 3) the council of the age.

The council of the theologians refers to certain theologians who, instead of adhering to the documents of the council as written decided to follow what they called “the spirit of Vatican II.” In setting aside the texts and focusing instead on the council’s “spirit,” a vast margin was left open for the question on how this spirit was to be implemented. In lieu of promoting the documents as written and in cooperation with the magisterium, certain

theologians presented the teaching of the council through the lens of their own theological agenda, foisting themselves on public opinion as authentic interpreters of the council.

The council of the media refers to media outlets becoming a mouthpiece for theologians promoting their personal interpretations of the council as well as the media's parceling of the Church into liberal and conservative factions. It is inappropriate to interpret the Church through political categories. The Church intersects constantly with our social and political realities, but we must remember that the Church is a divine institution that must be understood in a spiritual way. To interpret Church actions as nothing more than a skirmish between liberal and conservative groups will always prove insufficient and lopsided. Yet that is exactly what the media did when reporting on Vatican II. The effects of this kind of thinking is still negatively influencing dialogue in the Church.

The council of the age refers to the cultural and historical context that shaped the overall reception of the paracouncil and Vatican II. The 1960s and 1970s were a turbulent time in world history. In an age when doing unconventional things was heroic and casting off the shackles of antiquity was a virtue, certain theologians' interpretations of the Second Vatican Council appeared to be yet another way of "sticking it to the man." For some in the Church, Vatican II signaled that Catholicism was ready to sync-up with the society's revolutions and ideologies. This likewise usurped the overall message of the council.

Not everyone received the paracouncil with enthusiasm. In the decades following Vatican II, clergy and laity alike sought a return to tradition as a means of coping with the changes spreading throughout the Church under the paracouncil's influence. However, many of the issues raised by traditionalist groups, especially in regard to the liturgy, are not contentions with the council itself but rather with the ways in which specific individuals promoted paraconciliar opinions. Reclaiming Vatican II will be

key in uniting these opposing trends in the Church and moving forward as one Body in Christ.

Chapter Outline

- I. The current understanding of Vatican II in the Church
 - A. Decades after its closing session, Vatican II continues to be a point of contention for many Catholics
 - i. This has led to the development of two camps in the Church each with their own interpretation of Vatican II
 1. Paraconciliarists, also known as “liberal” Catholics
 2. Traditionalists, also known as “conservative” Catholics
 - ii. How did these opposing views of the council form?
- II. The origins of the paracouncil
 - A. What is the paracouncil?
 - i. An interpretation of the Second Vatican Council’s teachings rooted in personal ideologies or political and theological agendas that contradict the officially promulgated texts and intentions of the council itself
 - B. Three major sources of the paracouncil
 - i. The council of the theologians
 1. A term used to describe the post-conciliar theologians who are dismissive or disappointed in the declarations of the council and utilize the implementation phase (1965–present) as an opportunity to promote their personal theologies while claiming to act in the so-called “Spirit of Vatican II”
 - ii. The council of the media

1. A term used to describe the mass media's misrepresentation of Vatican II as a political event. It is due to the influence of media outlets that the labels "conservative" and "liberal" are now mainstream in Catholicism. Fr. Blake calls this the "liberal-versus-conservative narrative." The introduction of a political and polarizing commentary into Catholic culture continues to have negative consequences as people now place themselves into ideological camps as opposed to seeing the Church in dialogue

iii. The council of the age

1. A term used to describe the overarching cultural, political, economic, and religious movements present in the immediate implementation phase of Vatican II (1965–1980). This ambience greatly influenced the general reception of the council and the paracouncil

C. Fall-out from the paracouncil

- i. These three influences (that is, the council of the theologians, the council of the media, and the council of the age) led to a largescale misimplementation of the Second Vatican Council on multiple levels. Several generations of Catholics were misinformed about the true purpose of Vatican II, leading to a variety of practices and abuses—liturgical or otherwise—that did not represent the authentic vision of the council. Furthermore, many of the graces intended by the council have yet to be realized or shared with the People of God

III. The origins of traditionalism

A. Conservative reaction to the paracouncil

- i. As a response to the disingenuous presentation of Vatican II by the paracouncil and the resulting issues, a

number of clergy, religious, and laity rebelled against the council and sought to negate its seemingly disastrous effects. This is especially true in regard to the sacred liturgy

- ii. This reaction is known as the “traditionalist” or “conservative” movement due to their desire to return to the traditional practice of Catholicism before the reforms of Vatican II
 1. The most prominent of these groups is the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX) founded by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre although there are several others
 - iii. The majority of criticism hurled against Vatican II by traditionalists is unfounded. In fact, they are reacting to the paracouncil, *not* the Second Vatican Council
 1. Traditionalists claim Vatican II got rid of Latin in the Mass when in fact it did the opposite. The council reasserts the indispensable role of Latin in Catholic tradition and the need to retain it in the liturgy (that is, SC 50–60)
- B. A path forward for the paracouncil and traditionalism
- i. Fr. Blake holds that the way to reconcile with traditionalists disenfranchised with the Church is by reclaiming the original intention of Vatican II. Likewise, there needs to be pastoral initiatives to educate the faithful on the documents themselves as opposed to other people’s interpretations of the texts. This will safeguard against any false narratives that may be peddled in the name of Vatican II as well as help in defending the council’s legitimate purpose

Study Questions

1. What is the paracouncil and what are its three major sources?

2. Describe briefly in your own words the council of the theologians, the council of the media, and the council of the age.
3. Can you name any particular consequences of the paracouncil? Any you have personally been affected by or witnessed?
4. Explain the origins of the modern traditionalist movement and some of their criticisms against Vatican II.

Key Terms

The paracouncil (pp. 1–2)

The council of the theologians (pp. 2–6)

The council of the media (pp. 6–10)

The council of the age (pp. 10–11)

Traditionalism (pp. 11–14)

Society of St. Pius X/SSPX (pp. 11–12)

Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (p. 11)