

Looking through the Wrong End of the Telescope? Refracting *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

by Edward Foley, Capuchin

Advances in astrophysics over the past three decades have resulted in previously unimaginable developments in the design of telescopes. Land-based telescopes now have spaced-based partners. Traditional optical telescopes have been enhanced with lasers, coupled with spectroscopes, and redesigned with complex mirror segmentations. Then there are the radio telescopes and even cosmic ray telescopes that look nothing like what most amateurs point toward the stars; they are even devoid of any image-forming optical systems that have traditionally defined the very nature of a telescope!

Despite all of these advances, it yet seems appropriate to employ the most common and original form of the telescope as a metaphor for the process of interpretation that has surrounded *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (hereafter SC) since its promulgation in 1963. Such is true not only because this author is a veritable amateur when it comes to the physics of the previously noted modern advances, but also because the misuse of a traditional refracting telescope creates serious distortions and even polar opposite readings of things and events. A poorly refracted interpretation of SC can do the same.

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Interpreting Vatican II

While the Second Vatican Council ended in December of 1965, the ongoing interpretation, reinterpretation, and debate about the reinterpretation of that Council continues in a lively way. The lines of that debate have been drawn with multiple vectors. One metaphor for the divisions over the interpretation of Vatican II is mirrored in the emergence of two quite different scholarly journals in the wake of that Council. *Concilium* was a Dutch-based publication that appeared in 1964; yet within a few years, *Communio* appeared, edited by some of the experts who had joined in the founding of *Concilium* (e.g., the then Prof. Joseph Ratzinger) but then abandoned that project over deep theological differences. These two journals offered different appraisals of the Council, the former from what could be considered a neo-Thomistic viewpoint and the latter from a more neo-Augustinian viewpoint.¹ Shortly after his election in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI outlined more

clearly the two competing interpretations of Vatican II symbolized in those journals: one a “hermeneutic of dis-

¹ See, for example, Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning*, Kindle edition (New York: Paulist Press, 2012).

continuity and rupture” and the other “a hermeneutic of reform,’ of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us.”² The Pontiff clearly prefers the second.

There are many methods one can employ for interpreting or reinterpreting the individual documents and overall contribution of the Second Vatican Council. In reflecting upon Karl Rahner’s seminal reflection on the interpretation of Vatican II,³ John Dadosky suggests that two different yet inextricably related approaches to interpreting Vatican II might be through what he calls a “micro-hermeneutics” as distinguished from what he considers a “macro-hermeneutics” of the Council.⁴ According to Dadosky, a micro-hermeneutics is one in which scholars “shift through the enormous number of sources that pertain to the sixteen documents of the council, examine their authorship, their historical context relative to previous councils, their literary style, their form, content, and so on.”⁵ While we did not use that specific language, this micro-hermeneutical approach was one that my colleague Prof. Dianne Bergant and I pursued a number of years ago when examining the methodological presuppositions behind some key documents of Vatican II.⁶

The macro-hermeneutical approach, on the other hand, is less about examining aspects of the individual documents and more about considering the Council as a whole and how the Council reflects the Roman Catholic Church’s self-understanding more broadly. In this regard, Dadosky considers Rahner’s 1979 article a work of macro-hermeneutics in which Rahner emphasized the Church’s coming of age as a “world church,” as symbolized by the way it simultaneously brought the local church and inculturation to the fore.⁷ Dadosky would argue that this macro-hermeneutical approach of Rahner recognized Vatican II as an event that both had continuity with the past and also signaled a notable discontinuity, especially with previous councils.⁸

Interpreting *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

Employing Dadosky’s categories, one might suggest that more authors have taken a micro-hermeneutical approach to SC than a macro-hermeneutical approach. Often this micro-hermeneutical approach limits itself to a single topic from SC—for example, Anthony Ruff’s rich historical, musical and theological examination of the concept of the “Treasure of Sacred Music,” noted in SC 112.⁹ Recently, however, a most compelling macro-analysis of SC has emerged in the writings of Massimo Faggioli, who argues the need for linking SC with “the ultimate meaning of Vatican II.” He believes that “only a hermeneutic based on the liturgy and the Eucharist, as developed in the liturgical constitution, can preserve the riches of the overall ecclesiology of Vatican II.”¹⁰ Thus Faggioli passionately underscores “the dire need for an interpretation of Vatican II ...centered on *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.”¹¹

2 Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia (22 December 2005), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia_en.html.

