



# THEOLOGIA CATHOLICA LATINA

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2/2025

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(LXX) 2025  
December  
2

# STUDIA

## UNIVERSITATIS BABEȘ-BOLYAI

### THEOLOGIA CATHOLICA LATINA

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## SIXTY YEARS FROM VATICAN II: POINTS OF NO RETURN AND NEW UNCERTAINTIES. TOWARDS A GLOBAL AND SYNODAL RECEPTION OF THE COUNCIL

MASSIMO FAGGIOLI<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This article aims to highlight some of the key issues for understanding the current moment in the reception of Vatican II and for a new phase in the research and implementation of its message at sixty years of its conclusion (1965–2025). The greatest novelty to consider, also in light of pope Francis’s pontificate, is the complexity of global Catholicism in the 21st century: this brings to the fore questions and interpretative frameworks of the Second Vatican Council that are both connected and partly different from those typical of the English-speaking, American and European theology, which dominated the interpretation of the council’s message for the first decades after Vatican II.

**Keywords:** Vatican II, reception, global Catholicism, Catholic traditionalism, neo-conservatives.

### A New Historical and Ecclesial Situation

At sixty years from its conclusion, Vatican II has long ceased to be the natural meeting point between different theological cultures within the Catholic Church. It’s not only the rift between different theological schools, but today also between different “brands” of Catholicism represented by bishops, cardinals, and even more by public figures in the media and social media that are influencing the ecclesial self-awareness. The relationship with Vatican II has changed, not only in terms of theological orientations, but also as a presence or absence of the event of the council and familiarity with its texts in the biographies, self-representation, imagination, and the lived faith of Catholics today. This fragmented picture is not

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Article history: Received 30.10.2025; Revised 12.11.2025; Accepted 14.11.2025

Available online: 22.12.2025; Available print: 30.01.2026.

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simply the result of a natural shift in the role of Vatican II in the transition from generation to generation, but rather the result of processes of transmission *and* interruption of the conciliar tradition.<sup>2</sup> It is often said – last but not least also by Pope Francis – about the process of reception in the Church, that “it takes a century to implement a council”.<sup>3</sup> This dictum was sometimes taken as an automatic, self-fulfilling prophecy. But the present situation complicates the expectations about what the possible role of Vatican II for the future of the Church.

In the early post-conciliar period, there emerged various and alternative, but not frontally opposed, approaches to the hermeneutics of Vatican II. In the 1980s, a process of mutual alienation began between opposing models of reception (and sometimes non-reception) of Vatican II. On the one hand, there was a largely US-based “neoconservative” theological-political revision of the Council’s effects, in the name of and in defense of a pre-Vatican II past (which many believed Vatican II had rendered unusable) and against a liberal-progressive interpretation of the Council’s teaching. The late 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of the neoconservative theological and political project in the West: first in journalism and public intellectuals in the United States, and then in academia and in the Church hierarchy – a “long march” that bore bitter fruit in the new millennium. Initially, this occurred without attacking the legitimacy of Vatican II itself. But it already expressed a theological and political critique of the council’s teachings that proceeded from a *post hoc, propter hoc* perspective – an identification of Vatican II as *the* cause of secularization and of the ruptures in the Western world’s social and cultural model since the late 1960s.<sup>4</sup> In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in conjunction with shifts in the international debate on religion and politics after September 11, 2001, this neo-conservative Vatican II revisionism gained broader scope, with more frequent attacks against the theology of Vatican II, which later turned into an active attempt to evict conciliar theology from our common home. This deepening of the traditionalist turn within US Catholic conservatism became a systematic

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2 An earlier version of this article appeared in Italian in “Rivista del Clero Italiano”, 106.5 (2025), 344–355, with the title *Una nuova fase di recezione globale e sinodale. A sessant’anni dal Vaticano II*. This article represents an expanded and updated version.

3 Gerard O’CONNELL, “Pope Francis says Vatican II was ‘a Visit of God to His Church’ in New Interview”, *America* (February 28, 2023), <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/02/28/pope-francis-synod-tertio-244818/>.

4 See Massimo FAGGIOLI, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning*, New York: Paulist, 2012, (also in Italian and Portuguese).

targeting of pope Francis's teaching in ways that sought to delegitimize both his pontificate *and* Vatican II.<sup>5</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, in more liberal and progressive quarters, during those same thirty years there was a process of self-congratulatory and often complacent “monumentalisation” of Vatican II. This took place in a theological system in which the focus on the promises of the post-conciliar era often came at the expense of a reliable understanding of the council's teaching and of the theological Tradition (with a capital T, in the Congarian sense) – thus indirectly making the theology of Vatican II hard to know and to understand for the younger generations. This was not an attack on Vatican II, but a defence of it that turned into a silent process of isolating the council from the previous tradition: in favour of a post-conciliar, but also of a post-traditional and post-institutional idea of Christianity. This phenomenon had causes both internal to the theological academy (the precarious position of theology in Catholic and public universities; the system of academic recruitment and career development shaped by a technocratic culture) and external (frustration over the Church's perceived failure to deliver on the promises of Vatican II). This form of “monumentalisation” of Vatican II was particularly evident in the Anglo-American Catholic theological scene, and the consequences of it became serious especially during the pontificate of Francis when the defence of the Catholic social teaching (especially on the issue of immigration) could not count on a solid basis of systematic theology and on the ability to appeal to the tradition in a broad sense.

These two different forms of reductionism of Vatican II have created a void that is now, at sixty years from the council, being filled by other theological-political-evangelistic projects, both within university theology and beyond the university, and within the Church – with far-reaching effects even on seminaries for the formation of priests and religious: catechetical and theological programs in which Vatican II plays a marginal role, at best. This is one of the symptoms of the end, even for theology, of the monopoly of universities and the institutional Church in the production of knowledge, including theological knowledge. This entails also the end of a certain institutional protection that Vatican II theology enjoyed by the gatekeepers of mainstream religious culture. Those gatekeepers are in large

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5 See Massimo BORGHESI, Francesco. *La Chiesa tra ideologia teocon e «ospedale da campo»*, Milano: Jaca Book, 2021. English translation: *Catholic Discordance. Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2021.



part gone, and Vatican II has become fair game, or a favourite target of attacks in the “culture wars” in which religion plays a key role.

Some of the best interpreters of Church history saw this problem already at the beginning of the new century. The book by American Jesuit historian John O’Malley (1927–2022), *What Happened at Vatican II*, published in 2008 by Harvard University Press, a non-religious academic press, and translated into numerous languages, helped save the history and theology of the council from oblivion, as well as from subtle forms of abrogation and delegitimization.<sup>6</sup> O’Malley saw the urgent need to develop a new argument about Vatican II in the Catholic Church, where the memory of the council was often kept alive by a “veteran mentality”, of “those who were there”, incapable of talking to the new generations and those on the periphery of the post-Vatican II academic establishment. When his book on the council was published, it posed with great foresight the question of the place of Vatican II in the Church, in academia, and at the intersections between academia and the Church, but also in relation to the broader dialogue within and about Catholicism.

The issues raised by O’Malley nearly twenty years ago have acquired new relevance in light of changes in our ecclesial and political order: the rise of digital networks and social media, the collapse of institutional authority, the dogmatization of political identities and the politicization of religious identity in antagonistic terms, the return of illiberalism and of “Christian nationalism” even in the USA. O’Malley foresaw the risk of the emergence of a “non-conciliar” and “non-anti-conciliar” theological and religious culture, which has also taken root in Catholic universities, para-university institutions of higher learning, and on social media populated by Catholic thinkers and “culturally Catholic” politicians.

O’Malley’s intuition was confirmed in the golden age of the Catholic social media and performative anti-intellectualism beginning in the 2010s. According to some, a “non-conciliar and non-anti-conciliar” theology could be a solution to avoid the American-derived “culture wars” that have invaded intra-Catholic debate. But this comes, in the long-term, at heavy costs for our understanding of the tradition, as it seeks to isolate a particular slice of the “Catholic intellectual tradition” (whether it dates back to John Henry Newman or the early twentieth century, before the antimodernist crisis) and treat the Catholic theological tradition

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6 John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, translated in several languages.

as if it were somehow unaffected by the doctrinal, cultural, and social changes over the last century.

Within the intellectual world of the Catholic Church, today much more global than at the time of Vatican II, Catholic universities and Catholic theology today reflect a growing plurality and fragmentation in which Vatican II plays different roles in different contexts – but evidently more marginal than even twenty years ago. There is a temptation to appeal to a strong and coherent “Catholic identity” as a persecuted minority, or to identify Catholicism with a cultural or political movement, a religious order, or a particular ecclesial agenda. Other schools of thought, which are compelled to operate in the mainstream and in the market of education and publishing, are attracted to a less distinct idea of Catholic identity in their attempt to blend contradictory identities, but in a spirit more of technocratic paradigm than of evangelization.

The attempt to translate “Catholic” as *universal* has become much more complicated in a *global* culture that prizes the marketing of particular identities. The very definition of Catholic theology and the Catholic university – faithful to the etymological roots of *katholikos* and *universitas* – has become increasingly difficult to specify and generate consensus among those who work and support them, but also to generate interest in a missionary church. The crisis of the standing of the council as part of the theological tradition is visible in the difficulty to transmit Vatican II to the younger generation: it is a symptom of the isolation of a minority within the church, namely intellectuals and theologians, who over the past two centuries have not always been able to communicate with a broad audience, and have recently even stopped communicating with the clerical and episcopal elites who, in turn, do not miss having theologians as part of ecclesial dialogue. Then there is the broader question of a Catholic culture that has never ceased to be ultramontane and considers the pope the only legal executor of the *mens*, of the intention of Vatican II.

### After Pope Francis and with Leo XIV

Pope Francis (2013-2025) ushered in a new phase in the reception of Vatican II, trying to move beyond the usual theological-political alignments of “liberal-progressive” versus “conservative” – attracting much sympathy from the advocates of a continuing development of the theology of Vatican II and opposition from those who hold that Vatican II went far enough. Francis’ hermeneutics of Vatican II found

its most visible expressions in his pastoral perspective drawing on the legacy of John XXIII, his Jesuit formation, and his experience as a teacher and pastor in Argentina.

Francis did not use diplomatic language when he reminded the faithful about the binding value of Vatican II. On January 11, 2021, in a letter to the then Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Luis F. Ladaria, SJ, accompanying the *motu proprio* opening the ministries of lector and acolyte to women, the Pope described his decision in terms of “the horizon of renewal outlined by the Second Vatican Council” and “in line with the Second Vatican Council.”<sup>7</sup> Later that month, on January 29, 2021, further pointed observations arrived in his address to the National Catechetical Office of the Italian Episcopal Conference:

This is magisterium: the Council is magisterium of the Church. Either you are with the Church and therefore follow the Council, and if you don't follow the Council or you interpret it your own way, as you wish, you are not with the Church. We must be demanding and severe on this point. The Council should not be negotiated to obtain more of these... No, the Council is like this. And this problem we are experiencing, of selectivity with respect to the Council, has recurred throughout history with other Councils.<sup>8</sup>

Since its beginning, Francis's pontificate highlighted that in today's church, on the spectrum between faithful reception of the conciliar magisterium and open rejection, there is more than one theological interpretation to consider, as well as particular local and national ecclesial situations. For example, the USA is a particular case in point. The alliance of parts of conservative American Catholicism with Trump's “Make America Great Again” movement also speaks volumes about the failures in the reception of Vatican II: the fascination many Catholics have with a Caesarian political messianism is a symptom of the crisis of religious (and not just theological) reception of the council in the United States. However, while this is more evident among extreme voices on the conservative side, it is not a problem

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7 “Lettera del Santo Padre Francesco al Prefetto della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede circa l'accesso delle donne ai ministeri del Lettorato e dell'Accolitato”, 11 January 2021, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2021/01/11/0016/00033.html>.

8 “Discorso del Santo Padre Francesco ai partecipanti all'incontro promosso dall'Ufficio Catechistico Nazionale della Conferenza episcopale italiana”, 30 January 2021 [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2021/january/documents/papa-francesco\\_20210130\\_ufficio-catechistico-cei.html?fbclid=IwAR00ByhgFWSpifdezxB7jin-Tc-DCyHsOtI5uBL30AcJ5B73zWBGnqJUhaY](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2021/january/documents/papa-francesco_20210130_ufficio-catechistico-cei.html?fbclid=IwAR00ByhgFWSpifdezxB7jin-Tc-DCyHsOtI5uBL30AcJ5B73zWBGnqJUhaY).

unique to that end of the spectrum. There are broader systemic phenomena at play that in recent years have led to fault lines even within the liberal-progressive side. The first is a disruption of a tradition of Vatican II studies in Catholic seminaries and universities outside Europe and Latin America. Studying and transmitting the Council requires mastery or at least some knowledge of Latin. It also requires an intellectual ecosystem in which theology is grounded in – and in dialogue with – the history of the Church and the history of theology, and not merely with the social sciences. A problem closely related to this fracture is the breakdown of the coexistence and collaboration that characterized the working relationship between theologians, lay Catholics, and the hierarchical Church – a collaboration that made possible Vatican II.

The US-based Catholic academic establishment and ecclesiastical ecosystem, in which I have worked for almost seventeen years, is an extreme case but not an absolute exception. What I have witnessed in recent years is the emergence of tensions, both at the ecclesiastical and political level, around conciliar theology. It is undeniable that the new generation of Catholic militantism in the USA has marginalized and dismissed much of the academic literature on Vatican II, as well as the papal magisterium that unapologetically articulated a theological reception of the council. It seems that there is now more room in the academic conversations for two non-conciliar versions of Catholic theology: a pre-Vatican II and anti-Vatican II theology on the one hand, and a radically post-Vatican II theology with little contact with the tradition and the real life of the faithful on the other. In the United States today, the theology of Vatican II (the event, the documents, and their development in the magisterium) seems to be trapped in a kind of intellectual and ecclesial no-man's land. The sexual and financial scandals of the last forty years have provoked a moral and legal emergency, but also a theological and magisterial crisis. Anger toward an institutional and hierarchical structure that is perceived as insensitive (at best) on key social issues has led many Catholics to the idea that the Church has lost all religious and moral authority, and therefore that Vatican II has also lost that authority.<sup>9</sup>

Resentment and distrust of the institutional Church are rooted not only in an anti-historical or puritan mentality present in the DNA of the USA as a political and religious project. This distrust stems today also from the belief that Vatican

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9 See *The Legacy and Limits of Vatican II in an Age of Crisis*, edited by Catherine E. CLIFFORD, Kristin COLBERG, Massimo FAGGIOLI, Edward P. HAHNENBERG, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2025.

II failed to address issues of gender and racism in a way appropriate to the times and the reading of the Gospel. The perception has emerged that the debates of Vatican II, its final documents, as well as the post-conciliar historical and hermeneutical debate, were dominated by the clergy and later by academics that were male, white and/or of European origin. Vatican II appears to have little to say about the role of women in the Church and even less effective regarding the issue of abuse, whether sexual abuse, abuse of authority, or abuse of power.

Today, the appeals to Vatican II cannot hide the shortcomings of a teaching originating from the best theological minds of the 1950s and early 1960s, developed by a clerical elite born and raised in the age of empires, a generation which was just beginning to see the dawn of the post-colonial world on the horizon and its consequences. There is also a global, ecumenical, and interreligious factor that is different from the early post-Vatican II period: the shift in perception of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue between the time of the council and our post-9/11, 21<sup>st</sup>-century world. We have moved from a narrative of dialogue and encounter to one of encounter and conflict. Catholicism must now engage with more assertive post-secular faiths (both religiously and politically) around the world, as well as a more challenging secularism in which the nation-state is no longer the sole interlocutor. This has coincided with a rise of a new generation of Catholics who bring a different set of expectations to their understanding of the Church's tradition, one that places greater emphasis on the Fathers of the Church, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, the Catechism, and the papal magisterium than on Vatican II. This is especially consequential in the cases of high-profile "conversion" to Catholicism of public figures – politicians, public intellectuals, and hierarchical leaders from other Christian (non-Catholic) Churches and communities. In this sense, once again Catholicism in the United States is an extreme example and does not represent the general state of the relationship between the Church and Vatican II. In Latin America, for example, the scenario is very different, as seen from the contribution of that post-conciliar church to the synodal process. But it is undeniable that the global crisis we are experiencing has precedents in the fractures of the council's reception in specific areas and local areas of Catholicism, such as the United States of today, compared to the much more robust engagement of that same Church with the conciliar teaching in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>10</sup>

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10 See Joseph P. CHINNICI, *American Catholicism Transformed: From the Cold War Through the Council*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

What has happened since the early 2000s, both ecclesiastically and globally, raises questions about the role of Vatican II in Church history and the modern theological tradition. Was Vatican II a moment of opening to a new era (theology of the laity, ecumenism, interreligious dialogue), the beginning of a new chapter in history? Was it the last gasp of Catholic European Christendom? Or was it merely a parenthesis in the broader post-1945 era of the liberal international order which is now evidently struggling to survive? On the one hand, there is a revanchist rhetoric that sees Vatican II as the beginning of Catholicism's intellectual and moral demise: a naïve nostalgia for the pre-conciliar period that never existed, the desire to return what was allegedly taken away sixty years ago – less a recovery than a reinvention. On the other hand, there is an equally naïve progressive rhetoric about Vatican II as the last or the only heroic moment in the history of modern Catholicism: it is nostalgia for the mythology of the conciliar event and of the first period after the council.

