

The development of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* Part 1 of presentation by Seán O'Seasnáin

Becoming familiar with Vatican II and the Liturgy with a focus on  
Chapter 4 of *What Happened at Vatican II* by John W. O'Malley  
The Lines Are Drawn - The First Period (1962)

or, How to grok *Sacrosanctum Concilium* while avoiding moonbats and wingnuts  
from the vantage point of a young Irish friar in formation at the time of Vatican II

Placing the slang term 'grok' from the science fiction jargon of Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* accompanied by the derogatory labels 'wingnuts' and 'moonbats' (from his short story *Space Jockey*) in the subtitle of an article on Vatican II and the Liturgy seems to be courting irreverence rather than promoting respect for the sacred – especially when the subject matter is the first topic debated at Vatican II i.e. the Sacred Liturgy which led to the council's first sacrosanct, literally, Constitution on the Liturgy elegantly entitled *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (*SC*) the opening paragraph of which reads: "The sacred council has set out to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian lives of the faithful; to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change; to encourage whatever can promote the union of all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever serves to call all of humanity into the church's fold [1].

One reason for my unsanctimonious injection of sci-fi terminology is to arouse your curiosity and capture your attention about the liturgy which is, as *SC* states: "the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed; it is also the source from which all its power flows" [2]. Another reason for utilizing Heinlein's coinage is the intriguing appropriateness of the terms especially when it comes to the divisiveness among Catholics about Vatican II and the liturgy. There are some harsh critics of the council's liturgical reform since Vatican II who have morphed into wingnuts and moonbats and seem to be in the business of alienation rather than adoration – truly strangers in a strange land! On hearing or reading some of these critics on both sides of the spectrum of liturgical reform one cannot help detect their vitriol and animosity toward anyone who does not agree with them. These spokespeople are often devoid of virtue as they enforce their extreme viewpoints usually by blogging. What is needed is a *Via Media*. Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is the epitome of inclusive and contains unifying principles which support that middle way. I hope to explore "how the lines can be drawn" for a *Via Media* perspective through Dominican lens.

It was from *Today's Highlights* in Answers.com that I first became aware of the meaning of the terms "grok", "moonbats" and "wingnuts" [3]. Utilizing the jargon of this science fiction writer (Heinlein wrote around the same time that Vatican II was in progress) I hope to demonstrate that a familiar, if not intimate, understanding ('grok', after all, is a transitive verb meaning "to understand profoundly and intuitively" - Merriam-Webster) of what really happened at Vatican II regarding the liturgy can help us avoid extremes, excesses and distortions in interpreting the council and in celebrating the liturgy.

I feel very much like a 'grok' myself when it comes to Vatican II. I say this because I was so fully and deeply engaged with the happenings of Vatican II during those years which

coincided with my formation in theology as a friar in the Dominican Order. Some of the Order's members were periti (expert advisors) or highly influential interveners at the council. Names like Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Pierre-Marie Gy, come to mind. Many of their ideas, in so far as I could comprehend these scholars, became part of my theological training thanks to Liam G. Walsh O.P. [4].

I might even presume to say that Vatican II and the liturgy are part of my spiritual DNA. The liturgy is central to the Dominican lifestyle. "It is the express wish of St. Dominic that the solemn celebration of the liturgy in common be accepted as one of the principal duties of our vocation." [5] It was a very exciting time to be 'in formation' at the Dominican House of Studies in Tallaght, Dublin at the same time that Vatican II was in progress especially when your professors were graduates of Le Saulchoir or the École Biblique [6] and the Angelicum; and may have even been taught by, the council periti mentioned above. The Irish province also had two other friars actively engaged with reporting on the council for RTÉ Irish television (Romuald J. Dodd) and translating and publishing the documents of the council as they became available (Austin P. Flannery).