3 Karl Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979): 716-272.

4 John Dadosky, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Re-Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Heythrop Journal* 49 (2008): 742-63, here 744.

5 Dadosky, 744.

6 Dianne Bergant and Edward Foley, “The Beginning or the End of a Theological Agenda: Tracing the Methodological Flows through Vatican II,” *Gregorianum* 84 (2003): 315-345.

7 Dadosky, 743.

8 Dadosky, 744.

9 Anthony Ruff, *Sacred Music and Liturgical Reform: Treasures and Transformations* (Chicago: Hillebrand Books, 2007), especially Part IV of the book, pp. 272ff.

10 Massimo Faggioli, *True Reform: Liturgy and Ecclesiology in Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 16.

11 Faggioli, 15.

Unfortunately, as Faggioli and others have noted, instead of SC being a fundamental lens for reading the council, it is often interpreted through other documents of that Council, especially *Lumen Gentium*.¹² In some ways, this could be the metaphorical equivalent of looking through the wrong end of the telescope. True, *Lumen Gentium* is a “Dogmatic Constitution” while SC is only (?) a “Constitution.” On the other hand, in the view of the Italian jurist and Vatican II peritus Giuseppe Dossetti and Faggioli, the ecclesiology embedded in SC is not only chronologically earlier than the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium*, but also manifests “its theological priority in the overall corpus of Vatican II.”¹³

It is one thing to offer an interpretation of SC through a document like *Lumen Gentium*, since both are “Constitutions” from Vatican II, and some could argue that *Lumen Gentium* carries more theological weight since it is a “Dogmatic Constitution.” What is more common and more problematic from my perspective, however, is the way that SC—or more frequently specific teachings of SC—are interpreted through documents of obviously lesser magisterial weight. This is clearly looking through the wrong end of the telescope, placing the observer further from—instead of closer to—SC. Ironically, instead of offering a true magnification of SC, this kind of reverse refraction often leads to not only a minimizing of the teachings of SC but also their reversal.

A glaring example of this reverse interpretation can be found in the 2001 Vatican instruction *Liturgiam Authenticam* (LA), On the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Publication of the Books of the Roman Liturgy.¹⁴ Issued by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, this document was promulgated as The Fifth Instruction ‘For the Right Implementation of the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council.

Despite the fact that the document itself reports that it was approved by Pope John Paul II (LA 133), it is more properly understood as an administrative rather than a legislative document. As canonist John Huels explains, “The statement at the end of a curial document that the pope has seen and approved the text is not an indication of a papal mandate to issue legislation. This is pontifical approval *in forma communi*—in general form—whereby the document remains an act of executive power.”¹⁵ Huels further notes that the norms contained in such documents (what he labels “General Administrative Norms”) are binding on those for whom they are drawn up “but they are of lesser juridic weight than legislation or customary law ... [and] anything in them contrary to legislation lacks all force.”¹⁶ This would mean that, *de facto*, they are of lesser juridic weight than any legislative directives of an Ecumenical Council and null and void to the extent that they would contradict any legislative directives of any conciliar documents.

With this information in hand, let us turn to LA and its interpretation of the “right implementation” of SC, especially regarding the issue of translating the texts of the liturgy into the vernacular.

12 See, for example, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s 2001 presentation at the opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Aversa (Italy) entitled “The Ecclesiology of Vatican II,” *L’Osservatore Romano, Weekly English Edition* (23 January 2002): 5, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/CDFECCV2.HTM>.

13 This is a position taken in his posthumous publication *Per una ‘chiesa eucaristica,’* ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Giuseppe Ruggieri (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), cited in Faggioli, *True Reform*, 6.

14 On-line at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20010507_liturgiam-authenticam_en.html.

15 John M. Huels, *Liturgy and Law: Liturgical Law in the System of Roman Catholic Canon Law* (Montreal: Wilson & Lafleur Ltée, 2006), 87-8.

