

***The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*. Edited by Catherine E. Clifford and Massimo Faggioli. Pp. xxii, 777. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. £135.00.**

In recent years there has been an explosion of handbooks from major academic publishers. Such volumes must walk a fine line between providing a solid point of reference, and yet offer sufficiently fresh perspectives to avoid becoming the delight of Tolkien's Hobbits: 'books filled with things that they already knew, set out fair and square with no contradictions.' *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II* navigates this tightrope exceptionally well.

It does so by avoiding the tired polarisations of spirit–letter, progressive–conservative or continuity–reform, and attending not just to the history and texts but to the varied reception of Vatican II. The conciliar documents are given serious and intelligent treatment (albeit with some lacunae, discussed below) but not reified into a *historia sacra* (p.3), hermetically isolated from the narrative of their formation, the limits of the final text, or the complex plurality of reception. The list of contributors is impressive not only in terms of its scholarship, but in its international and indeed ecumenical composition. It is notable that several of the contributors have been invited as consultants to the 2023 and 2024 synods. A further volume to the same standard examining the reception of Vatican II in the current synodal journey would be very welcome.

The handbook is divided into five sections, and the structure reveals the essential approach taken by the editors. The first two parts address context and sources (Part I) and key documents (Part II). However, Parts III–V bring to the fore the distinctive contribution of this volume, delivering three distinct perspectives on the *reception* of Vatican II: Part III within Catholicism; Part IV—appropriately given the reunification of Christians prioritised in calling the Council (*UR 1*)—by other Christians and by non-Christians; and Part V in global perspective, examining reception across six continents.

Turning to each of the five parts in detail, there is a mixture of the expected and the delightfully surprising in the first two sections. Part I begins within John O'Malley's succinct account of the journey from Trent and Vatican I to Vatican II, effectively a distillation of his own authoritative works on these councils as historically-situated events. It concludes with a fine essay by Peter Hünemann on the unique character of Vatican II's teaching. In between such anticipated, but welcome, reference points are more specialised contributions including Norman Tanner, speaking with authority on English editions of the Council Documents (including his own) and chapters on alternative sources for understanding Vatican II including journalism, diaries, and mass media, on *ressourcement*, and Massimo Faggioli's useful introduction to the Council's historical context. This mix of elements characterises the volume—I can imagine several of these chapters being widely used for teaching at all levels, whereas others might only be read once, albeit with interest, by the non-specialist.

At first glance, Part II appears to be the most conventional part of the volume, addressing the familiar task of introducing the sixteen council documents. However, two innovations distinguish the volume from existing overviews. Firstly, the chapters on the documents

themselves are bookended by two important contributions, on ‘forgotten and expunged texts and messages of Vatican II’ (Alberto Melloni), and on women and the Council (Regina Heyder). Melloni’s chapter is of much more than historical interest and is an important hermeneutical resource, not least in showing that there were not two but ‘dozens of interpretive readings’ at Vatican II. So too, Heyder shows that the role of women in the council (perhaps also forgotten, expunged, or ignored) was multi-faceted and has ongoing significance, not least in the role of Catholic women’s organisations and women theologians.

Secondly, the treatment of the Council texts is integrative, inter-textual, and contextual. While the liturgy and the Church in the world are given chapters largely focussed on the texts of the respective constitutions, Richard Gaillardetz adopts an approach to ‘The Ecclesiology of Vatican II’ which weaves the main themes of *Lumen Gentium* into a much richer tapestry of ideas and teaching across the Council texts. I found his focus on the *Christifidelis*, and on the role of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the church to be particularly insightful. Similarly, Gerald O’Collins provides an outstanding chapter not on *Dei Verbum* alone, but on ‘Vatican II’s Theology of Revelation’, which presents a sacramental reading of divine self-communication through ‘word and works’. This chapter alone would make a fine primer for any class on revelation, and for the general reader. While the theme of each of the four constitutions receives a chapter-length treatment, *Christus Dominus*, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, *Perfectae Caritatis*, and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* are dealt with together under the heading of ‘Church Governance and Forms of Christian Vocation’ (Joachim Schmiedl). This grouping has the advantage of presenting cross-cutting issues which continue to be worked out in a Church trying to be more synodal, but covering so much ground risks leaving gaps. No mention is made of the important decision to reinstate the permanent diaconate in this chapter, or anywhere else in the volume apart from a passing mention regarding opening to women (p. 317).

The remaining chapters largely root themselves in one of the decrees or declarations of the Council, set in the respective larger thematic horizon (missiology, religious liberty, interreligious dialogue, and ecumenism). These chapters are reliably solid rather than ground-breaking, although Stephen Bevans manages to not only summarise the key themes regarding mission in Vatican II but very effectively connects that with movements in the Catholic Church and ecumenically in an essay that, like that of O’Collins, provides a fine introduction to the wider subject and will be useful for those involved in formation for lay and ordained ministry. Jane Regan, tackling *Gravissimum Educationis*, takes a rather different approach and broadens the horizon far beyond the text, moving from ‘religious instruction’ to ‘faith formation’. This is a welcome creative and practical approach, although the limits of the chapter length, and relatively few references to the literature means it feels like a sketch for a larger, much-needed, piece of work.

