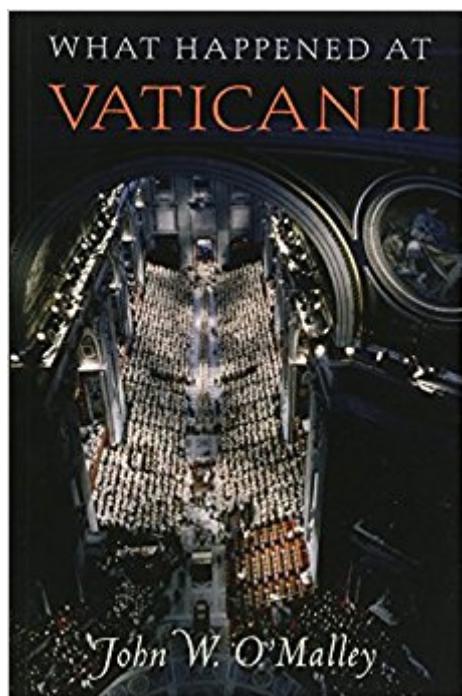


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# What Happened At Vatican II



## Synopsis

During four years in session, Vatican Council II held television audiences rapt with its elegant, magnificently choreographed public ceremonies, while its debates generated front-page news on a near-weekly basis. By virtually any assessment, it was the most important religious event of the twentieth century, with repercussions that reached far beyond the Catholic church. Remarkably enough, this is the first book, solidly based on official documentation, to give a brief, readable account of the council from the moment Pope John XXIII announced it on January 25, 1959, until its conclusion on December 8, 1965; and to locate the issues that emerge in this narrative in their contexts, large and small, historical and theological, thereby providing keys for grasping what the council hoped to accomplish. *What Happened at Vatican II* captures the drama of the council, depicting the colorful characters involved and their clashes with one another. The book also offers a new set of interpretive categories for understanding the council—categories that move beyond the tired “progressive” and “conservative” labels. As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the calling of the council, this work reveals in a new way the spirit of Vatican II. A reliable, even-handed introduction to the council, the book is a critical resource for understanding the Catholic church today, including the pontificate of Benedict XVI.

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## Customer Reviews

From 1961 to 1965, the world closely watched the proceedings of Vatican II, the Catholic Church's

council on the condition and future of the faith. Georgetown historian O'Malley presents the most thorough account of the proceedings of the council itself, from the time it was declared in 1959 until its conclusion in 1965, fulfilling the book's title. O'Malley gives a thorough and detailed history of the event, situating it in the longer history of the church and previous councils. But the bulk of the book concerns the characters and controversies of Vatican II itself, the biggest meeting in the history of the world. Though challenged by a conservative minority, the progressive majority of Vatican II reoriented and refashioned the Catholic Church: opening it to ecumenical relations, declaring its support for religious liberty and ending the practice of the Latin Mass. Infusing the council was the spirit of aggiornamento—Italian for updating. O'Malley shows how Vatican II allowed the church to modernize while also remaining true to its traditions and convictions. (Sept.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This remarkable book, in places a veritable page-turner, not only recaptures the drama and the struggles of Vatican II, but gets to the very heart of the issues under all the many ramifying words and acts of the Council. The reader can see how awkward and inadequate the familiar oppositions of liberal/conservative and progressive/reactionary are to the passionate struggles that took place. In fact, it was only through a recovery of Biblical and Patristic sources that Vatican II managed to return the Catholic Church to the twentieth-century world, and to open a dialogue which the traumas of the Reformation and French Revolution had inhibited. (Charles Taylor, author of *A Secular Age*) In this elegant and erudite book, the dean of American historians of Christianity tells the story of Vatican II. As a student, John O'Malley attended sessions of the Council. Now he shows us what happened, sets the Council before a richly reconstructed historical background, and makes clear why it still matters so much. His book will be essential reading for anyone interested in the modern history of the Catholic Church. (Anthony Grafton) This is a masterful presentation. It carries the reader deeper into the reality and outcome of Vatican II than do the other existing books on the Council. (Jared Wicks, Professor Emeritus, Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome) *What Happened at Vatican II* offers a one-volume history of the Second Vatican Council that not only tells the story in a way that brings out its drama, but, more importantly, calls the reader's attention to distinctive features of this council that are crucial for its interpretation. I do not know of any one volume that compares with this book for an in-depth account of what happened at Vatican II and of the factors that were at play in this major event in the life of the church. (Francis Sullivan, Boston College) It is an axiom that Ecumenical Councils take 50 years to assimilate and digest. If so, this clear and