Francis's pontificate demonstrated the crucial contribution of Vatican II theology to the transition from a European-centered Catholicism to a global Catholicism, following Karl Rahner's fundamental intuition.<sup>11</sup> However, this transition to a model other than the Euro-Western and colonial one is encountering strong resistance and is more complicated than expected.<sup>12</sup> The opposition to pope Francis was rooted in opposition to his expansive interpretation of Vatican II, necessitated by the departure from the European paradigm. Vatican II has found new life in local and national expressions of synodality, energizing the ecclesial process and, at the same time, addressing some of the gaps left by the theology and teachings of the Council. This moment in the globalization of the Church is exposing the limits of the ways in which Vatican II has played a role in the post-conciliar magisterium, especially at the episcopal level (national and local), as well as in the lived theology of the militant Catholic laity.

The election of Leo XIV on May 8, 2025, opened a new page: the first pope born after the end of World War II, the first Augustinian, and the first pope born in the USA (and in Chicago, one of the capitals of US Catholicism in its great cultural and racial diversities) where today the interpretation of Vatican II is particularly

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11 See Karl RAHNER, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II", *Theological Studies* 40.4 (1979) 716–727.

12 See Massimo FAGGIOLI and Bryan FROEHLE, *Global Catholicism: Between Disruption and Encounter*, Leiden: Brill, 2024; John T. MCGREEVY, *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2022.

polarized. Leo XIV was elected pope at a time of a “Thomistic revival” which is visible in important theological centers both in America and in Rome.<sup>13</sup> But the first months of his pontificate revealed pope Leo’s clear intention to continue the reception of Vatican II: as he said on October 29, on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, “It should not be forgotten that the first focus of *Nostra Aetate* was towards the Jewish world, which Saint John XXIII intended to re-establish the original relationship. For the first time in the history of the Church, a doctrinal treatise on the Jewish roots of Christianity was to take shape, which on a biblical and theological level would represent a point of no return”.<sup>14</sup>

### Vatican II and Synodality in the Global Church

The “thirty-year theological war” over the council, from the late 1980s and early 1990s until the pontificate of Francis, is over, or at least has entered a new phase. The “synodal process” initiated by Francis in 2021 was preceded and accompanied, not coincidentally, by a new era of studies on Vatican II characterized by a global historical-theological perspective, albeit still conceived and guided by European and Latin American Catholic scholars.<sup>15</sup> The situation of theological studies on the council in other areas is much more fragmented: it is dealing with more urgent and existential issues, but also uncertain vis-à-vis Vatican II and its promoters that are sometimes perceived as academic agents of a Western neo-colonial political and cultural agenda. At the same time, Catholic theology in the United States is gripped by a “cold civil war” - not only in politics, but also in the church and universities.<sup>16</sup>

13 See Thomas Joseph WHITE OP, “A Leonine Revival”, *First Things* (13 May 2025), <https://firstthings.com/a-leonine-revival/>

14 Leo XIV, *Catechesis on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the conciliar Declaration Nostra aetate*, October 29, 2025 <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2025/10/29/0809/01439.html>

15 See *Commentario ai documenti del Vaticano II*, cur. Serena NOCETI e Roberto REPOLE, 9 vols., Bologna: EDB, 2014–2022; *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, cur. Catherine E. CLIFFORD e Massimo FAGGIOLI, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023.

16 See *Vatican II in North America, Australia and Oceania*. Vol. 5 of the series *Vatican II – Event and Mandate. Intercontinental Commentary of Vatican II*, edited by Catherine CLIFFORD, Massimo FAGGIOLI, Richard LENNAN, and Ormond RUSH, Leuven: Peeters, 2025, available also in open access [https://www.peeters-leuven.be/detail.php?search\\_key=9789042953987](https://www.peeters-leuven.be/detail.php?search_key=9789042953987)) (German translation: *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil in Nordamerika, Australien und*



More than another celebration or commemoration of the Second Vatican Council, today we need to contribute to a new phase in the academic research, but also in the pastoral implementation of Vatican II: a new phase that reflects both a broader awareness of the global dimensions of Catholicism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and a deeper engagement with the challenges now facing all local churches. The post-European, post-Western, and global Catholicism that is leaving the paradigms of second millennium behind is not just somewhere else on the world map: it is everywhere, taking roots in many local Catholic churches today, especially in settings changed by migration and urbanization, social isolation and the breaking of inter-generational links.

This globalization of Catholic theology entails a relativization of the value and relevance for the life of the Church of much of the theological commentary published between 1965 and today. It also requires a reconsideration of the practical, pastoral, and catechetical theology implemented in the name of Vatican II in the last sixty years. The fact that this challenge takes often the shape of an ideologically motivated attack against Vatican II coming from traditionalist Catholic militancy does not detract from the substance of the problem. We need to reexamine the teaching of Vatican II from the perspective of the current ecclesial crisis in the context of the global “polycrisis.”<sup>17</sup> A renewed study and fruitful reception of the council should take into account critical considerations: we need a new synthesis that can be meaningful for a new generation of pastors, educators, and Church leaders.<sup>18</sup> A new approach must build on the collaboration between different disciplines in a truly global manner, incorporating a diversity of scholarly voices and perspectives casting a light on why Vatican II was a real moment of grace.<sup>19</sup>

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*Ozeanien*, Hrsg. Catherine C. CLIFFORD, Massimo FAGGIOLI, Richard LENNAN und Ormond RUSH, *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil – Ereignis und Auftrag* Bd. 5, Freiburg: Herder 2025

17 See Massimo FAGGIOLI, “Que reste-t-il de Vatican II? Sexisme, racisme, crise des abus et régimes d’historicité dans l’Église”, *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 55.2 (2024) 194–212, DOI: 10.2143/RTL.55.2.3293499.

18 See the masterful book by Australian theologian Ormond RUSH, *The Vision of Vatican II. Its Fundamental Principles*, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2019, and the recent volume of Christoph THEOBALD’s “opus magnum”, *La réception du Concile Vatican II*, vol. 2: *L’Église dans l’histoire et la société. L’Évangile et l’Église*, vol. II/A, Paris: Cerf, 2023.

19 See, for example, Brenna MOORE, *Kindred Spirits: Friendship and Resistance at the Edges of Modern Catholicism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.



Much of the new phase of reception of Vatican II will take place in synodal settings – at the local, national, and universal level – as synodality is a continuation of the trajectories of Vatican II in the third millennium, extending into a vastly changed theological, ecclesial, and social landscape. In this sense, synodality is an opportunity to de-ideologize the debate on Vatican II. It is revealing that the opposition to synodality is often a version of the opposition against the mainstream narrative of Vatican II as a council of radical change. It is not always another version of the opposition against Vatican II *per se*.<sup>20</sup>

Francis brought to the hermeneutics of the council his lived experience as a Jesuit, a bishop, and as pope. This is one of the legacies of pope Francis' pontificate, of its enthusiastic reception as well as of the strong rejection of it in some quarters of the global Church. There are lessons to be learned from first pope born in Latin America, and there will be other lessons coming from Leo XIV, the first pope born in the USA.

## Conclusions

In a global world where the secular and the post-secular coexist, marked by religious and intra-ecclesial divisions, radical identity claims, and a quest for meaning, Vatican II remains a vital resource for thinking and living faith in tension with contemporary realities. A conciliar hermeneutics of discernment is necessary, aware that the founding intuitions of Vatican II cannot be found in their entirety in the written and approved sixteen final texts. Vatican II is not just a *corpus* or a canon of final documents, but also as an act, a gesture, an event. At the same time, the new phase of reception of Vatican II cannot happen without a renewed attention to the documents, their intention, legacy, and limits for the global Catholic Church. These texts are today often barely known by priests and students of theology, let alone Catholics in the pews or those attending Catholic

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20 See Carlo FANTAPPIÈ, *Metamorfosi della sinodalità. Dal Vaticano II a papa Francesco*, Venezia: Marcianum, 2023; Christoph THEOBALD, *Un concile qui ne dit pas son nom. Le synode sur la synodalité, voie de pacification et de créativité*, Paris: Salvator, 2023; *Sinodalità e riforma. Una sfida ecclesiale*, edited by Rafael LUCIANI, Serena NOCETI, and Carlos SCHICKENDANTZ, Brescia: Queriniana, 2022; Kristin M. COLBERG and Jos MOONS, SJ, *The Future of Synodality. How We Move Forward from Here*, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2025.

school. It's often more a matter of oblivion than opposition, more a problem of perceived irrelevance than resistance against them.

It is necessary to continue a dual dynamic of *ressourcement* within tradition *and* of *aggiornamento*, which constitute both the most important legacies of Vatican II. We must return to the sources, beginning with Scripture and tradition continuing through Vatican II, which is an integral part of this tradition. At the same time, we must update our theologies and church structures in light of the faith lived by the people of God, in a Church and world that have profoundly changed in the last sixty years.<sup>21</sup>

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21 For the hermeneutical challenges of an intercontinental commentary of Vatican II today, see *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil: Allgemeine Einführung und Hermeneutik. Einführung und Hermeneutik*, vol. 1 of *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil – Ereignis und Auftrag*, edited by Sandra Ester ARENAS PÉREZ, Edoh F. BEDJRA, Catherine E. CLIFFORD, Margit ECKHOLT, Massimo FAGGIOLI, Nontando Margaret HADEBE, Peter HÜNNERMANN, Shaji George KOCHUTHARA, Carlos SCHICKENDANTZ, Klaus VELLGUTH, and Mary MEE-YIN YUEN, Freiburg: Herder, 2024; English translation: *Vatican II: General Introduction and Hermeneutics*, volume 1 of the series "Vatican II – Event and Mandate", Leuven: Peeters, 2025, available in open access [https://www.peeters-leuven.be/detail.php?search\\_key=9789042954755](https://www.peeters-leuven.be/detail.php?search_key=9789042954755).

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## THE SPIRIT OF VATICAN II AND THE LITURGICAL REFORM BETWEEN RECEPTION AND REJECTION

MÓZES NÓDA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This study analyses the reception of the liturgical reform and the ongoing controversies surrounding its meaning and legitimacy sixty years after the Council. It highlights the deep historical roots of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, shaped by decades of liturgical renewal. The liturgical reform embodied a broader ecclesiological shift, integrating *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* to renew the Church and its relationship with the modern world. The postconciliar period, however, saw increasing polarisation, with debates framed between continuity and rupture. The *Summorum Pontificum* intensified the crisis by relativising the liturgical reform and empowering anti-conciliar trends. The liturgical debates reflect deeper ecclesiological tensions. The apostolic letters of Pope Francis, *Traditionis custodes* and *Desiderio desideravi*, have sought to restore unity and reaffirm the authority of Vatican II and of the liturgical reform. Francis reconfirmed the postconciliar revised Missal as the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Catholic Church and emphasised the profound need for liturgical formation. He aimed to restore thereby the unity of the Church.

**Keywords:** Vatican II, liturgical movement, liturgical reform, liturgical debates, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Summorum Pontificum*, Pope Francis, *Traditionis custodes*, *Desiderio desideravi*.

In the life of a person, the age of sixty signifies maturity. In the lifespan of a council, sixty may still signify young age. Viewed through the subjective perception of time in the twenty-first century, however, after sixty years the council appears as a distant event, even if, proverbially, the reception of a council requires a hundred

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Article history: Received 25.11.2025; Revised 12.11.2025; Accepted 14.11.2025.

Available online: 22.12.2025; Available print: 30.01.2026.

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years.<sup>2</sup> From the perspective of the reception of the Council and of the liturgical reform, the past sixty years were fraught by conflicts and attempts to delegitimise the conciliar reform and reverse its course.

This paper reflects on the reception of Vatican II, more specifically of the liturgical reform, sixty years after the conclusion of the Council, and on the response of Pope Francis to the liturgy debates. In the first part I briefly evoke the aims and guiding principles of the Council and of the liturgical reform, reminding that the liturgical movement was deeply rooted in the preconconciliar liturgical movement. Looking at the reception, I recall the gradual delegitimation of Vatican II and of the liturgical reform, notably during the turbulent period marked by the *Summorum Pontificum*. I then look at the way the magisterial documents of Pope Francis (*Traditionis custodes*, the Letter to the bishops, and *Desiderio desideravi*) have sought to restore and confirm the principles and desiderata of the liturgical reform.

### What made Vatican II and its liturgical reform special?

#### *A long preparatory stage*

The Liturgical Constitution was not a theoretical document: the Council drew from and consecrated the insights and experience of the over fifty years of preconconciliar liturgical renewal.<sup>3</sup> The period preceding the council was a time of intensive theological reflection and quest; liturgists, systematic theologians, biblical scholars and ecumenists were seeking new paths and had the courage to act. The liturgical reform was one of the fields where this openness was particularly

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- 2 “Es gibt Ideen und Verhaltensweisen, die von einer Restauration herrühren, der das Konzil grundsätzlich nicht akzeptiert hat. Das Problem ist nämlich, dass das Konzil in einigen Bereichen noch nicht akzeptiert wurde. Es ist auch wahr, dass es ein Jahrhundert dauert, bis ein Konzil Wurzeln schlägt. Wir haben also noch vierzig Jahre Zeit, um es zu etablieren!” Papst Franziskus im Gespräch mit den europäischen Kulturzeitschriften der Jesuiten (19.05.2022), *Stimmen der Zeit* (10.06.2022), <https://www.herder.de/stz/online/papst-franziskus-im-gespraech-mit-den-europaeischen-kulturzeitschriften-der-jesuiten/>.
  - 3 Reiner KACZYNSKI, “Theologischer Kommentar zur Konstitution über die heilige Liturgie *Sacrosanctum Concilium*”, in Peter HÜNERMANN, Hans-Joachim SANDER and Reiner KACZYNSKI (eds.), *Sacrosanctum Concilium – Inter mirifica – Lumen gentium* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil 2), Freiburg: Herder, 2004, 1–261 (esp. 24–42).

manifest. The theological principles and practical initiatives of the liturgical renewal sought to make the liturgy the source and centre of spirituality.<sup>4</sup> The liturgical movement started in a number of Benedictine communities and the liturgical apostolate strove to put the Mass at the centre of the life of the Church, and endorsed the participation of lay believers in the celebration of the Eucharist,<sup>5</sup> particularly through liturgical formation and initiation in the spirit of the liturgy. Magisterial documents like the Instruction on Sacred Music *Tra le sollecitudini* of Pius X<sup>6</sup> and the encyclicals of Pius XII<sup>7</sup> paved the way for the liturgical reform of Vatican II.<sup>8</sup>

This long process of preparation can be seen as part of a wider process of historical reconciliation. Theologians developed a shared reflection and collaboration which removed barriers, resolved grievances, and healed the wounds inflicted by the wars. The 1913 meeting in Maria Laach, organised by Abbot Ildefons Herwegen, was later described by Robert Schuman as a cornerstone serving as foundation for the future Europe.<sup>9</sup> Later, the Liturgical Conferences were a vivid testimony to the reconciliation among nations as well as events and expressions of the shared theological reflection. Through the choice of diverse locations, symbolic places of the West served as venues for liturgical reflection and action.<sup>10</sup> The series of liturgical events culminated with the 1956 Assisi pastoral liturgical congress.

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- 4 Andrea Grillo evokes Guardini's periodisation of the liturgical movement, distinguishing a first, "restorative phase (Solesmes); then an academic phase (Maria Laach, Beuron), and a realistic phase." Romano GUARDINI, *Diary*, 1953 May 26, quoted in Andrea GRILLO, *Beyond Pius V. Conflicting Interpretations of the Liturgical Reform* (trans. Barry Hudock), Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013, 11.
  - 5 Lambert BEAUDUIN, *La piété de l'Église*, Leuven: Abbaye du Mont-César, 1914, 47; ID., "Das eigentliche Gebet der Kirche", *LJ* 9.4 (1959) 198–202; Romano GUARDINI, *Vom Geist der Liturgie* (Ecclesia orans 1), Freiburg: Grünewald/Schöning, 1922; Pius PARSCH, *Das Jahr des Heiles*, Klosterneuburg: Volkliturgisches Apostolat, 1923.
  - 6 *Tra le sollecitudini*, AAS 36 (1904) 325–329; Carlo BRAGA, Annibale BUGNINI, *Documenta ad instaurationem liturgicam spectantia 1903–1963*, Roma: CLV, 2000, 12–27.
  - 7 *Mystici corporis*, AAS 35 (1943) 200–243; *Mediator Dei*, AAS 39 (1947) 528–580.
  - 8 Nonetheless for a critical reflection on the limitations of *Mediator Dei*: GRILLO, *Beyond Pius V*, 21–24.
  - 9 Robert SCHUMAN, *Ein Blatt dankbarer Erinnerung*, *LJ* 9.4 (1959) 194.
  - 10 Maria Laach (1951), Odilienberg (1952), Lugano (1953), Leuven, Mont César (1954), Assisi (1956), Monserrat (1958), München (1960).



With its 1,500 participants representing almost the whole Catholic Church, the Congress in Assisi may rightly be regarded as a small council.<sup>11</sup> Assisi displayed the universal character of the Catholic Church, a dimension that was to become a major feature of Vatican II. The festive event was not without shortcomings.<sup>12</sup>

The topics of the liturgical conferences were chosen in consultation with Rome, and the process was not always easy; nevertheless, negotiations proved fruitful and benefitted both parties.<sup>13</sup> Remembering these perhaps now-forgotten events is important, because they expressed a deep desire to restore the centrality of the liturgy and the need to enhance the participation of the faithful in the Eucharistic celebration. The representatives of the liturgical movement recognised the signs of the times and sought to find responses to these challenges. This journey was on occasion fraught with tensions,<sup>14</sup> yet determination and courage ultimately paid off, as the Council confirmed these insights and initiatives.