Orientalium Ecclesiarum receives brief comments throughout the volume but no dedicated chapters. The same is true for *Optatam Totius* which might usefully have been included with *GE*, However *Inter Mirifica* is entirely absent from Part II, and receives only two passing mentions in the entire volume. No reason is given for this omission, which is strange, even if as some have argued, the text is long obsolete in terms of technologies and social attitudes.

Even if the text is seen as adding nothing to the legacy of the Council, surely there is still a need to say something about why it formed one of the sixteen basic documents and why time was taken to discuss it. If it has been or can be ignored, that is itself of significant hermeneutical interest in terms of both the Council and its reception. Given the media-laden, globe-trotting papacy of Paul VI and his successors, the omission is even more surprising in a volume concerned with reception and context, and which included a chapter on the significance of journalism and the mass media in Part I. In the era of online newsfeeds, social media, and the ‘digital continent’ identified in the 2023 synod, the questions and perhaps even some of the principles of this document remain of major concern to the church and I would have expected some discussion of the document, even if only to discuss its non-reception in a changing world.

At this point we are less than half way through the volume, and so must turn to the theme of reception which is explored in Parts III, IV, and V. Each of these three parts, which cannot be covered here in detail, makes a valuable contribution to the volume, and each contains several outstanding chapters.

In Part III, on the Catholic Reception of Vatican II, Giles Routhier’s essay is simply indispensable, a sure guide through the richness of reception as it has emerged as an ecclesial and ecclesiological reality since the council. Particularly valuable is his insistence that reception is not simply obedience and unilateral acceptance of teaching. Rather, the Church is ‘a community of reception of the gift of God’ (p.334). John Beal’s chapter on the challenge of receiving Vatican II adequately into canon law is another superb introduction for scholars and for the general reader. All the chapters in this section raise questions about areas where reception remains a work in progress. I found the reflection on incremental change and structural reform (pp. 466-8) in Serena Noceti’s insightful and wide-ranging chapter on reception within feminist theology to be particularly relevant for the Church as it makes a fresh reception of Vatican II in synodal mode.

Part IV not only gives the historical perspective of non-Catholics observers and guests, presented first in Peter de Mey’s meticulous overview, and from confessional perspectives in the chapters which follow, but also demonstrates the truth of Bishop Cassien’s observation that ‘the voices which the Council has uncovered give it dimensions that transcend the Catholic Church’ (p. 493), revealing lively *loci receptionis* in other churches and ecclesial communities. Compared to the broader understanding of reception in the rest of the volume, I found some of these chapters limited by their focus on formal ecumenical dialogues without also looking at how Vatican II was received within different communities in practice. Throughout the volume, accounts of reception make little use of social-scientific methods, or developments in practical theology to examine reception in the lived experience of Catholics and other Christians. The final three chapters of Part IV are not non-Catholic receptions in the same way, but rather three exemplary Catholic perspectives on how *Nostra Aetate* has been received within the church in respect of Judaism (John Pawlikowski), Islam (Michael Fitzgerald), and Asian Religions (Peter Phan).

Finally, Part V presents a series of impressively concise overviews of the reception of Vatican II in major continental regions. In a short space, the contributions are very effective in presenting a broad sweep of a narrative of reception, highlighted with bursts of local colour. Only the chapter on Europe really struggles under the weight of the wide range of cultural diversity it needs to represent, along with the impact of the iron curtain in the years following the council, and the peculiarities of Europe containing Rome and the Curia.

Overall, the volume is a hugely impressive achievement, demonstrating that the Second Vatican Council continues to be a site of mature—if still incomplete—reception beyond well-worn controversies, and a source of important and stimulating scholarship. I can see it being a standard reference point for teachers and students, as well as a rich but accessible book for the interested non-specialist. The text is well-referenced throughout, with suggested further reading in each chapter, and I only encountered few minor typological glitches. The index is however very selective, and I was glad to have access to an e-book to enable searching. For example, among the seven Pontifical Councils or Commissions, there is no entry for the Pontifical Biblical Commission, nor for the International Theological Commission, both of which are referenced in the text and played important parts in the reception of the Council. And while there is a long index entry for the Curia, none is given for bishops, priests, deacons, or the *Christifidelis*. Given the editorial focus on intertextuality and reception, the absence of a properly thematic index is a surprising omission. Nonetheless, this is superb volume which justifies its place, even on already-crowded Vatican II bookshelves, for a wide range of readers.

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