readable account of Vatican II is right on time and on target. O'Malley's characteristic concision and wide learning luster every page. (Kenneth L. Woodward, Newsweek Contributing Editor and author of *Making Saints*) With characteristic acumen and grace, John O'Malley has written a splendid book on Vatican II: the history, the meanings, and above all the enduring importance. Once again we are all in this great scholar's debt. (David Tracy) From 1961 to 1965, the world closely watched the proceedings of Vatican II, the Catholic Church's council on the condition and future of the faith. Georgetown historian O'Malley presents the most thorough account of the proceedings of the council itself, from the time it was declared in 1959 until its conclusion in 1965, fulfilling the book's title. O'Malley gives a thorough and detailed history of the event, situating it in the longer history of the church and previous councils. O'Malley shows how Vatican II allowed the church to modernize while also remaining true to its traditions and convictions.

(Publishers Weekly 2008-07-14) O'Malley's book represents a gift from his generation, which experienced the council, to the cohort coming of age today. The signal accomplishment of the book is synthesis. In just four hundred pages, O'Malley provides a thorough yet gripping overview of the lead-up to the council and each of its four sessions. He wisely avoids lengthy quotations from the sixteen documents produced by the council, which are sometimes written in opaque, 'churchy' language. Instead, he captures the main points of the texts, as well as the floor debates and behind-the-scenes struggles that generated the council's drama. He thus fills what has long been a gaping hole: the absence of a single volume written at a popular level that provides a guide to the council. O'Malley shows both its actual results and what might have been had the bishops headed in another direction. The book is a major accomplishment, which no doubt will help to keep the memory of the council alive. (John L. Allen, Jr. Bookforum 2008-09-01) 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. Personalities come to the fore in the contest between the minority of bishops who resisted change and the majority who favored it as desirable and necessary. O'Malley's emphasis on the importance of style is arguably his greatest contribution to understanding what happened at Vatican II. O'Malley's book is a helpful remedy for preserving Catholic memory. It rehearses not only what happened at Vatican II for a growing number of readers unfamiliar with the debates and documents but, more important, it gives them a way to think about what happened. (Hilmar M. Pabel The Tablet 2008-10-18) Volumes have been written on the council, but O'Malley offers a fresh perspective by setting it in the historical context of earlier councils and by attending to the language of the documents as well as the

personalities and politics of the participants. It should appeal to a wide readership, populated as it is by colorful characters and offering an original approach to the study of the council and an authoritative guide through its proceedings and documents. O'Malley conveys a vivid sense of why Vatican II remains a beacon for some and a burden for others in the ongoing conflict between conservatives and liberals. words that, as O'Malley makes clear, are inadequate to describe the complexity of the positions they describe, and the visions invested in them. (Tina Beattie Times Higher Education Supplement 2008-11-06) The highest accolade that the late John Tracy Ellis could pay a historian was to say that he had written a 'rich' book. There is little doubt that he would have been ready to pronounce that judgment on this book because of O'Malley's thorough research, lucid presentation, balanced judgments, shrewd insights and elegant style. If you want to know what happened at Vatican II, begin with O'Malley. (Thomas J. Shelley America 2008-11-03) Based on my experience of the same events, O'Malley does a truly superior job of reporting the crucial details and capturing the moods and passions of that time. Secondly, he has the advantage of many testimonies not known to us back then. These, too, he handles deftly. O'Malley's book is a splendid introduction to a story of longed-for change, its good consequences and its sometimes depressing, unintended ones. (Michael Novak Washington Post Book World 2008-10-05) [An] acutely observed history of the Council, now the go-to work on 'what happened at Vatican II.' [O'Malley] is particularly illuminating when he gives the background and context to the debates (often very heated) that gave birth to its decrees. The narrative might be Whig, but the history is fair and rivetingly told. (Edward T. Oakes, S.J. Wall Street Journal 2008-12-25) Father O'Malley has written one of the best and most needed books about [the Second Vatican Council]. [A] superb history. How the bishops took charge of the agenda and radically reshaped the outcome is a story of bold confrontations, clashing personalities and behind-the-scenes maneuvers, all recounted in colorful detail by Father O'Malley. A majority of bishops seemed primed for change, yet the path to final agreement was strewn with obstacles, whether from the stalwarts of the status quo or papal interventions. This is a tale with plenty of cliffhangers. (Peter S. Steinfels New York Times 2008-12-20) In this single volume, O'Malley has filled the need for a readable account that meets three goals: providing the essential storyline from Pope John's announcement on January 25, 1959, to the council's conclusion on December 8, 1965; setting the issues that emerged into their historical and theological contexts; and thereby providing 'some keys for grasping what the council hoped to accomplish.' O'Malley analyzes Pope John's motives and goals, and masterfully lays out the contexts and important issues of the council. O'Malley's book enables one to re-experience the event of Vatican II and to ask