### *The spirit of the Council*

Pope John XXIII convened the Council in this spirit of openness, dialogue, and attention to the challenges of the time. The Council was expected to be a new

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11 The 1,500 participants represented the universal Church: Australia, Belgium, Germany, France, China, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, the US, Canada, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Spain, and the Philippines. Johannes WAGNER, "Die Erneuerung der Liturgie aus dem Geist der Seelsorge unter dem Pontifikat Papst Pius XII", *LJ* 6.4 (1956) 189–199. I could not find references to participants from Eastern Europe.

12 KACZYNSKI, "Theologischer Kommentar", 41–42.

13 As indirectly attested by the *Mediator Dei*: "The same reasoning holds in the case of some persons who are bent on the restoration of all the ancient rites and ceremonies indiscriminately. The liturgy of the early ages is most certainly worthy of all veneration. But ancient usage must not be esteemed more suitable and proper, either in its own right or in its significance for later times and new situations, on the simple ground that it carries the savor and aroma of antiquity. The more recent liturgical rites likewise deserve reverence and respect. They, too, owe their inspiration to the Holy Spirit, who assists the Church in every age even to the consummation of the world. They are equally the resources used by the majestic Spouse of Jesus Christ to promote and procure the sanctity of man." MD 61.

14 Max KASSIEPE, *Irrwege und Umwege*, in *Frömmigkeitsleben der Gegenwart*, Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1939, 15–16. August DOERNER, *Sentire cum Ecclesia*, M. Gladbach: B. Kühlen, 1941, 252–290.



Pentecost, to bring forth the spring of the Church,<sup>15</sup> by promoting the renewal of ecclesial life, Christian unity, and an opening to the world.<sup>16</sup> The Council was meant to “spread everywhere the light of truth”.<sup>17</sup> Christian doctrine had to be defended and presented more effectively, investigated and presented it in timely manner.<sup>18</sup> The aims of the Council associate faithfulness to tradition and accommodation to contemporary necessities with a look at the future. This tension between the two perspectives will be exacerbated during the council, as shown by the disagreement between the conservative and the progressive position.

As John O’Malley has noted, the vote on the Liturgical Constitution, the very first conciliar document to be promulgated, had implications that went beyond the liturgy. It reflected the principles of *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*: the need to adapt the liturgy and implicitly ecclesial practice to the circumstances of the time and to return to the sources of the early Church – the Bible and the Church Fathers –, to reshape the liturgy: “The liturgists, that is to say, had returned to the ancient sources in order to find their way. The Mass was thus not so much

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- 15 *Superno Dei nutu*, AAS 52 (1960) 433–437, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/apost\\_letters/1960/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_apl\\_19600605\\_superno-dei.htm](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/apost_letters/1960/documents/hf_j-xxiii_apl_19600605_superno-dei.htm) (“*Superno Dei nutu factum esse reputavimus quod Nobis, ad Pontificale Solium vix evectis, Concilii Oecumenici celebrandi, veluti flos inexpectati veris, subiit cogitatio.*”).
- 16 *Ad Petri cathedram* (1959), 61–62, AAS 51 (1959) 497–531; Engl. [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_29061959\\_ad-petri.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_29061959_ad-petri.html) (the growth of the Catholic faith, the restoration of morals, the adaptation of Church discipline to the needs and conditions of our times; a wonderful spectacle of truth, unity, and charity that would be to non-Catholics a gentle invitation to seek and find unity); also *Superno Dei nutu*, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/apost\\_letters/1960/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_apl\\_19600605\\_superno-dei.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/apost_letters/1960/documents/hf_j-xxiii_apl_19600605_superno-dei.html); *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* 11, 14, 18–19
- 17 Allocutio Ioannis pp. XXIII in sollemni Ss. Concilii inauguratione *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* (11.10.1962), 4; AAS 54.14 (1962) 786–796, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/speeches/1962/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_spe\\_19621011\\_opening-council.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council.html); Engl. *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia. Pope John’s Opening Speech to the Council*, <https://jakomonchak.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/john-xxiii-opening-speech.pdf>
- 18 *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* 11, 14 (Faithfulness to the unchanging truth did not dispense with accommodation in expressing it: “What is needed is that this certain and unchangeable doctrine, to which loyal submission is due, be investigated and presented in the way demanded by our times. For the deposit of faith, the truths contained in our venerable doctrine, are one thing; the fashion in which they are expressed, but with the same meaning and the same judgement, is another thing”. GME 14).

‘modernized’ as made to conform more closely to fundamental and traditional principles.”<sup>19</sup> However, the *ressourcement*, the return to the sources, a principle advanced by the *nouvelle théologie*, was not uncontested, as it questioned the idea of a continuous development, involving a return to an early or original point that had been forsaken, to which the Church had to return.<sup>20</sup> The principles of *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* touched sensitivities in the Catholic Church, as they involved changing insights and practices that had been considered binding and immutable. Eventually, the Council adopted the principle of *aggiornamento*, according to which the Catholic Church had to adapt to the modern world. In doing so, it embraced certain values of modern culture. The return to the sources, Grillo argues, responded to a crisis of the liturgical practice. At the same time, *ressourcement* does not and cannot mean only a recovery of texts regarding the meaning and practice of the liturgy in the early Church; it requires the return to the liturgy itself as source, an initiation into the liturgy as expression of Christian faith.<sup>21</sup>

### *The radical decisions of the Council*

Peter Hünermann argued that Vatican II involved a number of fundamental decisions involving a break with earlier paradigms. It expressed a new relationship with religions, following a break with the identification of the order of faith and of the Church with the state-church system (as articulated in *Dignitatis humanae*).

19 John W. O'MALLEY, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press, 2008, 140.

20 On the mistrust towards the idea of *ressourcement*: O'MALLEY, *What Happened*, 41–42.

21 “In reality, no one has ever attempted such a radical rediscovery of the sources except in a situation of a grave crisis of praxis. The crisis is not the effect but the cause of the *ressourcement*. And yet *ressourcement* cannot be the ultimate solution to this crisis.” [...] “The crisis of the initiation of Christians into the rites and by means of the rites brought about a “return to the sources,” which in turn prepared for and brought about a “reform.” This reform can be brought to completion in Christian living only through an adequate liturgical initiation of believers into the Christian faith. We can say, in other words, that behind and before the “historical shift” that brought a new theological understanding of the rites through a “return to the sources,” there is the pastoral question of their actual significance as “sources of the life of the church’s faith.” GRILLO, *Beyond Pius V*, 56, 57 (also 16, on the margin of Pius Parsch’ contribution).

Subsequently, the mission of the Church was viewed not as an imposition of a set of beliefs, but as an act of communication, dialogue and freedom, offering the opportunity to encounter the truth of the Gospel (*Ad gentes*). It involved the decision to part with the division between the Eastern and Western Church, abandoning the view of the Church as a monocultural Western church, and to end the division between Catholics and Protestant Christians within the Western Church (as attested by *Orientalium ecclesiarum* and *Unitatis redintegratio*). Finally, it transcended the condition of a church that falters on the threshold of modernity and expressed an understanding of faith in the context of modernity (*Gaudium et spes*). In sum, these profound and transformative decisions meant that the Catholic Church redefined its position in several respects: regarding the public sphere, the state, and supranational organisations, vis-à-vis non-Christian religions, non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities. Second, faith and church life were outlined for the modern age. This transformation resulted in a new theological profile.<sup>22</sup>

### *The liturgical reform*

The aims of the Council were reiterated by the Liturgical Constitution, which described the prominence assigned to the liturgy and the promotion of the liturgical reform as part of this endeavour:

*This sacred Council has several aims in view: it desires to impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church. The Council therefore sees particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy (SC 1).*

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22 Peter HÜNERMANN, “Die zentralen theologischen Aussagen des Konzils”, in Dirk ANSORGE, *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil: Impulse und Perspektiven* (Frankfurter theologische Studien 70), Münster: Aschendorff, 2013, 23–51. Also, Peter HÜNERMANN, “‘...in mundo huius temporis’. A II. Vatikáni zsinat jelentősége korunk kultúrájának átalakulási folyamatában – a zsinati dokumentumok, mint alkotmányos szövegek”, tr. Görföl Tibor, *Vigilia* 77.9 (2012) 642–649.

The Liturgical Constitution is not only a programmatic document on the liturgy and its reform, but an ecclesiological document. It reflects a vision of the Church both present in this world, and a pilgrim community, with a human, visible dimension subordinated to the divine, invisible, an incarnate Church, whose human, embodied, institutional dimension is open to change and renewal, and open to the world, a Church living from the Paschal mystery, a sacramental Church, living from the liturgy, from the baptism and the Eucharist, where liturgy is a celebration and the liturgy communicates to the people the work of our redemption.<sup>23</sup>

The liturgy is defined as “the summit (*culmen*) toward which the activity of the Church is directed” and “the font (*fons*) from which all her power flows” (SC 10).

Beyond emphasising the indispensable ministry of the priest in the Eucharistic celebration, the SC addressed the participation of the assembly of the people of God in celebrating the liturgy, and made the full, conscious and active participation (*participatio actuosa*) of the faithful the guiding principle of the liturgical reform. By recognising the plurality of rites and their distinctive features, including language and the manner of celebrating, as well as through a process of decentralization (manifested in the greater authority of the local bishops to decide on various aspects regarding the liturgy), the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* reflected a broader vision of the liturgy and of the church.<sup>24</sup>

As Andrea Grillo underscores, the participation of the entire people of God in the liturgy is fundamental to the liturgical reform,<sup>25</sup> and links it to the understanding of the liturgy as *fons*, as source of the faith and life of the Church. Thus, active participation does not mean merely an intellectual understanding of the liturgy. It means “practical ritual participation”, an initiation into the liturgy as *fons*, an experiential recovery of the “ritual-prayer level of eucharistic understanding”, of

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23 Massimo FAGGIOLI, *True Reform Liturgy and Ecclesiology in Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012, 59, 65–71.

24 Albert GERHARDS, “Universalität und Partikularität. Zum Stand der liturgischen Erneuerung 50 Jahre nach Sacrosanctum Concilium”, in Dirk ANSORGE, *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil: Impulse und Perspektiven* (Frankfurter theologische Studien 70), Münster: Aschendorff, 2013, 349–374.

25 GRILLO, *Beyond Pius V*, xv (“The participation of the entire assembly in the single liturgical action is the fundamental purpose of the reform. If we forget the clarity and centrality of this decisive fact, the reform itself is rendered superfluous, almost effortlessly.”); *ibid.*, 11: active participation as litmus test for the effectiveness of the liturgical reform.

the *actio sacra*.<sup>26</sup> Active participation also involves an “initiation of Christians into their rightful place in the church, always as subjects [...] but, most important, as witness-symbols (of gifts), that is, of an ecclesial identity marked – in body, in heart, and in mind – by the gracious and merciful lordship of Jesus”.<sup>27</sup>

## Reception or rejection?

### *The crisis*

In the aftermath of the Council, after an initial enthusiasm, the changes and new emphases brought by the conciliar reforms stirred widespread fear. The position of the Council was gradually framed in terms of “break” or “continuity” with tradition, one side questioning the faithfulness and catholicity of the other.

Reflecting on the reception of the Council with special attention to the US, Massimo Faggioli argues that sixty years after its conclusion, the Council is no longer a point of encounter between different theological cultures in the Catholic Church, but its reception reflects a fragmented picture, related in part to the interruption of the conciliar tradition:

The relationship with Vatican II has changed, not only in terms of theological orientations, but also as a presence or absence of the event of the council and familiarity with its texts in the biographies, self-representation, imagination, and the lived faith of Catholics today. This fragmented picture is not simply the result of a natural shift in the role of Vatican II in the transition from generation to generation, but rather the result of processes of transmission and interruption of the conciliar tradition.<sup>28</sup>

Conflicting interpretations of the Council have led over the past sixty years and in particular since the early 2000s to mutual alienation. In the US and in Western Europe, neoconservative theology gained momentum and influence. The liturgical

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26 GRILLO, *Beyond Pius V*, 11, 18–19, 25–26. Also Andrea GRILLO, *A liturgia születése a 20. században. Tanulmány a liturgikus mozgalom és a (poszt)modernitás viszonyáról*, Pannonhalma: Bencés Kiadó, 2006, 290–291.

27 GRILLO, *Beyond Pius V*, 31.

28 Massimo FAGGIOLI, “Sixty Years from Vatican II: Points of No Return and New Uncertainties. Towards a Global and Synodal Reception of the Council”, *Studia UBB. Theologia Catholica Latina* 70.2 (2025) 5–18 (5).

reform became the focus of the clash. While initially the need for a “reform of the reform” was advanced, without an outright questioning of the Council, eventually the neoconservative stream targeted the very legitimacy of the Council and its liturgical reform. Over the past two and a half decades, especially in the US, the debates about the hermeneutics of the Council, about the liturgy and the liturgical reform acquired the outlook of liturgical wars (if not outright cultural wars).<sup>29</sup> This process was largely encouraged by the motu proprio *Summorum Pontificum* of Benedict XVI (2007).<sup>30</sup> This gave extensive permission for the celebration of the so-called ‘extraordinary form of the Roman Rite’, the revised Tridentine Mass published in the Missal of John XXIII, recognised as “one of usages of the one Roman rite”, next to the *Novus Ordo Missae* (or later, the ‘Ordinary Form’), promulgated by Pope Paul VI.<sup>31</sup> This gave unique legitimacy to the rite Vatican II considered in need of revision.<sup>32</sup>

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- 29 On the stages of the reception and the rejection of the Council, the increasing questioning of the legitimacy of the council by traditionalists: Massimo FAGGIOLI, *Vatican II: the Battle for Meaning*, New York: Paulist Press, 2012, 6–37; on the reinterpretation of the liturgical constitution and Benedict XVI’s emphasis on the need for a “reform of a reform”: 102–105, also 108–112 (the clash between the hermeneutics of continuity vs discontinuity). Also, John F. BALDOVIN, SJ, “The Constitution on Sacred Liturgy”, in Catherine E. Clifford, Massimo Faggioli (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 148–166 (164–165); John F. BALDOVIN, SJ, “A Liturgical Reform in Peril? Sacrosanctum Concilium Sixty Years On”, in Clare V. JOHNSON, Gerard MOORE, Peter G. WILLIAMS (eds.), *Sacrosanctum Concilium. Exploring Liturgical Futures*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025, 9–22, on the postconciliar trends of the reinterpretation and rejection of the liturgical reform as part of the liturgical wars.
- 30 BENEDICT XVI, *Apostolic Letter Given Motu Proprio Summorum Pontificum on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970*, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_motu-proprio\\_20070707\\_summorum-pontificum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20070707_summorum-pontificum.html).
- 31 PAUL VI, *Apostolic Constitution Missale Romanum on New Roman Missal*, [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_apc\\_19690403\\_missale-romanum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_19690403_missale-romanum.html).
- 32 On the paradox of the coexistence of two rites and the problems it has caused: Martin KLÖCKENER, “Zwei Formen des einen römischen Ritus? Zur Überwindung eines problematischen Nebeneinanders”, in Andrea GRILLO – Zeno CARRA (eds.), *Oltre Summorum Pontificum. Per una riconciliazione liturgica possibile / Beyond Summorum Pontificum. For a Possible Liturgical Reconciliation*, Bologna: EDB, 2020, 23–36.

The support of Benedict XVI for the “extraordinary form of the Roman Rite” undermined the normativity of the postconciliar liturgical reform. Martin Klöckener has shown that the recognition of the ‘extraordinary form’ endangered the progress reached with the conciliar liturgical reform. Such endangered results comprised the renewal of the liturgy of the word, a deeper understanding of the sacraments, the full, conscious and active participation of the faithful, the use of the vernacular languages, and the rich theology of the Eucharistic prayers and other rites, blessings and prayers. The emphasis on the importance of Scripture in the life of the Church and in the liturgy was followed by a reorganisation of the readings of the Mass. Biblical pericopes were also included in the celebration of the sacraments. The sacramental celebrations were revised so to express the essence of the sacraments. The *participatio actiosa* of the faithful in the liturgy, theologically grounded in baptism, is one of the most important principles of the Council; this was undermined by the clerical focus of the ‘extraordinary form’. The use of vernacular languages provided the basis for an understanding participation of the whole people of God. The new Eucharistic Prayers also enriched the liturgy of the Church.<sup>33</sup> The permissive position of *Summorum Pontificum* towards the ‘extraordinary form’ endangered these gains.

The delegitimisation of the Council reached a new peak with the attacks on Pope Francis, notably in the US. The causes were multiple: the ignorance of conciliar teaching, dissatisfaction with some of his positions, related for instance, to the issue of immigration (all the more as this aspect of the social teaching of the Church was less traditional).<sup>34</sup> Ultimately the Council itself became a target of the attacks. The fresh spirit and language of the Council, the emphasis on the people of God and the pilgrim Church, on brotherhood, collegiality, cooperation, and partnership signified for neo-conservative groups a break with traditional modes of expression. This language was amplified in Pope Francis’s forward discourse imbued with the appeal to mercy and compassion. Conservative ecclesial circles favoured a more authoritarian style of leadership, matching the political pattern

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33 KLÖCKENER, “Zwei Formen”, 30–31. See also John F. BALDOVIN, “Liturgical Reconciliation: How to Get Beyond the «Exceptional Status» of *Summorum Pontificum*?”, in Andrea GRILLO – Zeno CARRA (eds.), *Oltre Summorum Pontificum. Per una riconciliazione liturgica possibile / Beyond Summorum Pontificum. For a Possible Liturgical Reconciliation*, Bologna: EDB, 2020, 37–43; Benedikt KRANEMANN, “Gottesdienst weiterentwickeln: Wohin soll der Weg der römischen Liturgie führen?”, in the same volume, 45–53.