So what really happened at Vatican II regarding the liturgy? There are volumes written on this question and it would take a life time (at least at my pace of reading) to absorb and analyze them all. So I am going to propose a more workable approach i.e. by familiarizing ourselves ("grokking" so to speak) with 'The Discussion of the Liturgy' in *What Happened at Vatican II* and surveying some of the periti's personal memoirs of the First Session it may still be possible to bring some reasonable civility and more balanced commentary to the 'crisis' in the liturgy, and indeed permeating the whole church, today. I will conclude by proposing an alternative – a Via Media - to the hermeneutics of the continuity versus discontinuity dilemma and divisiveness. This will be to outline a tentative response to my teacher Liam Walsh's suggestion that "there are still hermeneutical 'fusions of horizons' to be done." [7]

James Martin S.J. headlines a posting in *America Magazine* (December 20, 2008) with the question What Happened at Vatican II? He alerts his readers to Peter Steinfels' positive review of John O'Malley new book (at that time) *What Happened at Vatican II* in the *New York Times*: "Steinfels summarizes O'Malley's history of the Council as well as his approach to the widespread 'continuity vs. discontinuity' debate. In short, says Steinfels, 'Father O'Malley's superb history demonstrates why any effort to shuffle the cards of continuity and discontinuity so as to minimize the profound reorientation wrought by the council borders on the ludicrous.'" In short, it's time to 'grok' SC and start "getting past liturgical polemics." This is the headline of an article by freelance writer Denys Horgan, reporting on a North American Academy of Liturgy meeting in San Diego in 2006, where he encapsulates the opinions expressed by revered liturgy scholars Fr. Paul Turner and Fr. Keith Pecklers: "Although giant strides have been made in the practice and study of liturgy in the United States and throughout the world, a few problems remain to be fixed. Scholars need to keep in touch with practitioners in the field, and the rocky relations between local churches and Rome still need to be ironed out. The good news is that steps are being taken to address both needs. Polemics are out

and conciliation is in. And if bridges are not already under construction, at least the blueprints have been drafted” [8].

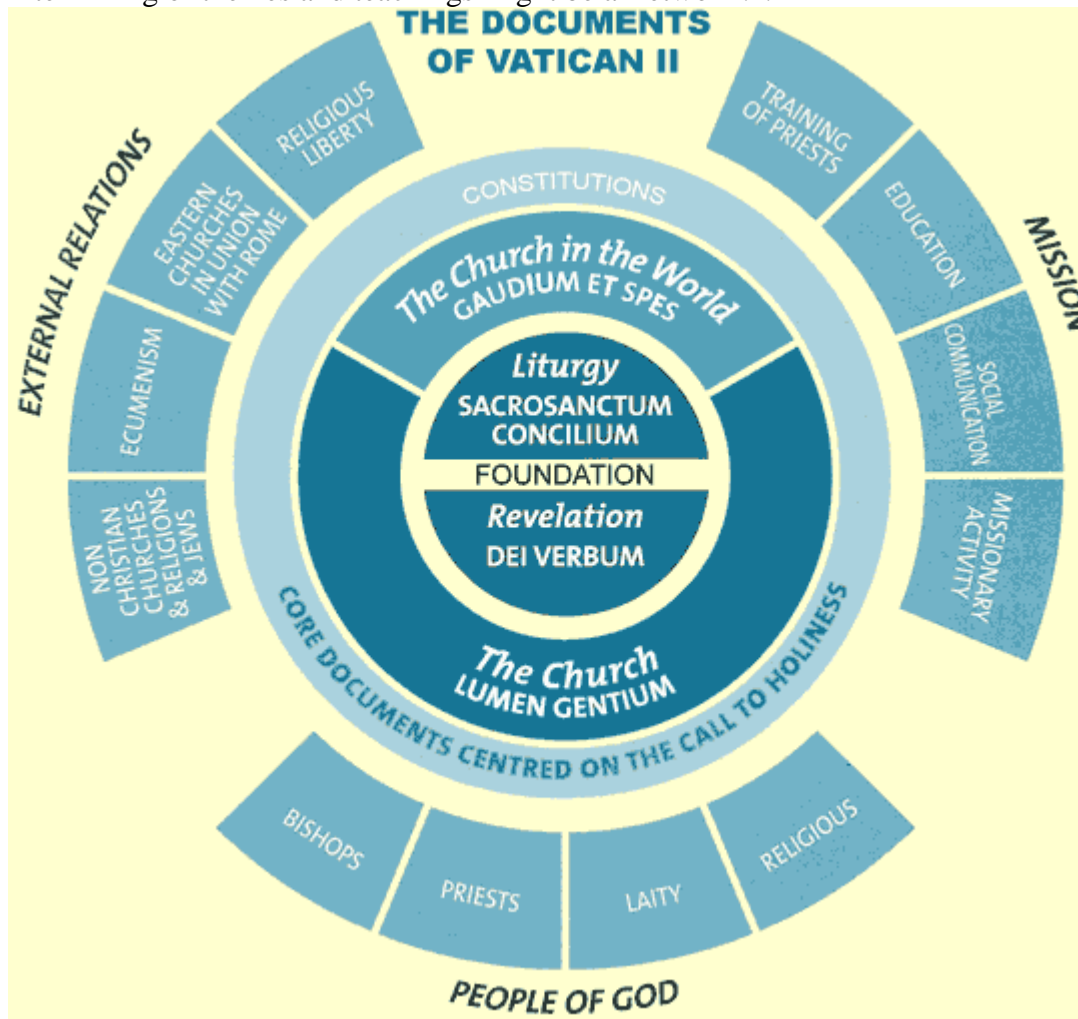
O’Malley’s *What Happened at Vatican II* has since become one such blueprint. For an overall description of *What Happened at Vatican II* Hilmar Pabel’s review is hard to beat: “His [O’Malley’s] aim is to give readers a ‘basic book’ that provides the council’s ‘essential story line’. It is not, however, a prosaic primer. It is a gripping account of the drama of Vatican II as it played itself out over its four sessions from 1962 to 1965. Far from being a dry analysis of the sixteen conciliar documents, the book concentrates on the debates that frothed beneath the deceptive serenity of these documents.” [9] It’s time to recapture “the air of serenity” SC breaths. Read it, and feel it.