whether its initiatives will ever be fully implemented. (Bernard P. Prusak Commonweal 2009-02-27)[A] lucid, coherent assessment of the Second Vatican Council. (T. M. Izbicki Choice 2009-02-01)An insightful and quite gripping account that brings Vatican II to life in all its complexity. It celebrates a council pastoral rather than condemnatory in spirit, struggling to open the Church to the modern world. (Ernan McMullin The Tablet 2010-11-27)It's 50 years since the Second Vatican Council. It can seem a long time ago, or only yesterday. What really went on? In *What Happened at Vatican II*, John W. O'Malley, historian and theologian, has the story. He unfolds the events, presents the main actors, describes the issues, assesses the results. Serious, but not heavy reading. Just right for a long summer evening. (Michael Fitzgerald The Tablet 2014-07-19)

The best adjectives to describe this work are basic ones: thoughtful, logical, systematic, detached—the kind of qualities one looks for in a serious study, and particularly in a treatment of Vatican II. The Council (1962-1965) has been acclaimed and derided, quite intensely, in the five decades in the United States. I dislike using the pedestrian term “useful” to describe fine literature, but John W. O'Malley's 300-page overview of the Council is the kind of work one buys in hardcover, because it will enjoy a long shelf life. It will be the quintessential one-volume history of the Council for catechetics, adult education, the college classroom, and the general adult Catholic readership. What strikes me about O'Malley in his narration and conclusions is his ability to make sound judgments without lapsing into judgmental excesses. Many commentators have found this balance hard to achieve in their own writings on the Council. The old assessment of Vatican II as progressive European theologians staving off a Machiavellian Roman Curia still lingers, particularly on Catholic blog sites. O'Malley does not run away from “prelates behaving badly,” but he provides an insightful overview of how those passions developed. Chapter 2, “The Long Nineteenth Century,” is an intriguing and balanced account of Church and society in the formation of Vatican II; the author dates this century as extending from the French Revolution (1789) to the eve of Vatican II. The “nineteenth century” was the coming to full bloom of secular modernity; for the Church, there was no hope of turning back the clock to a time before nationalism, democracy, science, and separation of Church and State, the end, as O'Malley phrases it, of the “old marriage of throne and altar.” Given that the modern era posed physical as well as philosophical

threats to geographic Rome—Risorgimento and the end of the papal states, for example--an embattled central church used the tools at its command: a fierce adherence to its past and a resistance to the present. The defensive posture of the Roman Church maintained itself through the election of Pope John XXIII. O'Malley captures the scope of the Council in terms of size and cost with some wonderment that such an event as Vatican II could have taken place at all. The author does not idolize Pope John; he recognizes that the pope—a keen observer of twentieth century horrors—came to the Throne of Peter with a conviction that the times called for a new conversation between the Church and the world. Pope John could model what he hoped for in his messages and encyclicals, but O'Malley comments on the unwieldy machinery collected for the drafting of documents and floor management. Visionary as he was, John XXIII fielded an old guard administration. The efforts of the Curia to engineer a brief Council in the mode and format of Vatican I are well known. But O'Malley explains the Curial mind without malice at numerous points in the narrative. If I may jump ahead to a telling episode on the debate over Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, in October 1965 the floor debate virtually ground to a halt over the language on the relationship of Scripture and Tradition. While a strong majority of the Council fathers endorsed a greater role for the Bible in Church life, the Curia lobbied Pope Paul VI to maintain a definition of Tradition as equal to Scripture. For Cardinal Siri, among others, any hint of diminution of Tradition as an equal revelation source would undermine doctrines of the Virgin Mary, notably the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, neither of which enjoyed a strong Biblical foundation. (p. 278) O'Malley's narrative incorporates three impulses driving the majority of Council fathers and their theological advisors: Aggiornamento, Ressourcement, and Development of Doctrine.