34 FAGGIOLI, “Sixty Years”, 6–7.



whereby a firm hand is seen as providing security in times of uncertainty. This, in turn, has brought about hostility toward the perspective of the Council, and Francis was rejected for allegedly advancing modernism.

*Attempts to exit the crisis: Pope Francis*

Reflecting on the tasks of theology on the margin of the synod and on the inability of the Church to respond to contemporary challenges, Andrea Grillo reverses the charge of modernism brought against Pope Francis and against the conciliar paradigm change. Grillo shows that Trent was in fact the modern response to the crisis of tradition. Modern style and thought involved bureaucratisation, centralisation, and clericalisation. Vatican II was a response to the crisis of the modern, Tridentine paradigm that emerged during the 19–20<sup>th</sup> century, and developed a new way of engaging with tradition.<sup>35</sup> After the Council a new vocabulary, a new language of openness emerged, giving up the “bureaucratisation of faith” and the “institutional formalisation of tradition”, and a new ‘canon’ of action was developed. However, in recent times, paradoxically the Church uses the language of Vatican II but acts according to the Tridentine ‘canon’.<sup>36</sup> This goes for many aspects of the life of the Church but is especially true of the liturgy. Vatican II initiated a “translation of tradition” that produced a comprehensive reform of all the ritual actions of Christian life. Not surprisingly, this ‘new canon’ became the target of the most stubborn resistance from those who refused to abandon the ‘modern’, Tridentine understanding of the Church. Pope Francis gave a clear response to those who ‘suspended’ the liturgical reform, between 2007 and 2021 (a hint to the period between the *Summorum Pontificum* and the *Traditionis custodes*), and rejected the new liturgical ‘canon’ claiming nonetheless to be “Roman Catholic”.<sup>37</sup> The synodal style employed by Francis, the synodal process is restrained by the ‘wheellock’ of fear. Grillo notes that opposing a lexicon

35 Andrea GRILLO, “Fare teologia oggi. Il passaggio dalla società dell’onore alla società della dignità”, *Munera. Rivista Europea di cultura* (21.05.2025), <https://www.cittadellaeditrice.com/munera/fare-teologia-oggi-lonore-e-la-dignita-oltre-il-blocco/>.

36 “Spesso noi parliamo il lessico del Concilio Vaticano II, ma agiamo secondo un canone che resta quello tridentino.” GRILLO, “Fare teologia”, *ibid.* He follows here Pierangelo Sequeri.

37 GRILLO, “Fare teologia”, *ibid.* On the response of Pope Francis, also Felix NEUMANN, “Wer sich gegen die neue Liturgie stellt, stellt sich gegen die Kirche. Franziskus verteidigt das



of openness to the rigidity of a ‘modern canon’ is not sufficient: the Church has to address a whole series of issues that touch on the dignity of individuals.<sup>38</sup>

Pope Francis responded with two apostolic letters to the questioning of the liturgical reform that gained impetus after the *Summorum Pontificum*. *Traditionis custodes*<sup>39</sup> and *Desiderio desideravi*<sup>40</sup> restrained the use of the Roman rite prior to the 1970 reform, expressed strong support for the conciliar liturgical reform and emphasised the importance of the liturgical formation of the entire people of God. *Traditionis custodes* introduces firm regulations regarding the use of the 1962 Roman rite. The accompanying Letter addressed to the bishops explains the decision.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the concessions granted by John Paul II and Benedict XVI were intended to preserve the unity of the Church. However, the 2020 consultation of the bishops, conducted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the application of the *Summorum Pontificum* has shown that the concessions did not yield the expected outcome.<sup>42</sup> Following these developments, the pope

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Konzil gegen die Restauration”, *katholisch.de* (30.06.2022), <https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/39918-franziskus-verteidigt-das-konzil-gegen-die-restauration>.

- 38 Deliberations must not be silenced. Acting otherwise would prove that mentally the Church continues to live in the modern, bureaucratic, and institutional forms of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. GRILLO, “Fare teologia”, *ibid*.
- 39 Apostolic Letter Issued Motu Proprio by the Supreme Pontiff Francis “Traditionis Custodes” on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970 (16 July 2021), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html).
- 40 Apostolic Letter *Desiderio Desideravi* of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, to Consecrated Men and Women and to the Lay Faithful on the Liturgical Formation of the People of God (29 June 2022), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/20220629-lettera-ap-desiderio-desideravi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/20220629-lettera-ap-desiderio-desideravi.html).
- 41 Letter of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops of the Whole World, that Accompanies the Apostolic Letter Motu Proprio Data “Traditionis Custodes” (16 July 2021), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescovi-liturgia.html>
- 42 “The responses [to the inquiry of the CDF] reveal a situation that preoccupies and saddens me, and persuades me of the need to intervene. Regrettably, the pastoral objective of my Predecessors, who had intended “to do everything possible to ensure that all those who truly possessed the desire for unity would find it possible to remain in this unity or to rediscover it anew”, [SP] has often been seriously disregarded.” *Letter*, <https://www>.

felt compelled to restore the unity of the Church, through unity in the liturgical celebration.

Pope Francis declared the post-conciliar, renewed Roman Missal “the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite” and it established the exclusive competence of the bishops to authorise the use of the 1962 Missal, breaking with the far more permissive regulations of the *Summorum Pontificum*.<sup>43</sup> In the accompanying letter, Francis addressed the abuse of the pastoral intent of the *Summorum Pontificum*, which eventually failed to promote the unity of the Church,<sup>44</sup> and pointed to the rejection of the liturgical reform and of the Council based on the unfounded claim of betrayal of tradition and of the Church.<sup>45</sup> While repeatedly emphasising the continuity with the intention of Pope Benedict, expressed in *Summorum Pontificum*, *Traditiones custodes* and the accompanying Letter show that the concessions not only failed to achieve the unity of a Church embattled by debates over the appropriate form of the liturgy, but they contributed in fact to the divisions and to the delegitimisation of the Council.

*Desiderio desideravi* provides important insights regarding the liturgy and strengthens the reception of the conciliar liturgical reform and ecclesiology. The pope proposes a biblical-theological reflection on the liturgy. The apostolic letter

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[vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescovi-liturgia.html#\\_ftnref12](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescovi-liturgia.html#_ftnref12).

- 43 “The liturgical books promulgated by Saint Paul VI and Saint John Paul II, in conformity with the decrees of Vatican Council II, are the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite” (TC 1). “It belongs to the diocesan bishop, as moderator, promoter, and guardian of the whole liturgical life of the particular Church entrusted to him, to regulate the liturgical celebrations of his diocese. Therefore, it is his exclusive competence to authorize the use of the 1962 Roman Missal in his diocese, according to the guidelines of the Apostolic See (TC 2).
- 44 “An opportunity offered by St. John Paul II and, with even greater magnanimity, by Benedict XVI, intended to recover the unity of an ecclesial body with diverse liturgical sensibilities, was exploited to widen the gaps, reinforce the divergences, and encourage disagreements that injure the Church, block her path, and expose her to the peril of division.” Letter, *ibid*.
- 45 “I am nonetheless saddened that the instrumental use of *Missale Romanum* of 1962 is often characterized by a rejection not only of the liturgical reform, but of the Vatican Council II itself, claiming, with unfounded and unsustainable assertions, that it betrayed the Tradition and the “true Church”. Letter, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescovi-liturgia.html#\\_ftnref13](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescovi-liturgia.html#_ftnref13).

defines the liturgy as the actualisation (the “today”) of salvation history and as encounter with the living Christ through the Eucharist and the other sacraments. The liturgy is the glorification of God; it is the place of encounter with God, in the ongoing story of salvation which unfolds today. “The Liturgy gives glory to God because it allows us – here, on earth – to see God in the celebration of the mysteries.” (DD 43). The focus on the encounter with Christ and the immersion in the Paschal mystery can rightly be seen as the most important goal of every liturgical celebration (an exclusive emphasis on external aspects of the celebration misses the point).<sup>46</sup>

The celebrating subject of the liturgy is the entire Church, the mystical Body of Christ (not just the priest, DD 36).<sup>47</sup> The theological depth of the liturgy is defined following the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, as *culmen* and *fons* of the life of the Church.

The pope reaffirms the normative character of the Missal of Paul VI as the “unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite” (cf. TC 1). The tension surrounding the form of the liturgical celebration is not simply a question of taste, but it is ecclesiological in nature. The rejection of the liturgical reform equals the rejection of the ecclesiological vision of the Church as developed in *Lumen gentium*, and of Vatican II as such, an attitude that would be incomprehensible in a Catholic.<sup>48</sup> This is one of the most notable statements with regard to the reception

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46 Dariusz KWIATOWSKI, “The Reception of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* in Pope Francis’ Apostolic Letter *Desiderio desideravi*”, *Poznańskie Studia Teologiczne* 46 (2024) 143–158 (156).

47 Thus, the liturgy is not merely the concern of the clergy, nor is it sufficient to relegate it to the domain of legislation, nor is it simply the transmission of grace. FEHÉRVÁRY Őrs Jákó, “*Desiderio desideravi*: Vissza (vagy előre?) a liturgikus mozgalomhoz!”, in ID., *Az ünneplés művészete*, Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2024, 143–171. This does not dismiss or minimise the role of the priest. On the role of the priest as presiding at the Eucharist, as a gift of the Holy Spirit received in ordination, and as instrument of the presence of Christ and of the Holy Spirit: DD 56–60. By presiding at the celebration, the priest is formed in the liturgy.

48 “It would be trivial to read the tensions, unfortunately present around the celebration, as a simple divergence between different tastes concerning a particular ritual form. The problematic is primarily ecclesiological. I do not see how it is possible to say that one recognizes the validity of the Council — though it amazes me that a Catholic might presume not to do so — and at the same time not accept the liturgical reform born out of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, a document that expresses the reality of the Liturgy intimately

of the liturgical reform and the liturgical debates, as it underscores the deep link between ecclesiology and liturgical celebration: the rejection of the liturgical reform is rooted in the rejection of conciliar ecclesiology. This understanding of the liturgy is a response to the liturgical question, underscoring that the image of the Church always determines the interpretation of the liturgy. It also shows that the critique or rejection of the liturgical reform always also signifies the rejection of the teaching and theology of Vatican II.<sup>49</sup>

The Letter to the Bishops and *Desiderio desideravi* point to the link between the aim of liturgical reform and the full, conscious and active participation of the whole People of God in the liturgy. The Letter highlights the continuity between this principle of the Liturgical Constitution and previous magisterial decisions.<sup>50</sup>

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joined to the vision of Church so admirably described in *Lumen gentium*. For this reason, as I already expressed in my letter to all the bishops, I have felt it my duty to affirm that “The liturgical books promulgated by Saint Paul VI and Saint John Paul II, in conformity with the decrees of Vatican Council II, are the unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite.” [TC 1]. The non-acceptance of the liturgical reform, as also a superficial understanding of it, distracts us from the obligation of finding responses to the question that I come back to repeating: how can we grow in our capacity to live in full the liturgical action? How do we continue to let ourselves be amazed at what happens in the celebration under our very eyes? We are in need of a serious and dynamic liturgical formation.” (DD 31, cf. TC 1). On Francis’s emphasis on the intimate link between the documents of Vatican II: Massimo FAGGIOLI, “How Francis Talks About the Liturgy It’s his way of talking about Vatican II”, *Commonweal* (2023.03.12), <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/how-francis-talks-about-liturgy>.

49 “The Liturgical Reform from 1963 until Today . . . and Beyond”, *Toronto Journal of Theology* 32.2 (2016) 201–217 (202: “The example of the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX), which is in schism, clearly shows that the rejection of the liturgical reform could not be kept under control, not even with the exceptions that John Paul II granted them in the postconciliar period.”). Also, Andrea GRILLO, “Superare lo stato di eccezione liturgica: restituire autorità alla *lex orandi* e ai Vescovi”, in Andrea GRILLO – Zeno CARRA (eds.), *Oltre Summorum Pontificum. Per una riconciliazione liturgica possibile / Beyond Summorum Pontificum. For a Possible Liturgical Reconciliation*, Bologna: EDB, 2020, 67–76 (69–71).

50 “From the vota submitted by the Bishops there emerged a great insistence on the full, conscious and active participation of the whole People of God in the liturgy, along lines already indicated by Pius XII in the encyclical *Mediator Dei* on the renewal of the liturgy. The constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* confirmed this appeal, by seeking ‘the renewal and advancement of the liturgy’ [SC 1, 14], and by indicating the principles that should

According to the *Desiderio desideravi*, the principles of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* “continue to be fundamental for the promotion of that full, conscious, active, and fruitful celebration [SC 11; 14] in the liturgy” (DD 16). The intention of the liturgical reform, as established by the ecumenical council, was that “the faithful would not assist as strangers and silent spectators in the mystery of faith, but, with a full understanding of the rites and prayers, would participate in the sacred action consciously, piously, and actively”. (The Letter to the bishops quotes here SC 48.) It was this intention that led to the revision of the Roman Missal (initiated already by Pius XII, based on “ancient liturgical sources”, allowing the Church to raise “a single and identical prayer” in unity, in the variety of languages). Restoring the authority of the post-conciliar Missal is aimed to reestablish the unity of the Church, expressed in the liturgy.

The essence and purpose of active participation consist in understanding and living the spirit of the liturgy: “the fundamental question is this: how do we recover the capacity to live completely the liturgical action? This was the objective of the Council’s reform. The challenge is extremely demanding because modern people – not in all cultures to the same degree – have lost the capacity to engage with symbolic action, which is an essential trait of the liturgical act.” (DD 27).

The *Desiderio desideravi* pleads therefore for a thorough liturgical formation, both as theoretical instruction *for* the liturgy and as participative, initiatory formation *in and by* the liturgy (DD 34). Stressing liturgical formation takes up a principle of the liturgical movement, emphasised already by Lambert Beauduin and Romano Guardini. The Pope explicitly quotes Guardini on several occasions. Liturgical formation involves an inner transformation and a new way of religious relationing, without which ritual and textual reforms are unhelpful.<sup>51</sup> In view of the inability to understand symbols, this is “the first task of the work of liturgical

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guide the reform [SC 3]. In particular, it established that these principles concerned the Roman Rite, and other legitimate rites where applicable, and asked that ‘the rites be revised carefully in the light of sound tradition, and that they be given new vigor to meet present-day circumstances and needs’.” Letter, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescovi-liturgia.html#\\_ftn15](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/20210716-lettera-vescovi-liturgia.html#_ftn15).

51 DD 34, referring to Romano GUARDINI, *Liturgische Bildung* I, Rothenfels, 1923, quoted after Romano GUARDINI, *Liturgie und liturgische Bildung*, Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1992, 43; also Romano GUARDINI, *Der Kultakt und die gegenwärtige Aufgabe der Liturgischen Bildung. Ein Brief*, Aschendorf, 1964, cited from ID., *Liturgie und liturgische Bildung*, 14.

formation: man must become once again capable of symbols.”<sup>52</sup> *Desiderio desideravi* also quotes Guardini extensively on the need to overcome individualism and subjectivism in religious life and the imperative of regaining “the sense for the ‘great’ style of praying”, “through discipline, through giving up weak sentimentality; through serious work, carried out in obedience to the Church, on our religious being and acting”. This discipline is manifested in the liturgical uniformity in gestures and voice, which raises in individual participants “the awareness of being one body”.<sup>53</sup> Liturgical formation is a continuous exertion: “Since the gift of the mystery celebrated surpasses our capacity to know it, this effort certainly must accompany the permanent formation of everyone, with the humility of little ones, the attitude that opens up into wonder.” (DD 38).

Francis also discusses the manner of celebrating, addressing the two extremes that emerged after the council: “the *ars celebrandi* cannot be reduced to only a rubrical mechanism, much less should it be thought of as imaginative – sometimes wild – creativity without rules. The rite is in itself a norm, and the norm is never an end in itself, but it is always at the service of a higher reality that it means to protect.” (DD 48).

### Concluding remarks

Sixty years after the conclusion of the Council, the reception of Vatican II and of the liturgical reform is marked by commotions and conflicts. After a couple of decades marked by enthusiasm and effervescence, an increasing polarisation developed. Although deeply rooted in several decades of liturgical renewal, the conciliar reform was branded as a break with tradition. The *Summorum Pontificum*, which recognised the pre-conciliar Mass as the “extraordinary form” of the Roman Rite, contributed to the delegitimisation of the liturgical reform and encouraged anti-conciliar positions.

The apostolic letters of Pope Francis, *Traditionis custodes* and *Desiderio desideravi*, have sought to restore unity and reaffirm the authority of Vatican II and of the liturgical reform. Francis reconfirmed the revised Missal of Paul VI as a unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Catholic Church and emphasised the profound need for liturgical formation.

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52 GUARDINI, *Liturgische Bildung*, 36.

53 DD 50–51, GUARDINI, *Liturgische Bildung* I, 81, quoted after GUARDINI, *Liturgie und liturgische Bildung*, 99.

Given the deep link between liturgy and ecclesiology, the fundamental question is ecclesiological. The resurgence of an apologetic form of Catholicism, self-styled as “true Catholicism”, has been accompanied by a rejection of conciliar teachings and of the liturgical reform (based on the claim that the Tridentine Latin Mass represented the authentic liturgy in line with the tradition of the Church). This stance reflects a defensive vision of the Church as besieged stronghold, seeking to safeguard tradition and thereby security, against perceived enemies in contemporary world. Conversely, the Liturgical Constitution and the apostolic letters of Pope Francis reflect a different ecclesiological vision. Pope Francis has consistently argued for a Church able to step out of the accustomed sphere, of the comfort zone, to go out to the periphery, following the example of Christ, to reach out to contemporary humanity. The reception of the Council presupposes the courage to step out from behind the walls. The Catholic Church has to find the language to address contemporary people and respond to their religious and spiritual needs. The Church is not defending fortresses, but are bolder, daring. The stagnation and decline of synodal reception, or lamenting over the past, will not lead anywhere.