O’Malley opens Chapter 4 The First Period (1962) with the chapter heading *The Lines Are Drawn* skillfully describing the three moderating bodies which providentially “blurred boundary lines”, namely: i) the Council of Presidents consisting of ten cardinals, only one of which, Eugène Tisserant, was from the Curia. The role of the Presidents was to handle questions and problems arising in sessions; ii) the Secretariat for Extraordinary Affairs consisted of seven cardinals under Amleto Cicognani (younger brother by two years of Gaetano Cicognani the Prefect Congregation of Rites). This Secretariat’s role was to resolve procedural conflicts; and iii) the Secretary General Pericle Felici’s role was to represent different viewpoints and find a middle way in conflicts [pp127-128]. Felici, who was created a cardinal after the council in June 1967, held an extremely important and sensitive position as secretary general. O’Malley continues: “He had been an assistant to Cardinal Tardini in the ante-preparatory stage of the council and won increasing respect and influence from that point forward because of his intelligence, energy, and organizational skills” [pp111-112]. A Via Media was already in the works?

O’Malley’s Chapter 4 title ‘The Lines Are Drawn’ seems at first reading to suggest a dissonance among the Council Fathers yet in reviewing the contents of that chapter there emerges a nuance of togetherness. I believe the essence of Chapter 4 The First Period (1962) is splendidly summed up by O’Malley: “[O]n December 4, 1963, the council overwhelmingly gave its approval to the revised text of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and Paul VI then promulgated it. The final vote was even more of a landslide: 2,147 in favor, 4 against. This was the first document approved by the council and, compared with others, was remarkable for how little it had changed from the original version . . . By approving *Sacrosanctum*, the council set in motion a programmatic reshaping of virtually every aspect of Roman Catholic liturgy unlike anything that had ever been attempted before. . . Within the council itself the vote that originally approved *Sacrosanctum*, on November 14, 1962, had a significance beyond liturgy and worship. It enunciated and gave voice to at least four principles that would be adopted and developed by other documents and help give Vatican II its final profile. The first is the principle of *aggiornamento* . . . [although] the provisions and great themes of the text are as much due to the principle of *ressourcement* as to that of *aggiornamento*. The liturgists, that is to say, had turned to the ancient sources in order to find their way. The Mass was thus not so much ‘modernized’ as made to conform more closely to fundamental and traditional principles.