16 Huels, 89.

Reading *Sacrosanctum Concilium* Through *Liturgiam Authenticam*

SC gives limited but pointed attention to the issue of vernacular translation for the Roman Catholic liturgy. While noting that Latin is to be preserved, no. 36.3 allows the competent territorial ecclesiastical authority to decide if and how much the vernacular is to be employed; this decision requires subsequent approval by Rome. This same article (SC 36.4) notes that the competent territorial authority needs to approve all translations into the vernacular.¹⁷

Besides these specific norms regarding the translation of the Latin liturgy into the vernacular, SC offers other useful norms derived from the pastoral nature of the liturgy. In SC 34 the Council decrees, “The rites should radiate a rich simplicity; they should be brief and lucid, avoiding pointless repetition; they should be intelligible to the people, and should not in general require much explanation.”¹⁸ This instruction follows a discussion that recognizes while the liturgy is an act of worship, it is also meant to be formative for the assembly (SC 33). In particular, the Council gives specific consideration to the prayers of the liturgy that, while spoken by the priest to God, are yet said in the name of the assembly. It concludes that all the sung, prayed, and performed parts of the liturgy are meant to be nourishment for the people (SC 33). It is precisely because of its formative, instructive, and nourishing nature that it should be concise, lucid, and accessible to the faithful.

Following the groundbreaking work of Ladislav Örsy,¹⁹ Huels recognizes that legal texts contain many different kinds of statements, e.g., some may be juridical while others are theological or even factual.²⁰ In the same way, a conciliar constitution such as SC contains many literary forms, some theological and others factual. I would contend, however, that the “should” language of no. 33 cited above underscores its place as a prescriptive principle that is more than inspirational or even exhortative. If, in general, the interpretation of liturgical law must respect the critical role of SC in that process, “especially its key principles,”²¹ the principles of concision, intelligibility, and accessibility do not appear to be dispensable.

The authors of *LA* certainly seem to be aware of the centrality of SC in promulgating any new liturgical directives and cite the conciliar document 19 times in its 86 footnotes—almost twice as many times as, for example, the Code of Canon Law. On the other hand, it seems that *LA*’s directives on translation actually seem to contradict, even violate the fundamental principles of brevity, lucidity, and accessibility outlined in no. 33 of SC. Particularly noteworthy here is no. 27:

Even if expressions should be avoided which hinder comprehension because of their excessively unusual or awkward nature, the liturgical texts should be considered as the voice of the Church at prayer, rather than of only particular congregations or individuals; thus, they **should be free of an overly servile adherence to prevailing modes of expression**. If indeed, in the liturgical texts, words or expressions are sometimes employed which **differ somewhat from usual and everyday speech**, it is often enough by virtue

17 For a general introduction to the use of the vernacular in Christian liturgy, with particular attention to the role of SC in that development, see Keith Pecklers and Gilbert Ostdiek, “The History of Vernaculars and Role of Translation,” in *A Commentary on the Order of Mass of the Roman Missal*, ed. Edward Foley (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 35-72, esp. 51-56.

18 *Ritus nobili simplicitate fulgeant, sint brevitate perspicui et repetitiones inutiles evident, sint fidelium captui accomodati, neque generatim multis indigeant explanationibus*. See *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman Tanner, 2 volumes (London: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 1990), II:827.

19 See, for example, his “Literary Forms in the Code” in The Canon Law Society of America, *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 41-5.

20 Huels, 104-15; also his “Appendix IV” that provides an extensive excursus on “Liturgy Forms in Canon Law,” 233-7.

21 Huels, 104.

of this very fact that the texts become truly memorable and capable of expressing heavenly realities. Indeed, it will be seen that the observance of the principles set forth in this Instruction will contribute to the gradual development, in each vernacular, of a **sacred style** that will come to be recognized as proper to liturgical language. Thus it may happen that a certain manner of speech which has come to be **considered somewhat obsolete** in daily usage may continue to be maintained in the liturgical context. In translating biblical passages where seemingly **inelegant words** or expressions are used, a hasty tendency to sanitize this characteristic is likewise to be avoided. These principles, in fact, should free the Liturgy from the necessity of frequent revisions when modes of expression may have passed out of popular usage. [emphasis added]

While the preceding paragraphs of *LA* indicated that the content of the texts are to be “evident and comprehensible even to the faithful who lack any special intellectual formation” and that “the translations should be characterized by a kind of language which is easily understandable” (*LA* 25), paragraph 27 of *LA* makes it clear that fidelity to the Latin text trumps accessibility. While needing to be free of an “overly servile adherence to prevailing modes of expression,” it does appear that there should be an almost overly servile adherence to ancient Latin texts. In no. 19, *LA* emphasizes that such texts express truths that “transcend the limits of time and space” and thus are not “primarily to be a sort of mirror of the interior dispositions of the faithful.” Thus, they must be translated “integrally and in the most exact manner, without omissions or additions in terms of their content and without paraphrases or glosses,” concluding that “any adaptation to the characteristics or the nature of the various vernacular languages is to be sober and discreet” (*LA* 20). Doing so may require “that words already in current usage be employed in new ways,” and that “new words or expressions be coined” or “that terms in the original text be transliterated” (*LA* 21).