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## ECUMENICAL ASPIRATIONS AND ORTHODOX RESISTANCE: UKRAINIAN CATHOLIC EFFORTS TOWARD DIALOGUE AT VATICAN II, 1959–1965

ANATOLII BABYNSKYI<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This article examines the efforts of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) to foster ecumenical dialogue and secure Orthodox participation at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), focusing on the years 1959–1965. Despite sustained episcopal diplomacy, the UGCC's aspirations for unity with Ukrainian Orthodoxy proved structurally impossible due to deep-seated historical and institutional resistance from Orthodox hierarchs. Key challenges included the Orthodox suspicions of the Council, the controversy over Moscow Patriarchate observers, and the eventual rejection of an invitation to send observers, even after the unauthorized visit of one hierarchy, Archbishop Mstyslav Skrypnyk, underscored the internal divisions within Ukrainian Orthodoxy. The study reveals a profound asymmetry in ecclesial memory that prevented Greek Catholic calls for unity from taking root in Orthodox consciousness.

**Keywords:** Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), Ukrainian Orthodoxy, Ecumenism, Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky, Metropolitan Maxim Hermaniuk, Archbishop Mstyslav Skrypnyk.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) was an epoch-making event in the history of the Catholic Church, inaugurating profound theological, liturgical, and ecclesiological reforms. For the Eastern Catholic Churches, it was no less significant. In particular, the conciliar decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* summarized more than half a century of ecclesial reflection on the place and role of the Eastern Catholic Churches within the universal communion – a process catalyzed by Leo XIII's

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Article history: Received 25.11.2025; Revised 2.12.2025; Accepted 5.12.2025.

Available online: 22.12.2025; Available print: 30.01.2026.

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1894 breve *Orientalium dignitas*. Equally important was the Council's decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, which devoted particular attention to the Catholic Church's ecumenical engagement with the Eastern Orthodox Churches. Since nearly all Eastern Catholic Churches (with the exception of the Maronite Church) have their own "Orthodox counterparts" with whom they share a common history, territorial space, traumatic experiences, and a long tradition of polemics and dialogue, the ecumenical spirit of the Council demanded a fundamental rethinking of their place in light of the updated paradigm of inter-Christian relations.

Ukrainian Greek Catholics and Orthodox had sought opportunities for reconciliation and the restoration of unity already in the decades following the Union of Brest in 1596. Dialogue continued, with varying intensity, until around 1680,<sup>2</sup> when external circumstances beyond the control of either party brought these efforts to a halt until the twentieth century. Pope John XXIII's announcement of the Council, emphasizing that it was to serve not only as a means of renewing the Catholic Church but also as a vehicle for healing divisions among Christian communities,<sup>3</sup> prompted laypeople, theologians, and bishops alike – both from the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and from the various Ukrainian Orthodox jurisdictions – to formulate their own positions in response to this call. This process of reflection, debate, and position-forming continued throughout all sessions of the Council, shaping responses to the unfolding conciliar proceedings.

The significance of this study lies in the fact that existing scholarship on the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC)<sup>4</sup> and the Second Vatican Council

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- 2 See Jan KRAJCAR, "The Ruthenian Patriarchate. Some Remarks on the Project for its Establishment in the 17th Century", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 30 (1964) 65–84; Wasyl LENCYK, "The Origins of the Ukrainian Patriarchate", in Nicholas L. CHIROVSKY (ed.), *The Millennium of Ukrainian Christianity*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1988, 371–392; Demetrius TANCZUK, "Quaestio Patriarchatus Kiowiensis tempore conaminum Unionis Ruthenorum (1582–1632)", *Analecta OSBM* 2.1.1 (1949) 128–144.
  - 3 William HENN, "The Reception of Vatican II's Teaching on Ecumenism into the Life of the Catholic Church", *Jubilee 2000 Magazine* 2 (1997), [https://www.vatican.va/jubilee\\_2000/magazine/documents/ju\\_mag\\_01051997\\_p-45\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01051997_p-45_en.html) [accessed 23 November 2025]
  - 4 Prior to 1959, "Ruthenian Church" served as the formal ecclesiastical designation in official usage, even as "Ukrainian" had gained widespread acceptance in vernacular discourse, particularly within the diaspora. In 1959, the Conference of Ukrainian Catholic Bishops in the diaspora adopted the decision to change the designation to "Ukrainian Catholic Church." In the diaspora, particularly in North America, the name "Ukrainian Catholic

has focused predominantly on two areas: debates surrounding the patriarchate,<sup>5</sup> which intensified from 1963 onward and dominated post-conciliar discourse, and discussions of the decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, particularly concerning liturgical practice and religious-cultural identity.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, the ecumenical dimension – specifically, the question of unity with the Ukrainian Orthodoxy – has received comparatively less scholarly attention,<sup>7</sup> despite its centrality to both the episcopal hierarchy and the broader Ukrainian Catholic community during the Council's preparatory and early phases. This article addresses that lacuna. Drawing upon Ukrainian Catholic periodicals, episcopal correspondence, minutes of episcopal conferences, personal diaries (particularly those of Metropolitan Maxim Hermaniuk), and archival materials,

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Church” continues to be used today. This article employs the official name generally accepted within the framework of the Church: the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC). Beginning in 1961, the *Annuario Pontificio* began using the designation *degli Ucraini* (of the Ukrainians) for eparchies and metropolises historically connected to the Kyivan Metropolitanate, replacing the earlier formulation *per i fedeli ruteni di rito bizantino* (for the Ruthenian faithful of the Byzantine rite).

- 5 See for example Augustyn BABIAK, *Legitimacy of the Ukrainian Patriarchate*, Lyon-Lviv: Missioner, 2005; Vasyl MARKUS, “The Role of the Patriarchal Movement in the Ukrainian Catholic Church”, in David GOA (ed.), *The Ukrainian Religious Experience: Tradition and the Canadian Cultural Context*, Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1989, 157–170.
- 6 See for example Mariia IVANIV, *The Reception of the Decree Orientalium Ecclesiarum by the Ukrainian Archeparchy of Philadelphia 1965–1980*, Doctoral Thesis, University of St. Michael's College and the Graduate Centre for Theological Studies, Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto, 2024.
- 7 Certain aspects of this topic have been addressed in Myroslaw TATARYN, “The Eastern Catholic Churches and the Paradox of Vatican II”, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 13/2 (2013) 83–95; Peter DE MEY, “Metropolitan Hermaniuk and the Conciliar Work on Unitatis Redintegratio and Orientalium Ecclesiarum: A Comparative Study”, in Jaroslav Z. SKIRA, Peter DE MEY (eds.), *Met. Maxim Hermaniuk, Vatican II and the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church* (Eastern Christian Studies Series 31), Leuven: Peeters, 2020, 99–142; Mariia IVANIV, “The Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Bishops at the Second Vatican Council: The Participation in the Council and Contribution to the Discussions of Conciliar Documents”, in Vladimir LATINOVIC, Anastacia K. WOODEN (eds.), *Stolen Churches or Bridges to Orthodoxy?* (Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue), Springer International Publishing, 2021, 161–184.

as well as Orthodox Ukrainian statements and correspondence, this article examines Ukrainian Greek Catholic efforts to secure Orthodox participation at the Council and the broader question of Catholic-Orthodox reconciliation during the years 1959–1965. The analysis illuminates the divergence between the Council's ecumenical promises and the realities of Ukrainian Catholic-Orthodox relations, revealing why rapprochement mattered so profoundly to Greek Catholic identity yet proved structurally impossible despite sustained episcopal diplomacy, genuine personal relationships, and shared national aspirations.

### Post-war ecumenism

At the time when Pope John XXIII announced, on 25 January 1959, his decision to convene the Council, the UGCC found itself in an exceptionally difficult situation – one that significantly shaped both its expectations of the Council and its subsequent evaluation of its decisions. Although the Ukrainian episcopal delegation was among the most numerous of the Eastern Catholic groups – 15 out of approximately 120 bishops<sup>8</sup> – its voice was less visible than that of the 16 Melkite bishops headed by Patriarch Maximos IV. The main reason for this lay beyond the UGCC itself: in its homeland, where the Church's historical and theological center was located, it existed only underground. All of its bishops had been arrested by the Soviet authorities in 1945, and by 1962 only its head, Metropolitan Josyf Slipyj, remained alive among those arrested – by then having spent seventeen years in the GULAG camps. Moreover, the vast majority of the Church's faithful, along with significant portions of its property, had been forcibly incorporated into the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>9</sup>

This violent suppression inevitably colored attitudes toward ecumenism within the Greek Catholic diaspora, particularly given Rome's desire to establish dialogue with the Moscow Patriarchate – a Church that, in the eyes of many Ukrainian Catholics, bore direct responsibility for their persecution.

By contrast, during the preceding decade the Church in the diaspora underwent dynamic development, expanding from two exarchates in 1945 to six exarchates,

8 Андрій Сапеляк, *Українська Церква на II Ватиканському Соборі*, Рим–Буенос-Айрес: Салезіянське видавництво, 1967, 69.

9 See Bohdan BOCIURKIW, *The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and the Soviet State 1939–1950*, Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1996.

one apostolic visitation, and two metropolitanates comprising seven eparchies. Yet despite this considerable institutional growth, the episcopate lacked unified leadership: hierarchs were primarily focused on the internal needs of their respective local communities.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, the Church's internal environment itself presented a significant challenge. The expansion of its institutional network was driven in no small part by the sharp increase in the number of faithful: after the Second World War, roughly 250,000 Ukrainians arrived in the West, the majority of whom were Greek Catholics. This new wave of emigration – with its own experiences and its own understanding of the Church's nature, mission, and future – often differed in its views from those of the older emigration and their descendants.<sup>11</sup> This created a new configuration of internal expectations and needs, which in turn influenced the formation of diverse and sometimes markedly different hopes and assessments regarding the Council's forthcoming decisions.

The experience of this postwar cohort was decisive in shaping expectations regarding the Council, particularly on questions of ecumenism. Before resettling permanently in North and South America, Western Europe, and Australia, these Ukrainian refugees spent several years in displaced persons (DP) camps in Germany and Austria. A distinctive feature of religious life in these camps was the parallel existence of sizable Greek Catholic and Orthodox communities. For the first time in over 150 years – a period during which these two religious groups had been separated by the political borders of the Austrian and Russian empires – direct and sustained contact became possible. According to available statistics, approximately 65–67% of Ukrainian refugees belonged to the UGCC, organized into 120 communities, while 30–33% were Orthodox, belonging to 80 parishes of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC).<sup>12</sup> This proximity generally unfolded without significant

10 Anatolii BABYNSKYI, "The Quest for Unity and Autonomy: The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in the Diaspora", *Religions*, 16.4 (2025) 518.

11 See Анатолій Бабинський, *Патріархальний рух в середовищі українських греко-католиків у діаспорі (1964–1989 рр.)*, Дисертація на здобуття наукового ступеня доктора філософії, Львів: Український католицький університет, 2020.

12 Essentially, this Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) was an outgrowth of the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church (PAOC), which received the Tomos of autocephaly from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1924. A significant portion of the PAOC faithful consisted of ethnic Ukrainians who consistently advocated for the Ukrainization of church life and subsequently received their own bishops. During



conflict. On occasion, representatives of different confessions formed a single parish community, participated in joint paraliturgical celebrations marking national holidays, or collaborated in commemorative events honoring national heroes.<sup>13</sup> Life in the DP camps thus fostered what might be termed a “grassroots ecumenism” – one that was not institutional in character but rather emerged organically at the level of the laity. This development, however, raised concerns in Catholic circles. In 1947, it became the subject of a conversation between Cardinal Eugène Tisserant and Bishop Constantine Bohachevsky, Exarch of Philadelphia for the Ukrainian Catholics in the United States, during which the Vatican official expressed anxiety about the possibility of Greek Catholics converting to Orthodoxy out of patriotic motives.<sup>14</sup>

One striking manifestation of this postwar Ukrainian ecumenism was an unprecedented attempt to produce a shared Church history that would account for both Greek Catholic and Orthodox perspectives. This effort was realized within the framework of the *Encyclopedia of Ukraine* project in 1949.<sup>15</sup> In Greek

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World War II, on the Ukrainian lands occupied by the Nazis, these Ukrainian hierarchs of the PAOC consecrated several new bishops. Fearing repression, they emigrated, along with many of their faithful, ahead of the advancing Red Army. After being resettled from the camps, they merged with Ukrainian Orthodox structures in the United States and Canada, which had been formed in the first half of the 20th century, or created new ones in Western Europe and Australia. These structures were not recognized by other Orthodox churches for a significant period, and only in 1990 (Canada) and 1995 (USA) did they enter the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople with the status of autonomy. For further details, see: Nicholas E. DENYSENKO, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation*. Northern Illinois University Press, 2018, 59-134.

- 13 BARAN, “The Ukrainian Catholic Church”, in Wsevolod W. ISAJIW (ed.), *The Refugee Experience: Ukrainian Displaced Persons After World War II*, Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, University of Alberta, 1992, 150; Bohdan R. BOCIURKIW, “The Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church in West Germany, 1945–50”, in Wsevolod W. Isajiw (ed.), *The Refugee Experience: Ukrainian Displaced Persons After World War II*, Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, University of Alberta, 1992, 166.
- 14 Martha BOHACHEVSKY-CHOMIAK, *Ukrainian Bishop, American Church: Constantine Bohachevsky and the Ukrainian Catholic Church*, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 417.
- 15 Микола Чубатий, Наталія Полонська-Василенко, “Історія Церкви”, in Володимир Кубійович, Зенон Кузеля (eds.), *Енциклопедія українознавства. Загальна частина, т. 2*, Мюнхен–Нью-Йорк: Наукове Товариство ім. Шевченка, 1949, 601–622.



Catholic discourse, such rapprochement was primarily framed as the realization of Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky's (1865–1944) ecclesial vision, which had placed the reunification of the Christian East and West – specifically, the restoration of unity within the confessionally divided Kyivan Metropolitanate – at the center of his life's work.<sup>16</sup>

### On the eve of the Council

Yet as lay-driven initiatives waned – primarily because the faithful were dispersed across different localities and returned to their respective parishes, losing the direct daily contact that had characterized the DP camps, which lowered the intensity of grassroots ecumenical activity though did not entirely eliminate it – a new phase emerged in which Greek Catholic bishops themselves began to assume leadership in ecumenical outreach. A pivotal moment came in 1957, on the occasion of the establishment of the UGCC Metropolitanate in Canada, when the “Ukrainian Catholic hierarchy in the free world” – comprising nine bishops, primarily from the United States and Canada, along with Ivan Buchko, Apostolic Visitor for Ukrainians in Western Europe, and Gabriel Bukatko, Apostolic Administrator of the Eparchy of Križevci in Yugoslavia – issued a pastoral letter in which a substantial portion was devoted specifically to the restoration of unity between Ukrainian Greek Catholics and Orthodox.<sup>17</sup>

In this address, the bishops emphasized that for nearly 170 years, Orthodox and Greek Catholics had been deprived of opportunities for dialogue, primarily due to political circumstances: Greek Catholic communities had been forcibly incorporated into the Russian Orthodox Church by the tsarist regime, whereas Orthodox communities were gradually assimilated into Russian Orthodox culture. Given that both Churches now existed in the diaspora under conditions of freedom, the bishops argued, they not only could but should initiate dialogue on unity. The

16 See Lubomyr HUSAR, “Sheptyts’kyi and Ecumenism”, in Paul Robert MAGOCSI (ed.), *Morality and Reality. The Life and Times of Andrei Sheptyts’kyi*, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1989, 185–200.

17 *Спільне пастирське послання Української католицької єпархії вільного світу з нагоди оснування української Католицької митрополії всієї Канади у Вінніпегу / Collective Pastoral Letter of the Ukrainian Catholic Hierarchy in the Free World on the Occasion of the Erection of the Ukrainian Catholic Metropolitan See in Winnipeg*, Yorkton, Sask.: Redeemer's Voice Press, 1957.

hierarchs noted that Ukrainian Orthodox could pursue this dialogue not only with them but also directly with Rome. They further suggested that a potential framework for unity might be the establishment of a Kyivan Patriarchate – an idea that had been discussed as early as the seventeenth century. The overall rhetoric of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic bishops remained, understandably, within the prevailing Catholic framework of the era: they spoke of “uniting our separated brethren in Christ’s Church”<sup>18</sup> and invoked the Council of Florence. This language reflected the pre-conciliar understanding of Christian unity, though it avoided the more triumphalist rhetoric of “return” that characterized much Catholic discourse of the previous periods.