“ . . . The second is the principle of adaptation to local circumstances: ‘The church does not wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters that do not involve the faith or the good of the whole community’ . . . The third is the principle of episcopal authority and of greater decision making on the local level. The document is thus consonant with the doctrine of episcopal collegiality. The final principle is the full and active participation of everybody present in the liturgical action. This is a principle of engagement and active responsibility, and by implication is extended beyond liturgy to the church at large, to the church as ‘the people of God’. Liturgy, that is to say, had ecclesiological implications and ramifications” [pp138-141].

Some of this is graphically outlined in the diagram (below) from The Sower Vol. 23 No 1, January 2002 © Maryvale Institute and is reproduced here with the kind permission of Editor, Petroc Willey. The diagram shows the centrality of the four 'core' documents which are the foundation, and from which the rest of the council documents emanate. I first discovered this diagram at vatican2voice.org which contains the following important observation: “This diagram cannot easily be bettered, although a truer concept of the interlinking of themes and teachings might be a 'network'.”:



## Notes

[1] *Sacrosanctum Concilium* #1 is from *The Basic Sixteen Documents - Vatican Council II Constitutions Decrees Declarations – A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language* General Editor Austin Flannery O.P. Dominican Publications 2007 p117

[2] *ibid* #10 p122

[3] *Today's Highlights*, July 7, 2011 <http://www.answers.com/topic/what-words-were-coined-by-robert-heinlein#ixzz1dX2JnNT4> What words were coined by Robert Heinlein?

[4] Liam was one of my many teachers during my student days in Tallaght in the 1960s - unraveling the wisdom of the *Summa Theologiae* Pars I, II and III over the span of my four Theology years sharing his own solid theological experience of a classical Studium Generale in Ireland, the Pontifical Faculty at Le Saulchoir in Paris, and his doctoral year at the Angelicum. He wrote recently in *The Tablet* April 16, 2011: “In the early 1960s, when I began to teach the theology of sacraments, I drew my inspiration and material mainly from three books; well, four, because like all Dominicans of those days I had learned and was teaching theology from the Summa. The other three were Karl Rahner’s *The Church and the Sacraments*, Edward Schillebeeckx’s *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God*, and Herbert McCabe’s *The New Creation*.”

[5] Dominican Constitutions Chapter II Art.1 57 2003 edition

[6] Another of my revered teachers at this time was Wilfrid Harrington O.P. who is still actively teaching and writing. His namesake and fellow Biblical scholar Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. recently wrote in *America Magazine* January 3, 2011: Wilfrid Harrington, a Dominican priest who is a professor of Scripture at the Dominican House of Studies in Dublin and visiting lecturer at the Church of Ireland Theological College in Dublin, is widely regarded as the “dean” of Catholic biblical studies in Ireland. . . . Now in his mid-80s, Harrington by his writing and teaching remains not only one of Ireland’s national treasures but also a teacher for all who seek to enter into the world of the New Testament. Though our paths have seldom crossed, we share a surname and common roots in the Beara Peninsula of Ireland. Also, each of us has contributed a volume to a series edited by the other. But even more important to me has been the example of learning, industry and fidelity shown by Wilfrid Harrington in making available to God’s people the best in contemporary biblical scholarship and so helping our Catholic Church become more explicitly and profoundly biblical.”

[7] Liam writes: “I have mused <http://www.domcentral.org/trad/plurfund.htm> about what is Dominican by looking back to Dominic and Thomas. I have tried to find in them some pointers to how we might deal with issues of Pluralism and Fundamentalism in our educational activity... There are still hermeneutical 'fusions of horizons' to be done. I trust that what I have been saying to you may have given some colour to the Dominican horizon.” For the complete text of Liam’s inaugural address on Dominican Education ‘Between Pluralism and Fundamentalism’ click on the domcentral.org link above.

[8] *National Catholic Reporter* February 3, 2006

[9] From a review of *What Happened at Vatican II* in *The Tablet* October 16, 2008

To be continued. . .