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Review of *What Happened at Vatican II* by John W.  
O'Malley

Ralph Del Colle

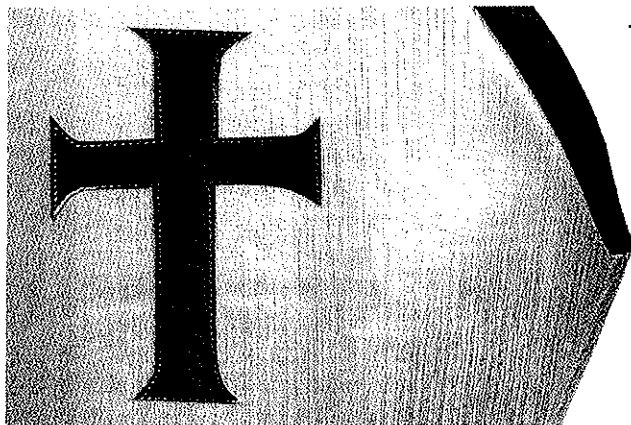
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## Augustine's Authenticity

Dismissing St. Augustine of Hippo became so popular in the latter 20th century that flinching at his name is almost a matter of muscle memory. Augustine's critics blame him for the doctrine of original sin, as if there weren't daily evidence of that doctrine's truth. They caricature him as sexually repressed, as if Augustine lived with his mother all his life and feared unknown pleasures. As is so often true, the real Augustine is far



more interesting than the cartoon. Read Fr. Patrick Twomey's review essay to learn about one of Augustine's tougher critics: the saint himself.



14



23



25

# THE LIVING CHURCH

THIS ISSUE | August 28, 2011

## NEWS

4 Eau Claire, Fond du Lac Consider Uniting

## FEATURES

8 The Wisdom of Small Groups

By Kyle Matthew Oliver

14 Bishops: Guardians of the Body of Christ

By Ralph McMichael

17 OUR UNITY IN CHRIST series

Section 4: Commitment in Word and Deed

By Andrew Goddard

## BOOKS

20 Revisions

Augustine, translated by Boniface Ramsey

Review by Patrick T. Twomey

22 What Happened at Vatican II

by John W. O'Malley

Review by Ralph Del Colle

## CATHOLIC VOICES

25 John Stott: 1921-2011

By Graham Kings

## OTHER DEPARTMENTS

23 Cultures

28 Sunday's Readings

30 People & Places

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# A Jesuit's Tour de Force

## What Happened at Vatican II

By John W. O'Malley, SJ. Harvard. Pp. 380.  
\$29.95. ISBN 978-0-674-03169-2

Review by Ralph Del Colle

The continued reception of the Second Vatican Council has led to a conflict of interpretations about the nature of the council. John O'Malley, SJ, has led the charge on the so-called progressive side by emphasizing the "spirit of the council" and its discontinuity from the pre-conciliar church. No less than Pope Benedict XVI has argued for continuity and that attention should be paid to what the council documents actually say. This schema is, of course, a simplification of the matter, but much truth resides in this characterization. *What Happened at Vatican II* is O'Malley's tour de force from his end of the spectrum.

The major issue for O'Malley is one of context, situating the Catholic Church amid both the emergence of modernity in "The Long Nineteenth Century" and the more proximate post-World War II situation of the end of colonialism and the spread of democracy. More importantly, renewal efforts in the church had already begun with *ressourcement* and the emergence of the *nouvelle théologie*.

Therefore, while O'Malley identifies four major issues (dear to all progressives) that were at the council but not of or on the council's agenda — clerical celibacy, birth control, reform of the Roman Curia, and the Synod of Bishops created by Paul VI during the council — his analysis focuses on what he terms three "issues-under-the issues" (bor-

rowed from the American Jesuit John Courtney Murray, "perhaps the single most important *peritus* [appointed theological expert] at the council").

The first of these is hermeneutical and is at the core of his thesis, namely, how to interpret change in the church and the conciliar project of *aggiornamento* (updating). More specifically, this comes under the rubric of the development of doctrine wherein the council went beyond Catholic teaching, perhaps even contravening it, e.g., Church-state relations (hence the accolade for Murray and his influence on the council's position on religious liberty).

The second issue—under-the issue tracks the relationship during the council between the bishops and the Roman Curia (again with implications for the present church), while the third capitalizes on the style of the council captured in words such as *charism* and *dialogue*. All of this contributes to the well-worn phrase "the spirit of the council" intended to capture the style and genre of Vatican II that is itself a teaching moment for the Church and does not eschew the "drama of the politics [that] was a part of the council's substance, intrinsic to its meaning."

The rest of the book delineates the thesis in a historical and thematic account of the council. Following the distant and proximate context — up to and including the calling of the council by Pope John XXIII — O'Malley devotes a chapter to each year of the council (1962 through 1965). The case he builds is cumulative. Much is familiar territory to those with some knowledge of Vatican II. For others, the book will serve as a superb introduction and, for all, its inner working fills out the narrative of the event of the council, something very important

for O'Malley, who contends that something indeed happened at Vatican II that should inform the life of the church today.

The leitmotif here is that this eventfulness of the council contrasts with those for whom the council is a matter (in O'Malley's view) of a "myopic, sometimes almost proof-texting, approach ... without regard for contexts, without regard for before and after, and without regard for vocabulary and literary form." To be sure this "minimal interpretation of the council" is one that "fails to see" it "as the new moment it wanted to be in the history of the Catholic Church."

There are not many surprises in this narrative. Of course, the majority of bishops had the good sense to outvote the minority led by Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani and Ernesto Cardinal Ruffini in support of a pastoral approach rather than the more juridical doctrinal emphases of the past. This is not to deny that the developments in ecclesiology, collegiality, revelation, the relationship of the Church to other religions, and religious liberty do not carry some dogmatic weight.

This, combined with the "spirit of the council," is after all what O'Malley is arguing for as emblematic of what the post-conciliar church should be. That same spirit, and with no little attention to what the council documents actually say, will continue to define the continuing reception of Vatican II. Interestingly enough, the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, truly men of the council (and not of the minority!), will be equally influential as well.

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