If the 1957 pastoral letter represented primarily a continuation of the UGCC’s longstanding self-understanding as promoter of unity between Christian East and West, the 1959 appeal introduced a qualitatively new dimension. Within two years, both the tone and substance had shifted considerably. Ukrainian bishops appear to have taken seriously Pope John XXIII’s declaration that one of the primary aims of the announced Council would be the advancement of Christian unity. This question was formally addressed at the Conference of Ukrainian Catholic Bishops in Rome in October 1959, where the hierarchs resolved: “In connection with the convening of the announced Ecumenical Council, [we] approve the cultivation of an appropriate atmosphere and desire for union at the grassroots level.”<sup>19</sup> The accompanying pastoral letter “To the Ukrainian People,” issued on the same occasion, again devoted significant attention to dialogue with the Orthodox. Significantly, in 1959 the Greek Catholic bishops addressed themselves directly to their Orthodox counterparts rather than confining themselves to general pronouncements. The rhetoric had become markedly different, emphasizing the shared responsibility of both Churches for the historical division and the common obligation of both hierarchies to work toward reunification. The Greek Catholic bishops invited their Orthodox counterparts to join them in addressing a petition to the Council, announced by Pope John XXIII, requesting the establishment of a common Kyivan Patriarchate in union with Rome.<sup>20</sup>

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18 Ibid., 10

19 Minutes of the Conference of Ukrainian Catholic Bishops, 12–14 October 1959, *Archive of the Ukrainian Archeparchy of Philadelphia (AUAP)*, Box “Greek Catholic Ordinariate in Philadelphia 1959”, n.p..

20 *Пастирське послання українських владик до українського народу*, Рим, 1959, 9.

Parallel to these episcopal initiatives, public discourse on the ecumenical dimension of the forthcoming Council began to emerge within Ukrainian Greek Catholic and Orthodox circles in North America. The episcopal appeals of 1957 and 1959 found an enthusiastic reception among Greek Catholic laity and intellectuals, who actively engaged questions of Orthodox-Catholic reconciliation in periodicals, public lectures, and community forums. This engagement reflected the grassroots ecumenical spirit that had animated DP camp life in the late 1940s – a spirit that, though diminished by geographic dispersion, had not been extinguished.

These discussions ranged widely: from the practical question of Ukrainian Orthodox participation as observers at the Council, to theological and ecclesiological differences between the two Churches, to identifying factors that hindered unity, and to addressing internal problems within both communities that complicated rapprochement. Yet as these discussions unfolded, it became increasingly apparent that skepticism and even hostility toward the Council predominated within Orthodox communities.<sup>21</sup> While individual voices within the Ukrainian Orthodox diaspora in the United States did advocate for greater engagement with the ecumenical movement and specifically called for sending observers to the Second Vatican Council, these remained minority positions that failed to gain traction within the broader Orthodox ecclesiastical establishment.

The institutional Orthodox response crystallized at a meeting of seven Ukrainian Orthodox bishops held on 28–30 April 1960 in the city of Winnipeg, Canada. Although these hierarchs did not constitute a jurisdictionally unified body – structures in the United States and Canada existed independently of one another and had consistently failed to reach agreement on uniting among themselves – they proved capable of issuing a joint statement on the question of the Council. The resulting declaration was both emotionally charged and uncompromisingly negative in tone. It emphasized that “the Ukrainian Orthodox Church considers it impossible to take any part whatsoever in this Council of the Roman Catholic Church.”<sup>22</sup> The bishops attributed this refusal to the Catholic Church’s responsibility

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21 See for example Мелетій Соловій, “Ізоляція чи співпраця?”, *Америка*, 15, 16, 19 червня 1962, 2; Мелетій Соловій, “Три кроки у церковному об’єднанні (з приводу думок православного священика)”, *Америка*, 22 вересня 1962, 2; Ілля Сапіга, “Нема перешкод до поєднання. Думки православного українця про Вселенський собор”, *Америка*, 6, 7 лютого 1962, 2.

22 “Українська православна церква не бере участі на II Ватиканському соборі”, *Віра і культура*, 3, 123 (1964) 19.

for the division of the Ukrainian people and accused it of “treachery” and “violence” against the Ukrainian Orthodox community. In response to the Greek Catholic episcopal appeals, they declared: “We call with heartfelt love all Greek Catholic bishops, all Greek Catholic clergy, and the entire Greek Catholic people to abandon Rome, which is foreign and hostile to us, and to return home – to your own Mother, the Orthodox Church! And when you all return to us, this will be the greatest and brightest celebration of Ukraine, afflicted by this division. And then there will truly be a One Unified Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and it will lead us all to a truly Unified and Free Ukraine!”<sup>23</sup>

The sharp divergence between Greek Catholic aspirations and Orthodox resistance on the eve of the Council reflected not only political calculations or recent historical experiences, but also a deeper asymmetry in ecclesial memory and imagination. For Greek Catholics, the restoration of Kyivan ecclesiastical unity through a patriarchal structure had been a consistent aspiration since the seventeenth century. This vision – repeatedly articulated as the recognition of the historical dignity of the Kyivan Church – remained a vital foundation for constructing the identity and mission of their Church. It was not an improvised response to the Second Vatican Council, but rather the application of an old ecclesiological ideal to new circumstances. In the Orthodox tradition, however, this concept never achieved comparable resonance. With the exception of certain seventeenth-century figures, such as Metropolitans Job Boretsky and Petro Mohyla – whose openness to various forms of engagement with Catholics nonetheless provoked criticism from more conservative clergy, laity, and bishops – the idea of a Kyivan patriarchate in communion with the papacy failed to take root in Orthodox consciousness.

The repeated appeals of Greek Catholic bishops thus presupposed a shared historical imagination that, in fact, did not exist. This fundamental difference in how the two communities perceived unity – Greek Catholics viewing it as a continuation of an earlier dialogue, the Orthodox regarding it as capitulation to historical oppression – significantly shaped their respective reactions to the ecumenical orientation of the forthcoming Council. What Greek Catholics understood as an invitation to recover a common heritage was interpreted by Orthodox hierarchs as yet another expression of Roman Catholic expansionism – one that, in their historical experience, invariably bore a Polish face – albeit now presented in ecumenical terms.

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23 Ibid., 20.

### At the Council: Moscow observers controversy

The opening of the First Session of the Second Vatican Council became a trial for Ukrainian Greek Catholic bishops – one directly connected to the ecumenical character of the Council itself. They were heavily affected by the conjunction of two events: the presence of official observers from the Moscow Patriarchate and the simultaneous absence of the head of the UGCC, Metropolitan Josyf Slipyj, who remained in Soviet imprisonment. Moreover, according to the testimony of Metropolitan Maxim Hermaniuk of Canada, the official Vatican press avoided “the martyrdom of Ukraine” and the issue of the persecuted Church in the USSR.<sup>24</sup>

As early as 17 October, the hierarchs discussed issuing a joint statement to the Council fathers concerning the presence of Moscow Patriarchate observers, but within the episcopate itself there was no unity on this issue.<sup>25</sup> On 27 October, they received a signals from the Congregation for the Eastern Churches and the Papal Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity that the Pope expected them to refrain from any public statements.<sup>26</sup> Evidently, the idea of such a statement had reached the Vatican through dissenting bishops who were familiar with its preparation.

Despite this intervention, a draft statement was prepared. It was not released directly by the Ukrainian bishops but was leaked to the press through informal channels: on 21 November, *Il Giornale d'Italia* published the article by journalist Filippo Pucci who presented a detailed account of the document's contents. The

24 Jaroslav Z. SKIRA, Karim SCHELKENS (eds.), *The Second Vatican Council Diaries of Met. Maxim Hermaniuk C.Ss.R. (1960–1965)* (Eastern Christian Studies 15), Leuven: Peeters, 2012, 90.

25 *The Second Vatican Council Diaries of Met. Maxim Hermaniuk*, 74. Among the most vocal opponents of such an appeal was Metropolitan Ambrose Senyshyn of the United States, who consistently sought to demonstrate loyalty to Rome. His reasoning, as recorded in his correspondence and Council notes, revealed internal contradictions. On the one hand, he argued against the statement on the grounds that it would only provide publicity to “Moscow agents”; on the other, he expressed concern that such a declaration would provoke the communist press to attack the Catholic Church. Senyshyn to Missionary Sisters of Mother of God, 7 November 1962, AUAP, Senyshyn's Collection, n.p., Senyshyn to Missionary Sisters of Mother of God, 12 November 1962, AUAP, Senyshyn's Collection, n.p.. For more on the problems of unity among the episcopate of the UGCC, see BABYNSKYI, “The Quest for Unity and Autonomy.”

26 *The Second Vatican Council Diaries of Met. Maxim Hermaniuk*, 75-76.

Ukrainian bishops emphasized that the joy surrounding the opening of the Council was overshadowed by grief over the absence of the unlawfully imprisoned Metropolitan and by the presence of representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate. They asserted that the participation of Russian observers could not be understood in religious or ecclesial terms, but rather constituted part of a political strategy by the Soviet regime aimed at “sowing confusion”. The bishops underscored the dramatic situation of their Church: the violent liquidation of its institutional structure, the imprisonment of its episcopate, the violent subordination of millions of Greek Catholics to Moscow’s jurisdiction, and the complicity of the Moscow Patriarchate in Soviet anti-religious policy. They formulated five demands, the fulfillment of which could lend the presence of Moscow observers “a character of sincerity”: the release of bishops, the return of churches and property, the cessation of forced propaganda, and recognition of the legal status of the Eastern Catholic Church.<sup>27</sup>

The publication immediately drew Vatican attention. During the general session of the Council, Monsignor Johannes Willebrands of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity approached the Ukrainian bishops, inquiring about the article and suggesting that they issue a retraction. At a conference of Ukrainian bishops held that same day at the Collegium of St. Josaphat, the hierarchs resolved “not to associate ourselves with any statements.”<sup>28</sup> They maintained this position of public silence thereafter, neither commenting on the appearance of the statement nor acknowledging their role in its dissemination.<sup>29</sup>

The impact became evident within a week. On 28 November, the General Secretary announced that the Council would dedicate a novena to prayers for all bishops, “those present and those absent,” which Italian newspapers immediately connected to the Ukrainian statement. This recognition was reinforced during Christmas, when *L’Osservatore della Domenica* published an article explicitly naming Metropolitan Slipyj among imprisoned hierarchs.<sup>30</sup> The fact that such acknowledgment appeared in official Vatican media suggests that the leaked

27 Сапеляк, *Українська Церква на II Ватиканському Соборі*, 95-97.

28 *The Second Vatican Council Diaries of Met. Maxim Hermaniuk*, 95.

29 Metropolitan Hermaniuk later acknowledged that the Ukrainian bishops had deliberately leaked the document. Jaroslav Z. SKIRA, “Fostering Dialogue and Promoting the Reception of Vatican II Among Ukrainian Canadians”, in Jaroslav Z. SKIRA, Peter DE MEY (eds.), *Metropolitan Maxim Hermaniuk, Vatican II and the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church* (Eastern Christian Studies Series 31), Leuven: Peeters, 2020, 200.

30 Сапеляк, *Українська Церква на II Ватиканському Соборі*, 98-100.

document had fundamentally altered the terms of discourse surrounding the persecuted Eastern Catholic Churches at the Council.

This episode revealed the structural constraints facing the Ukrainian episcopate within the Council's ecumenical framework. While the Ukrainian bishops actively sought dialogue with Ukrainian Orthodox, they regarded the observers of the Moscow Patriarchate at the Council as representatives of an institution complicit in the persecution of Ukrainian Catholics. Their circumvention of Vatican directives reflected not mere tactics but a fundamental disagreement over the terms of ecumenical engagement. From their perspective, Rome's pursuit of dialogue with Moscow – what would later be termed *Ostpolitik* – prioritized diplomatic compromise over authentic ecumenism. The leak strategy allowed them to challenge this approach without directly defying papal authority, while the Vatican's subsequent public acknowledgment of the persecuted Church suggested that their intervention had shifted institutional discourse, even as it failed to alter the underlying policy of engagement with the Moscow Patriarchate – a policy that would generate sustained resentment within the Ukrainian diaspora throughout the conciliar period and beyond.

### **Ukrainian Orthodox observers**

Following the First Session, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic bishops issued a joint pastoral letter that returned to the question of Orthodox participation. The letter expressed regret that “among the observer-representatives of non-united Christian confessions at the Council, there are unfortunately no representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Churches.” The bishops reported that during the Council they had received news about the favorable attitude of some Orthodox Ukrainian circles toward the matter of participation of Ukrainian Orthodox observers at the Council, as well as written greetings and requests from respected representatives of Ukrainian Orthodox intelligentsia asking them to persuade Orthodox hierarchs to send representatives. Invoking Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky's legacy as “our great champion of church unity,” the bishops appealed once more: “We, Ukrainian Catholic bishops, want to hope that our Orthodox Ukrainian bishops, in the name of Christ and for the good of our Church and people, will overcome all earthly obstacles and decide to send their representatives to participate in the Council's deliberations, in the role of observers.” The letter framed Orthodox participation not as capitulation but as an expression of shared longing for unity, arguing that



“their presence would benefit not only the Church but the temporal good of the entire Ukrainian people.”<sup>31</sup>

This renewed episcopal appeal prompted Metropolitan Hermaniuk to undertake direct diplomatic engagement. Between February and August 1963, he conducted a sustained campaign to persuade Metropolitan Ilarion Ohienko, arguably the most authoritative and intellectually distinguished Ukrainian Orthodox hierarch in the diaspora, to send observers from the Ukrainian Greek-Orthodox Church in Canada to the Second Session. Hermaniuk’s dialogue, conducted in his capacity as president of the Conference of Ukrainian Catholic Bishops in the diaspora, proceeded in coordination with Johannes Willebrands, Secretary of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. In March 1963, Hermaniuk had discussed the matter with Willebrands in Rome; by April, Willebrands asked Hermaniuk to ascertain whether the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Canada would be prepared to accept an official invitation. Should such willingness be expressed, Willebrands indicated, a formal invitation would be issued.<sup>32</sup>

The negotiations proceeded through multiple formal visits between February and August, with each meeting exposing deeper layers of Orthodox resistance. Ilarion’s objections were manifold. He criticized the Greek Catholic bishops for procedural missteps – specifically, for having issued public appeals through the press rather than first cultivating private dialogue. He cited institutional constraints, explaining that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was “not yet prepared” and that any decision would require consultation with his Consistory. And he invoked political concerns, pointing to the presence of Moscow Patriarchate observers as evidence that the Council had already been compromised.<sup>33</sup> Yet beneath these tactical deferrals lay a more fundamental obstacle. As Hermaniuk recorded after their April meeting, Ilarion “could not hide his instinctive intolerance of Rome.”<sup>34</sup>

By August 1963, after six months of engagement, Ilarion’s final answer remained negative. Though he acknowledged personal sympathy – he would personally favor his Church sending an observer – he faced “too much opposition among his own.” Hermaniuk pressed for a formal written response, but Ilarion declined to provide

31 Спільне Пастирське Послання Українських Католицьких Владик, прийавних на Вселенському Соборі Ватиканському Другому в Римі, *Америка*, 12 грудня 1962, 2.

32 Лист митрополита Максима Германюка до митрополита Іларіона Огієнка, *Віра і культура*, 3.123 (1964) 20-21.

33 See *The Second Vatican Council Diaries of Met. Maxim Hermaniuk*, 110-119.

34 *Ibid.*, 116.



one. Instead, he preferred to deliver his refusal orally, maintaining a posture of personal regret while affirming the institutional impossibility of action: he was “very interested in the Council, prays for its success, but at this time he can not yet ignore history.”<sup>35</sup>

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- 35 Ibid., 120. The Ukrainian bishops’ engagement with the Council’s ecumenical agenda was not limited to behind-the-scenes diplomacy. They also participated actively in conciliar debates on *Unitatis Redintegratio*, articulating perspectives shaped by their concrete experience of failed dialogue with Ukrainian Orthodoxy. On 28 November 1963, Bishop Volodymyr Malanczuk addressed the assembly regarding paragraph 18 of the decree’s third chapter, devoted to the development of cooperation with Orthodox Eastern Churches. Malanczuk identified three obstacles to such cooperation. Two of these – religious particularism, whereby particular Churches identified themselves so completely with their nations that they viewed other churches as national enemies, and self-sufficiency, manifested in the conviction that one’s own language, tradition, and customs were superior to those of other churches – addressed the general Catholic-Orthodox context. In the context of this study, however, Malanczuk’s first point proved most revealing, as it directly reflected the experience of Ukrainian Catholic engagement with Ukrainian Orthodox: political motives that conflated religious identity with national independence, making any rapprochement with Rome appear as betrayal of patriotic duty. As Malanczuk elaborated, these political motives “abuse the influence of the Christian religion for the implementation of national ambitions. These motives are in favor of rejection of any religious dialogue, allegedly harmful to the political independence, and which they [the Orthodox] call ‘dependent on external influence, such as the influence of the Roman See.’ They consider religious independence as the high level of patriotism. All the attempts to restore relations with the Holy See they consider as dangerous for the Church and the nation.” This formulation captured precisely the logic underlying the 1960 Winnipeg declaration of Ukrainian Orthodox bishops: ecumenical engagement with Rome risked appearing, within the Ukrainian Orthodox community, as capitulation to foreign ecclesiastical authority – an especially sensitive issue given the historical association of Catholicism with Polish political dominance. The declaration made this equation explicit: “We, together, the entire Ukrainian Episcopate, call with heartfelt love all Greek Catholic bishops, all Greek Catholic clergy, and the entire Greek Catholic people to abandon Rome, which is foreign and hostile to us, and to return home – to your own native Mother, the Orthodox Church! And when you all return to us, this will be the greatest and brightest celebration of Ukraine, afflicted by this division. And then there will truly be a One Unified Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and it will lead us all to a truly Unified and Free Ukraine!” For further details about Ukrainian Bishops’ intervention during the debates concerning *Unitatis redintegratio* see

As the minutes of the meeting of the Conference of Ukrainian Bishops from the Second Session of the Council reveal, similar conversations were conducted not only with Metropolitan Ilarion Ohienko in Canada. By this time, the Conference was presided over by Metropolitan Josyf Slipyj, who had been released from Soviet imprisonment earlier that year.<sup>36</sup> At the session held on 10 October 1963, the question of Ukrainian Orthodox observers at the Council was the subject of dedicated discussion. Reports were heard from Bishops Maxim Hermaniuk, Volodymyr Malanchuk, Platon Kornyliak, and Ivan Prashko. It emerged that the most promising prospect was the potential attendance of Archbishop Mstyslav Skrypnyk, then deputy to Metropolitan Ivan Theodorovych of the Ukrainian (Autocephalous) Orthodox Church in the USA and head of its Consistory. Consequently, “the Conference resolved, for its part, to make every effort so that, should Archbishop Mstyslav come to the Council, he too, following the example of other observers, might be present there.”<sup>37</sup>

Mstyslav’s arrival at the Second Session in autumn 1963 materialized under circumstances that remain somewhat unclear. The minutes of the conference suggest that Greek Catholic bishops had conducted soundings with multiple Ukrainian Orthodox hierarchs. Metropolitan Ivan Theodorovych, head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the USA, was notably absent from the list of potential visitors, indicating that he had expressed no willingness to attend – likely unwilling to deviate from the collective Orthodox position articulated in the 1960 Winnipeg declaration. By contrast, his deputy, Archbishop Mstyslav Skrypnyk, had signaled openness to such a visit. This created a procedural impasse: any formal invitation from the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity could only be addressed to the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the USA, not to his subordinate. A direct invitation to Mstyslav, bypassing Theodorovych’s authority, would have violated Orthodox ecclesiastical protocol.