“Aggiornamento” is a term often applied to Pope John's “throwing open the windows.” In his addresses, John used the term favorably as a need to openness and change in the face of new challenges throughout the world. Aggiornamento was a mood; Ressourcement, on the other hand, was a technical theological term for a contemporary review of the primitive or early practices of the Church. “Perfectae Caritatis,” for example, challenges religious orders to return to the principles of their founders. “Development” too was a theological principle of exploration into existing teachings to consider new applications. A notable example is John Courtney Murray's contribution to the Council's *Declaration on Religious*

Liberty.ÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã Â•OÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã â„¢Malley manages to produce a consistent chronology of the floor proceedings despite considerable odds. Among them was uncertainty over just how long the Council would last. That Vatican II extended over four years came as a gradual surprise and point of concern for bishopsÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã â•and certainly to the Curia, which had hoped for a one-session conclave of several weeks. Once the original plan for the Council was scuttled, its proceedings were managed by Curial moderators in a fashion of haphazardness, an unevenness of clock management, and a maddeningly disjointed daily agenda of serious debate interrupted frequently by calls to vote on schemas or portions of schemas on entirely different subjects. Hardly a Roberts Rules convocation. As a result, many bishops from the ÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã Â“third worldÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã Â• and the Eastern rite churches received precious little attention to their pressing concerns by CouncilÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã â„¢s end. Moreover, some documents were written hastily (on ÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã Â“Social Communications,ÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã Â• for example) so that precious time could be allotted to major doctrinal and pastoral concerns. The author speaks positively of the bishops themselvesÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã â•their openness to Pope JohnÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã â„¢s vision, their own theological acumen or their selection of competent advisors, and their willingness to tackle controversial questions from the start: the ÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã Â“Sacred Constitution on the LiturgyÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã Â• was the first document promulgated. In his final chapter, ÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã Â“Conclusion,ÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã Â• OÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã â„¢Malley does offer a telling assessment of perhaps the biggest error of the bishops, particular Western bishops: ÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã Â“They assumed an easier transition from ideas of the scholarsÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã â„¢ study to the social reality of the church than proved to be the case.ÃfÃ¢Ã ª ¬Ã Â• (p. 292) Hence the turmoil when the bishops returned home.

Fine writer with many details told to the laity in (mostly) understandable language.

The book studies extremely well the concepts characterizing the Vatican II documents, the state of the Roman Catholic Church during "the long nineteenth century", the debates and challenges of each session and the work done in the time between sessions. The author shows the degree to which Vatican II stressed meeting the modern world, returning to Christian practices previous to the Council of Trent, emphasizing collegiality, the Word of God, the participation by the laity. The endnotes show extremely thorough scholarship... but the book itself is extremely readable, engrossing, a great work of study and synthesis which bears several rereadings. It is a wonderful way to discover Vatican II and understand its importance. After that, read the documents that interest

you most.

All Catholics should read this book. Important information that you can't get elsewhere

It is my experience that John O'Malley is always outstanding. This book is no disappointment.

If you are looking for the one book you will read on the meaning of the Second Vatican Council, search no further for you have found it in *What Happened at Vatican II*. Fr. O'Malley is both a church historian and an historian of culture, recognized as the best in his field. These two areas of his expertise combine marvelously in this ground-breaking study of Vatican II. Whereas other historians of the Council catalogue its proceedings, Fr. O'Malley cogently and convincingly explains what the impact of those proceedings were for the history of the Roman Catholic Church. He deftly demonstrates how Vatican II diverged from previous councils in style as much as substance. By abandoning the language of the Roman Senate that had characterized previous Roman Catholic Church councils, Vatican II spoke to the People of God without condemnation and anathema. In this sense, the wishes of Pope John XXIII for a pastoral rather than a doctrinal council were realized. Fr. O'Malley's engaging writing style brings all of the major players of the Council to life. He eschews simplistic explanations and gets to the heart of the matter in each of the four periods that the Council met between 1962-1965. At a time when some in the Roman Catholic Church actually repudiate Vatican II and attempt to claim that nothing of import really happened at the Council, Fr. O'Malley presents a vibrant and vital portrayal of the reform that the Council intended for the Roman Catholic Church. One of his most poignant insights is that those who would downplay the significance of Vatican II for the history of the Roman Catholic Church actually do the Council a great disservice by denying it the greatness that it had hoped for in its reform of the Catholic Church. Fr. O'Malley's assessment of the Council puts the lie to their denial. You will not be disappointed by this book. Not only is it a pleasure to read, but it is also a repository of full and substantive factual information on what happened at Vatican II.

Absolutely one of the best books I have ever read; so interesting and so informative; it helped me understand so much of my own religion and brought what I had always pictured as an overwrought, incense-filled conclave to life with real people.

This is perhaps the best book of many so far that I have read on Vatican II. Most people don't

remember Vatican II, but it is the most authentic and most recent teaching of the entire Church, that is, all the Bishops and experts from all walks of life gathered together, while the whole world was watching. To miss Vatican II, which is ongoing, is to miss the most dynamic thing to happen to in the Church in many hundreds of years.

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