Whereas *SC* called for concision, intelligibility, and accessibility in rite and music and text, *LA* promotes language that is separate from everyday speech, allows for the obsolete and inelegant, envisions the emergence of a “sacred style” distinctive from everyday speech, and even seems to reason for language that is excessively unusual or awkward. Given these directives, it is not surprising that the 2010 English translation of the 2008 *Missale Romanum* is filled with obsolete and inelegant language. Thus, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8), at the preparation of the gifts we pray about “prevenient grace”; during the creed we profess Christ to be “consubstantial with the Father”; during Eucharistic prayers we consistently talk about the “oblation,” not to mention the puzzling reference to “dewfall” in Eucharistic Prayer II; and on Tuesday within the Octave of Easter we pray to God who has “bestowed on us paschal remedies.” It is especially some of the orations that are particularly troubling for presiders to proclaim and assemblies to perceive, as this opening of an oration from the liturgy of the Word during the Easter Vigil demonstrates:

O God, whose ancient wonders
Remain undimmed in splendor even in our day
For what you once bestowed on a single people,
freeing them from Pharaoh’s persecution
By the power of your right hand,
Now you bring about as the salvation of the nations
Through the waters of rebirth ...

Besides seeming to contradict *SC*’s instructions about brevity, lucidity, and accessibility, *LA*’s emphasis on the liturgical texts as “a rich patrimony” that must be preserved (*LA* 20), and thus the need for exacting translation—de-

spite the difficulties such presents to contemporary worshippers—also seems to challenge a fundamental theological principle of SC, i.e., the role of worshippers as subjects rather than objects of the liturgy.

As previously proposed in the 1947 encyclical *Mediator Dei* of Pope Pius XII, SC treats the active role of the laity in the midst of its definition of liturgy, which lies at the very heart of the theological exposé that opens this document. In that definition SC frames the liturgy as a Christological act, “as the enacting of the priestly role of Jesus Christ” (SC 7.3). It then goes on to note that liturgy has two inseparable functions: the glorification of God and the sanctification of people.²² It concludes by teaching that in the liturgy “the mystical Body of Jesus Christ ... is together giving completely and definitive public expression to its worship” (SC 7.3) and reiterates that every liturgical celebration “is the act of Christ the priest and of his body, which is the church” (SC 7.4).

It is this theological assertion that the baptized with Christ are actually subjects of worship that undergirds SC’s fundamental pastoral principle that “all believers are to be led to take a full, conscious and active part in liturgical celebrations. This is demanded by the nature of the liturgy itself; and by virtue of their baptism, it is the right and duty of the Christian people” (SC 14). Thus, it is not simply for the sake of people’s personal devotion or spiritual fulfillment that the liturgy must be accessible to them. Rather, the texts and tunes, rites and readings, and prayers and preaching need to be concise, intelligible, and accessible so that the faithful can fulfill their rightful and necessary responsibility of full, conscious, and active engagement that is essential if the liturgy is to be properly enacted.

Conclusion

In discussing the validity of any translation, the celebrated liturgist Anscar Chupungco notes that a good rule of thumb for verifying the exactness of any translation—for example, from Latin to English—is to translate the English back again into Latin to see how close it is to the original.²³ In a similar way, one could argue that determining the validity of an interpretation of a document like SC through a text like LA could be achieved by attempting to “translate” the principles of directives of LA “backwards” into a conciliar form. I would contend that there is virtually no way that the directives for translation outlined in LA would lead us back to the lucidity, comprehensibility, and accessibility that SC dictates. On the contrary, like looking through the wrong end of a telescope, LA seems to further us from SC’s principles for active participation, instructions about the accessibility of the worship, and theological assertions about the baptized as subjects with Christ in the liturgical event. When it comes to principles for translation—which are *de facto* principles for interpreting the liturgy for the church and for the world—we clearly need different lenses, as well as the capacity to point the metaphorical telescope in the right direction.

22 These two elements are consistently conjoined when SC speaks about the nature of the liturgy; besides here in no. 7 also see nos. 5, 10, 61, and 112.

23 Anscar Chupungco, “Excursus on Translating *OM2008*,” in *Commentary on the Order of Mass*, 134.