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Mariia IVANIV, “The Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Bishops at the Second Vatican Council: The Participation in the Council and Contribution to the Discussions of Conciliar Documents”, in Vladimir LATINOVIC, Anastacia K. WOODEN (eds.), *Stolen Churches or Bridges to Orthodoxy?* (Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue) Springer International Publishing, 2021, 174-179.

36 See Karim SCHELKENS, “Vatican Diplomacy after the Cuban Missile Crisis: New Light on the Release of Josyf Slipyj”, *The Catholic Historical Review* 97.4 (2011) 679–712.

37 Minutes of the Conference of Ukrainian Catholic Bishops 1963, *Historical Archive of the UGCC in Rome (HA UGCC)*, 2, IVa, 73, 35;

The solution emerged through an indirect approach. The invitation came first from the Conference of Ukrainian Catholic Bishops rather than from the Vatican Secretariat. This allowed Mstyslav to frame his journey as a personal initiative undertaken without official ecclesiastical mandate, softening – though not entirely avoiding – the breach of subordination to his superior, Metropolitan Theodorovych.

By 21 October, the Ukrainian Catholic bishops had received a positive response from Mstyslav, prompting Metropolitan Slipyj to contact Msgr. Willebrands that same day. The Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity subsequently decided that Cardinal Augustin Bea would write a personal invitation to Skrypnyk. On 23 October, Hermaniuk discussed the matter further with Willebrands, coordinating the practical arrangements for Mstyslav's participation.<sup>38</sup>

Mstyslav's decision was supported by those circles within Ukrainian Orthodoxy that advocated greater international engagement – both with other Orthodox Churches, particularly in the context of the pan-Orthodox preparatory meetings then underway in Rhodes, and with the Catholic Church. The broader context of Mstyslav's journey suggests a strategic vision extending beyond the Council itself: before arriving in Rome, from 14–19 November he traveled to Istanbul for a meeting with Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras. On 20 November he continued to Athens, where he had hoped to meet Orthodox Archbishop Chrysostomos, but the latter was absent.<sup>39</sup> This itinerary indicates that his Roman visit formed part of a larger effort to extricate Ukrainian Orthodoxy in the diaspora from its isolation. An energetic and ambitious hierarch – who would eventually assume leadership of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the USA in 1971 – Mstyslav evidently saw the Council as an opportunity to establish Ukrainian Orthodox presence on the international ecclesial stage, even if he could not secure the unified support of all Ukrainian Orthodox jurisdictions.

Yet Mstyslav's initiative provoked immediate resistance from Orthodox hierarchs who viewed it as a breach of collective discipline. On 29 October 1963 – even before Mstyslav had departed for Rome – Metropolitan Ilarion sent him a letter of strong warning: “Dear Brother, I strongly and forcefully advise you and ask you not to do this!... There are a hundred reasons, and I cannot write them

38 *The Second Vatican Council Diaries of Met. Maxim Hermaniuk*, 139.

39 Богдан Желехівський. “З подорожі владыки Мстислава до Європи”, *Українське православне слово*, 1 (1964) 12-13. Михайло Коржан, “Передсоборові міркування”, *Український самостійник*, 9 (479) (1964) 2-7.

all here. I presented some of them to you during our personal meeting... My deep conviction and belief: there is nothing to go to Rome for!”<sup>40</sup> This intervention failed to dissuade Mstyslav, but it demonstrated the depth of Orthodox institutional resistance to any form of engagement with the Council, even at the personal level.

Mstyslav arrived in Rome on 21 November 1963. Following the Second Session, Hermaniuk noted in his diary: “I talked to Msgr. Willebrands about the issue of the arrival of Archbishop Mstyslav for the Second Period of the Council. Msgr. Willebrands said to me, that Archbishop Mstyslav has not yet applied to the Secretariat for Christian Unity, but he should hurry with this matter since the end of the session is nearing. In the event that he applies to the Secretariat, he would be allowed to be present at the Council.”<sup>41</sup>

On 22 November, Mstyslav met with Metropolitan Josyf Slipyj. Two days later, on 24 November, he visited the Ukrainian bishops at the Collegium of Saint Josafat, where, following Divine Liturgy in the college chapel, he had a conversation with Ukrainian Bishops, explaining that “he has come with the knowledge of Metropolitans Ivan and Ilarion, though he is not representing them at the Council.”<sup>42</sup> On 24 November, he met with Msgr. Willebrands in the company of Bishop Prashko, where he received formal permission to attend. He was assigned a seat in the first row of the observers’ tribune.

On 26 November, Mstyslav attended the Council for the first time. Two days later, on 28 November, he attended the Ukrainian episcopal conference dinner at the Collegium, where after the meal he addressed the bishops, explaining “his attitude (full respect and interest) to the Council.”<sup>43</sup>

On 30 November, Hermaniuk accompanied Mstyslav to a meeting with Cardinal Augustin Bea. Through Hermaniuk as interpreter, Mstyslav conveyed that he was “very happy to be able to attend this Council,” grateful to meet Ukrainian Catholic and other bishops personally, pleased to witness the ecumenical movement in action, and hoped to return for the third session while in the meantime spreading interest in the Council’s work among Ukrainian Orthodox in the United States.<sup>44</sup>

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40 “Лист митрополита Іларіона Огієнка до архієпископа Мстислава Скрипника”, *Віра і культура*, 3(123) (1964) 22.

41 *The Second Vatican Council Diaries of Met. Maxim Hermaniuk*, 153.

42 Ibid., 155.

43 Ibid., 158.

44 Ibid., 159.

Mstyslav's presence at the Council provoked sharp condemnation both from his own hierarchical superior and from other Ukrainian Orthodox structures in the diaspora, particularly in Canada. The situation created an acute internal conflict within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the USA. At a joint meeting of the Metropolitan Council and Consistory of the UOC in the USA on 19 March 1964, Archbishop Mstyslav was compelled to issue a public declaration in which he acknowledged that during his journey to Europe he had acted without authorization from Metropolitan Ivan or the governing bodies of the UOC in the USA, and expressed regret that he had "harmed the authority of Metropolitan Ivan as primate of our Church."<sup>45</sup>

The situation remained tense for some time. Metropolitan Ivan, who had even been prepared to resign over the matter held negative views of Mstyslav's actions.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, the Fifth Council of the UOC in the USA, held in October 1964, did not formally condemn Mstyslav's actions, though criticism was voiced during its proceedings.<sup>47</sup> This outcome reflected Mstyslav's institutional position as head of the Consistory – the administrative body that wielded considerable influence over church governance – which allowed him to shield himself from formal ecclesiastical sanctions despite hierarchical displeasure. In May 1965, the XIII Council of the Ukrainian Greek-Orthodox Church in Canada, along with Metropolitan Ilarion personally, sharply condemned his unauthorized journey to the Council,<sup>48</sup> as did the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church in Australia in December 1965.<sup>49</sup>

Defense of Mstyslav's actions came not from the hierarchs who had warned against his journey but primarily from forces within the Consistory of the UOC in the United States, which Mstyslav himself headed, and from the Supreme Council of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church Metropolitanate in Europe. On 2 June 1964, the Supreme Council issued a statement affirming that "nowhere during his journey in Europe did he do anything that could give grounds for

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45 "Спільне засідання ради митрополії і консисторії УПЦ в США", *Українське православне слово* 4 (1964) 6.

46 "З української преси", *Церква й життя* 3(42) (1964) 18; "З української православної преси", *Церква й життя* 3(48) (1965) 19.

47 "П'ятий собор УПЦ в ЗДА в Честері закінчився великою перемогою єдності для добра Церкви і народу", *Свобода*, 27 жовтня 1964, 1-3

48 "Святим духом керований собор", *Церква й життя* 4.49 (1965) 21-22.

49 Василь Каменецький. "Сучасні церковні події і тіні минулого", *Церква й життя* 2.59 (1967) 17.

accusing him of any intentions to betray the Orthodox faith or the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.”<sup>50</sup>

These denunciations, particularly intense in Canada, reflected the specific historical circumstances of Orthodox institutional formation in this country. The Ukrainian Greek-Orthodox Church in Canada had emerged in the early twentieth century, precisely in opposition to Catholicism and was composed primarily of former Greek Catholics who had converted to Orthodoxy.<sup>51</sup> The Church had crystallized its institutional identity through sustained polemics against Catholic influence, and among its faithful, anti-Catholic sentiment remained especially acute, rooted in local conflicts over church property, parish affiliation, and competing claims to represent authentic Ukrainian religious identity. In this context, any engagement with Rome – however informal – risked appearing to the Orthodox faithful as betrayal of the community’s founding mission. Mstyslav’s unauthorized participation thus violated not merely ecclesiastical protocol but the very logic of Orthodox self-definition in the Canadian diaspora.

Yet Mstyslav’s presence at the second session remained the sole instance of Ukrainian Orthodox participation throughout the entire conciliar period, and rather than opening possibilities for broader engagement, it foreclosed them. When Hermaniuk attempted to revive the question of official observers in April 1965 – delivering a joint Easter greeting from all Ukrainian Catholic bishops headed by Major Archbishop Josyf Slipyj and again inquiring whether the Ukrainian Orthodox Church would accept an official invitation from the Secretariat for Christian Unity to send observers to the Fourth Session – Ilarion cited Mstyslav’s unauthorized participation as having “complicated this matter very much.” His response remained unchanged: “As it is now, I have to say that we remain at our previous position to date – not to go to Rome.”<sup>52</sup> Given that Ilarion had from the very beginning been inclined to seek reasons not to send observers to the Council, his appeal to the incident with Mstyslav appears less an expression of genuine regret over the impossibility of doing so than a convenient pretext to reaffirm his earlier position.

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50 Коржан, “Передсоборові міркування”, 6.

51 See Orest MARTYNOWYCH, *Ukrainians in Canada. The Formative Period, 1891-1924*, Edmonton; Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1991, 155-400.

52 *The Second Vatican Council Diaries of Met. Maxim Hermaniuk*, 234.

Mstyslav's unauthorized visit thus had the opposite effect of what Ukrainian Catholic bishops had hoped: instead of opening a path for broader Orthodox engagement, it became grounds for rejecting future participation. What had been intended as a gesture of ecumenical goodwill became, in Orthodox institutional politics, evidence of the dangers of engagement with Rome.

Ukrainian Greek Catholic's sustained efforts between 1963 and 1965 had revealed the limits of episcopal diplomacy when confronted with structural obstacles rooted in historical memory, institutional competition, and prejudices. Ukrainian Orthodox participation at Vatican II remained confined to one unauthorized visit by one hierarchy – a symbolic gesture that, rather than bridging the Catholic-Orthodox divide, underscored its persistence.

## Conclusion

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church approached the Second Vatican Council already prepared for ecumenical engagement. The idea of Church unity had been integral to its identity for centuries, but Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky (1865–1944) elevated it to the very center of ecclesial discourse and practice. Under his leadership, all aspects of church life – education, monasticism, pastoral formation, theological reflection – were oriented, in one way or another, toward the goal of restoring unity between Christian East and West. This comprehensive integration of ecumenical vision into institutional life earned Sheptytsky recognition as a “precursor of ecumenism,” and the depth to which this vision had taken root in Greek Catholic consciousness was already evident in the 1957 pastoral letter issued on the occasion of the establishment of the UGCC Metropolitanate in Canada. While this was not yet ecumenism in the modern sense – nor in the sense that would emerge from Vatican II – it provided a foundation from which the Ukrainian hierarchy could readily adjust its course once the Council's ecumenical framework became clear.

In the Council and its ecumenical debates, Ukrainian bishops saw an opportunity to renew contact with Ukrainian Orthodox on fundamentally new terms. This outlook reflected a certain spirit of the age – optimistic, perhaps excessively so, in its expectation that the question of unity could be resolved with relative swiftness and intensity. The announcement of the Council, Pope John XXIII's rhetoric of reconciliation, and the participation observers from other Christian Churches and



communities all seemed to suggest that centuries-old divisions might be overcome within a generation. When this did not materialize – when the sharp Orthodox rejection articulated in the 1960 Winnipeg declaration made clear that Ukrainian Orthodox hierarchs viewed unity with Rome not as opportunity but as capitulation – Greek Catholic bishops shifted to a more incremental approach. They sought, at minimum, to draw Ukrainian Orthodox into the broader ecumenical process: not immediate reunion, but participation as observers, bilateral dialogue, gradual rapprochement. However, this too proved unattainable.

Yet already at the Council's opening, Ukrainian bishops encountered the submerged obstacles of ecumenical dialogue. The presence of Moscow Patriarchate observers confronted them with a fundamental dilemma: how to participate in an ecumenical process when one's hypothetical dialogue partner continued to participate in one's persecution? The Moscow Patriarchate's complicity in the violent liquidation of the UGCC in Soviet territories – the imprisonment of its episcopate, the forced incorporation of its faithful, the confiscation of its property – made the Vatican's invitation to Moscow observers appear, from the Ukrainian Catholic perspective, as a prioritization of diplomatic accommodation over authentic ecumenism. The Ukrainian bishops' leaked statement of November 1962, with its five demands for lending Moscow's presence "a character of sincerity," articulated this tension. Though the Vatican subsequently acknowledged the persecuted Church through prayer and symbolic gestures, it did not alter the underlying policy of engagement with Moscow – what would later be termed *Ostpolitik*. This experience revealed the limits of the Council's ecumenical promise for Eastern Catholic Churches whose very existence was contested by the Orthodox partners Rome sought to engage.

The repeated refusals of Metropolitan Ilarion Ohienko between 1963 and 1965, despite six months of sustained diplomatic engagement by Metropolitan Hermaniuk, revealed obstacles that goodwill and persistence could not overcome. Ilarion's objections were multiple: procedural, institutional, and political. Yet beneath these tactical deferrals lay something more fundamental. As Ilarion stated in August 1963, he could not "ignore history" – the accumulated weight of Catholic-Orthodox conflict, the association of Catholicism with foreign political dominance (particularly Polish), the influence of Russian Anti-Catholic discourse absorbed during the imperial period, and the conviction that religious independence constituted the highest form of patriotism. The 1960 Winnipeg declaration had



made this explicit. Orthodox unity equaled Ukrainian national liberation; Catholic affiliation represented foreign subjugation. No amount of episcopal diplomacy could bridge this chasm in historical imagination.

Ukrainian Orthodox hierarchs saw neither advantage nor opportunity in dialogue with the Catholic Church. Even from a purely pragmatic perspective, which was likely behind Archbishop Mstyslav Skrypnyk's actions – making Ukrainian Orthodoxy more recognizable internationally, demonstrating its distinctiveness from Russian Orthodoxy, securing a voice at a major ecclesial gathering – the potential benefits of Council participation did not outweigh the perceived risks. For Orthodox leaders shaped by decades of competition with Greek Catholics in the diaspora, engagement with Rome meant association with the very force against which their institutional identity had been constructed. The logic of self-preservation thus trumped ecumenical opportunity.

The sole instance of Ukrainian Orthodox presence at the Council – Archbishop Skrypnyk's unauthorized attendance at the second Session in November 1963 – only confirmed the depth of institutional resistance. Mstyslav came on his own initiative, without mandate from his Church. His presence provoked condemnation from his fellows. When Hermaniuk attempted in April 1965 to revive the question of official observers for the Fourth Session, Ilarion cited Mstyslav's unauthorized participation as having “greatly complicated this matter” and reiterated: “we remain at our previous position – not to go to Rome.” Mstyslav's visit, intended to demonstrate Orthodox openness to dialogue, instead reinforced institutional barriers and marked both the high point and the endpoint of Ukrainian Orthodox participation at Vatican II.

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## THE FAILURE OF ECUMENISM IN THE FACE OF THE WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

KORINNA ZAMFIR<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** The churches and ecumenical organisations have largely failed in their response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While the Russian Orthodox Church [ROC] openly legitimised the aggression, most churches hesitated to condemn it or severe ties, prioritising ecumenical diplomacy. This reluctance stems from naïve assumptions about the ROC, overconfidence in dialogue, and the overlap of ecclesial and political interests. This study examines the support of the ROC for the war and its ecumenical consequences, the response of the Catholic Church, and of the major ecumenical bodies (notably the WCC), arguing that during a war of aggression, placing ecumenical relations above truth, justice, and solidarity with the victim falls under the notion of “false irenicism” (UR 11), benefits the aggressor, weakens the pursuit of peace, and damages the credibility of the Churches. The old paradigms of ecumenical relations and ecclesial diplomacy – the Ostpolitik, neutrality, the myth of dialogue –, as well as pacifism at all costs, need to be revised.

**Keywords.** Russian invasion of Ukraine, ecumenical relations, Russian Orthodox Church, Ukraine, Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Catholic Church, World Council of Churches, Unitatis reintegratio, Charta Oecumenica, pacifism, just war

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has put ecumenical relations at a test. With very few exceptions, the response of the churches and ecumenical bodies was inadequate. While the Russian Orthodox Church [ROC] has consistently legitimised the war of aggression against Ukraine, most churches were unwilling to condemn its position, let alone sever ties with it, prioritising ecumenical relations over a clear stance on the war. The reluctance to break with a church that represents and supports the aggressor state stems partly from a naïve misapprehension regarding the nature

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and intentions of the ROC doubled by overconfidence in dialogue and diplomacy as instruments of conflict resolution, but it also results from the entanglement of ecclesial and political considerations.

This paper addresses the failure of ecumenical relations in the context of the war. I firstly evoke the support of the ROC for the war against Ukraine and the way this has affected ecumenical relations. I then turn to the response of the Catholic Church and of the ecumenical institutions to the war. I argue that under the circumstances of a war of aggression, prioritising ecumenical relations and diplomatic steps at the cost of truth, justice and solidarity with the victim favours the aggressor, does not advance the cause of peace, and undermines the credibility of the churches and ecclesial organisations that take this path. The Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* has warned against “false irenicism” as an attitude thoroughly foreign to the spirit of ecumenism (UR 11). This warning should apply not only to theological dialogue but to ecumenical relations in general.

### **The role of the Russian Orthodox Church in legitimising the war against Ukraine**

The ROC fully sustains the war of aggression against Ukraine. Its ideological discourse, – a manifestation of political religion –, uses religious concepts and symbols to justify a political goal, the occupation of Ukraine and the achievement of Russian neo-imperialistic ambitions. To that aim, two ideological concepts are blended in political and religious discourse: the *russskiy mir* and the Holy Rus.

The *russskiy mir*, a central concept in Russian political discourse and geopolitical strategy, has become the quintessence of post-Soviet imperialistic ideas.<sup>2</sup> More

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- 2 On the concept, its meaning and evolution: Cyril HOVORUN, “Interpreting the ‘Russian World’”, in Andrii KRAWCHUK and Thomas BREMER (eds.), *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 163–172; Pavlo SMYTSNYUK, “The War in Ukraine as a Challenge for Religious Communities: Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Prospects for Peacemaking,” *Studia UBB. Theologia Catholica Latina* 1 (2023) 26–70 (30–35); Marlene LARUELLE, “The ‘Russian World’. Russia’s Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination”, *Center for Global Interests Papers* (2015) 1–28; Oleksiy BONDARENKO, “Russkij Mir’, Between Diaspora and Public Diplomacy. Russia’s Foothold in Central Asia”, *Il Politico* 81.3 (2016) 87–106; Thomas BREMER, “Diffuses Konzept. Die Russische Orthodoxe Kirche und die ‘Russische Welt’”, *Osteuropa* 66.3 (2016) 3–18; Alexander MEIENBERGER, The Concept of the “Russkiy Mir”: History of the Concept and Ukraine, *Euxeinos* 13.35 (2023)

than a linguistic-cultural community and a geopolitical marketing brand, the concept of the 'Russian world' has come to be defined as a civilisational space standing up to the decadent, satanic West, defending 'traditional values'.<sup>3</sup> Politically, it was used for legitimising the subjugation of neighbouring countries, based on the argument that the West was contriving to destroy the unity of the Russian civilisational space.<sup>4</sup> In the imaginary of the *russskiy mir*, Ukrainians and Belarusians are fraternal people belonging to the Russian nation. These nations are thus denied their national identity, language, and culture (dismissed as inferior manifestations of Russian language and culture).<sup>5</sup> Russia questions thereby these nations' right to self-determination and even their statehood (notably that of Ukraine).<sup>6</sup> In the name of a claimed moral superiority, Russia feels entitled to exercise punitive 'correction' on its neighbours that have allegedly fallen to the corrupting influence of the West, by means of political control and the use of military power.<sup>7</sup> The idea of the endangered 'Russian world' has served as ideological foundation for the war against Ukraine since 2014, and especially since the full-scale invasion in 2022, legitimising military occupation and genocidal warfare. The ROC plays a significant role in this process.<sup>8</sup>

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15–29; Anatolii BABYNSKYI, "Resentment, Ideology and Myth: How "Holy Rus" Haunts the Russian Soul, in Yury P. AVVAKUMOV – Oleh TURIY (eds.), *The Churches and the War: Religion, Religious Diplomacy, and Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine*, Ukrainian Catholic University Press, Lviv, 2024, 58–83; Tatiana VAGRAMENKO, FRANCISCO ARQUEROS FERNÁNDEZ, "La guerra santa del Russskiy mir. Religión y guerra en Ucrania", *Política y sociedad* 60.3 (2023) 1–14 (3–4), <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/poso.84415>.

- 3 HOVORUN, "Interpreting", 167–169; SMYTSNYUK, "War", 30–31, MEIENBERGER, "Concept", 21.
- 4 HOVORUN, Interpreting, 164; SMYTSNYUK, "War", 31–32. These 'traditional values' are limited to sexual ethics. Kirill has repeatedly referred to homosexuality and gay pride marches as signs of the West's depravity, which, he claimed, has poisoned Ukraine. Homily of Patriarch Kirill on Forgiveness Sunday in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (6.03.2022): Патриаршая проповедь в Неделю сыропустную после Литургии в Храме Христа Спасителя, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html>, also SMYTSNYUK, "War", 33.
- 5 The ideological foundation is contradictory, but effective, as it appeals to different groups: there is no Ukrainian language and identity, but Ukraine pushes for the "forced Ukrainisation" of the Russian population. BABYNSKYI, "Resentment", 61–62.
- 6 LARUELLE, "Russian World", 1.
- 7 HOVORUN, "Interpreting", 164–167; BONDARENKO, "Russkij Mir", 88.
- 8 Viorel COMAN, "Critical Analysis of the Moscow Patriarchate Vision on the Russian-Ukrainian Military Conflict: Russskiy Mir and Just War", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 76.4



Given its use in the war against Ukraine, in religious discourse, the ideology of the Russian world has been condemned in March 2022, in an important declaration issued by Orthodox theologians.<sup>9</sup>

In the discourse of the ROC, the *russskiy mir* has been superimposed on the older concept of the Holy Rus, – a manifestation of the Kingdom of God in the Eurasian region, a sort of metaphysical essence of the Russian people, allegedly born from the ‘Kievan baptismal font’ – an ideological reference to the baptism of Kyivan Prince Voldemar (Volodymyr, Vladimir). The Holy Rus is an expression of exceptionalism. Thus, Russia is said to be a Christian Orthodox civilisation with a unique destiny, meant to save the world from moral decay and destruction, by holding back the Evil brought about by the West.<sup>10</sup>

In what follows, I look at the intertwining of these two concepts in the homilies of Patriarch Kirill and in the Decree of the World Russian People’s Council (2024).

The ROC, in particular Patriarch Kirill has had a major role in providing ideological-religious legitimisation to Russia’s war against Ukraine, starting with the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014. Kirill has from the beginning combined the two ideological constructs, the *russskiy mir* and the Holy Rus,<sup>11</sup> to portray Russia’s war as defence of the Orthodox civilisational space and of traditional values against the hostile, decadent West, conniving to break the unity of the Russian people born from the ‘Kievan baptismal font’. The narrative not only legitimised Russian invasion but provided the war with a religious dimension.<sup>12</sup>

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(2023) 332–344; Paul L. GAVRILYUK, “When the Patriarch of Moscow Blesses a War: The Russian World and the Sacralization of Violence”, *Modern Theology* (2024), DOI:10.1111/moth.12970.

- 9 Brandon GALLAHER, Pantelis KALAITZIDIS, and the Drafting Committee, “A Declaration on the ‘Russian World’ (Russkii Mir) Teaching”, *Mission Studies* 39 (2022) 269–276, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/>.
- 10 See Mikhail D. SUSLOV, “Holy Rus”: The Geopolitical Imagination in the Contemporary Russian Orthodox Church, *Russian Politics and Law* 52.3 (2014) 67–86 (68–71); ID., “The Russian Orthodox Church and the Crisis in Ukraine”, in Andrii KRAWCHUK, Thomas BREMER (eds.), *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 133–162 (138–140); BABYNSKYI, “Resentment”, 63–67.
- 11 BABYNSKYI, “Resentment”, 67, on Gundiayev’s claim that the Holy Rus is the core the Russian world.
- 12 See the speech following the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts on the 38<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his episcopal consecration (14.03.2014): <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3606218>.

These topoi are also found in the discourse of Metropolitan Hilarion: the West bears the responsibility for the war (euphemistically, the sad events occurring within the Eastern Orthodox family), having sown the seeds of discord.<sup>13</sup> The ROC defends the traditional values of marriage and family, protects human life from the moment of conception to natural death, fights against the loss of moral authority, the triumph of falsehood and injustice in contemporary society, while certain parts of the Western Christian world are sliding into the abyss of the total rejection of the Gospel and Christ, and follow the path of moral relativism. These claims were made in March 2022, as war raged in Ukraine and civilians in Bucha, Mariupol, Izium were tortured, starved, slaughtered and buried in mass graves.<sup>14</sup>

After the full-scale invasion, Kirill not only justified the Russian “military operation” on religious and moral grounds,<sup>15</sup> but turned the war aiming at the destruction of Ukraine into a metaphysical war, in which the Russian army fights on the side of good, in defence of the Holy Rus, against the evil, satanic forces of darkness (the West and the government of Ukraine), against the destruction of Christian faith.<sup>16</sup> In this eschatological combat, those who adhered to the divine commandments and Orthodoxy were fighting the forces of evil. Kirill assimilated

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html. Strikingly, Kirill questions Ukrainian statehood and national identity (its territory is part of the Russian world, the Orthodox civilizational space, from which the enemies of the Russian homeland tried to tear it away; its population is referred to as ‘our faithful people’; a ‘fratricidal war’ must be avoided).” Also BREMER, *Diffuses Konzept*, 13–14.

13 On the occasion of the inter-Orthodox consultation in Cyprus: Metropolitan HILARION of Budapest and Hungary, “Reconciliation and Unity Are the Purpose of the Divine Love Incarnate in Jesus Christ”, in Ioan SAUCA – Vasile-Octavian MIHOC (eds.), *Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Karlsruhe. Christ’s Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity*, Geneva: WCC, 2022, 52–59 (54). The language evokes the enemy in Matt 13,25.39, in Russian Orthodox discourse a personification of the Satanic West.

14 HILARION, “Reconciliation”, 55.

15 Vebjørn L. HORSFJORD, “Patriarch and Patriot: History in Patriarch Kirill’s Sermons in the First Year of the Full-scale War in Ukraine”, *Religion, State and Society* 52.4 (2024) 367–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2024.2353417>.

16 Homily in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, 27 February, 2022: His Holiness Patriarch Kirill Calls on the Faithful to Pray for Peace and Unity of the Church, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/text/5904398.html>. Some days later, on March 6, while the Russian army invaded and was bombing Ukraine, and the civilian population was fleeing, the patriarch spoke of the preparation for Easter as a time of spiritual spring and rebirth, attributing the war to the plotting of hostile external forces and to sins against divine commandments, especially

the fight of the Holy Rus in defence of national and Christian values to the cosmic struggle of Ephesians. The ‘military confrontation’ with hostile forces, Russians’ struggle was “not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6,12). In this struggle, Kirill claimed, Russia was on the side of light. Russia “does not want to conquer other countries, it does not want to subjugate anyone [!]. Russia simply seeks to preserve its identity, its beliefs, its values.”<sup>17</sup>

In Kirill’s interpretation celestial figures are militarised and turned into instruments of political religion. The Mother of God becomes the heavenly patron of the Russian soldiers fighting against Ukraine and a military commander. The festive presentation of the Avgústovskaya icon of the Mother of God to Viktor Zolotov, Commander-in-Chief of the Rosgvardiya on 13 March 2022, the day of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, and its subsequent transferral to the Church of St. Vladimir in Balashikha (near Moscow), is a striking example of the close cooperation between the ROC and the army, promoting military and political goals.<sup>18</sup> The Patriarch was honouring thus the troops that took part in the massacre in Bucha in the early stages of the offensive against Ukraine.

The Archangel Michael is turned into an example for the soldiers as an *archistrategos* of God. Contrary to the common view that God is Love and that everything around him is pervaded by love, St Michael, the closest angel to God, Kirill argued, points to the struggle between good and evil. In this distorted

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gay pride parades: Патриаршая проповедь в Неделю сыропустную после Литургии в Храме Христа Спасителя, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html>.

17 Homily on Palm Sunday, 2023. Россия стремится сохранить свою самобытность, свою веру, свою систему ценностей, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6017763.html>, see also SMYTSNYUK, “War”, 30.

18 Vyacheslav KARPOV, “The Theotokos as Commander in Chief: How Russian Orthodoxy Informs Imperialist Wars and is Twisted by Them”, in Yuri P. AVVAKUMOV – Oleh TURİY (eds.), *The Churches and the War: Religion, Religious Diplomacy, and Russia’s Aggression Against Ukraine*, Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2024, 84–117. Also <https://bigasia.ru/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/4c5de1eab6fa970589147d338add3f3b.jpg>. In some interpretations of the icon, the Mother of God not only extends her blessing, protective hand over the Russian army, but also points the way for the Russian offensive on the Western Front as a military commander.

narrative, in the metaphysical war, the Russian soldiers fighting against Ukraine are on the side of Good and can be assured of God's support.<sup>19</sup>

Political soteriology and the cult of the dead also find a place in Kirill's discourse. The death of Russian soldiers is not only self-sacrifice, but a sacrifice that washes away all their sins.<sup>20</sup> Perpetrators of violent crimes become thus Christ-like victims.<sup>21</sup> Self-redemption renders Christ's redemptive sacrifice on the cross irrelevant. Moreover, this redemptive death is attributed to soldiers who fought a war of aggression, committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. This claim contradicts established Orthodox teaching about killing as a serious offence even in the case of self-defence.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most aggressive attempts to legitimise the war against Ukraine with ideological and religious arguments is the resolution of the 25<sup>th</sup> World Russian People's Council, *The Present and Future of the Russian World*.<sup>23</sup> The document, approved at a session presided by Kirill, blends the ideology of the *russkiy mir* and Holy Rus, presenting the war against Ukraine (the "special military operation" [SMO]) as a war of liberation, a struggle for the survival and values of the Russian nation, against the criminal Kyiv regime and the collective West behind it, which, it claims, has been waged "on the territories of southwestern Rus" since 2014.

19 In his speech at the Church of St. Luke in the A.A. Vishnevsky Central Military Clinical Hospital (Novy, Krasnogorsk) (21.06.2022), <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/77388>.

20 Патриарх Кирилл произнёс особую молитву о русских воинах и победе Святой Руси, *Народный Собор* (26.09.2022), <https://narodsobor.ru/2022/09/26/patriarh-kirill-proiznyos-osobuyu-molitvu-o-russkih-voinah-i-pobede-svyatoj-rusi/>. Also, VOLKOVA, "Theological Foundation", 123.

21 VOLKOVA, "Theological Foundation", 128–129.

22 On the departure from Orthodox doctrine: COMAN, "Critical Analysis", 340–343. See further Christos KARAKOLIS, "Nonviolence in the New Testament: An Orthodox-Hermeneutical Perspective", *Sacra Scripta* 19.1–2 (2021) 76–91.

23 Наказ XXV Всемирного русского народного собора «Настоящее и будущее Русского мира», <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6116189.html>; Order of the XXV World Russian People's Council "Present and Future of the Russian World", [https://risu.ua/en/order-of-the-xxv-world-russian-peoples-council-present-and-future-of-the-russian-world\\_n147334](https://risu.ua/en/order-of-the-xxv-world-russian-peoples-council-present-and-future-of-the-russian-world_n147334). The document was issued at the session of November 27–28, 2023, and was approved on March 27, 2024, at the session presided by Patriarch Kirill, held at the Hall of Church Councils of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The circumstances and the composition of the WRPC and the religious discourse indicate that the decree expresses the position of the ROC.

Thoroughly distorting reality, it claims that the Russian people are “defending with arms their life, freedom, statehood, civilizational, religious, national, and cultural identity, and their right to live on their own land within the borders of the unified Russian state.” (The falsehood and cynicism of this claim are astonishing.) The declaration openly states that, from a spiritual and moral viewpoint, the SMO is a “holy war” in which Russia “defends the unified spiritual space of Holy Rus” and thereby fulfils the role of the Restrainer. This evokes the κατέχων, the mysterious figure of 2 Thess 2 who holds back the appearance of the Lawless One empowered by Satan, delaying the day of judgment.<sup>24</sup> Russia fulfils this role by protecting “the world from the assaults of globalism and from the victory of the West, which has sunk into Satanism.”

The apocalyptic scenario has a clear political aim: after the SMO the entire territory of Ukraine must fall under Russia’s exclusive sphere of influence, and the possibility of an anti-Russian political system must be removed. The document elaborates on the nature and mission of the ‘Russian world’ as a spiritual and cultural-civilizational space that transcends the borders of the RF and historical Russia; it is a “Russian ecumene” comprising the Eastern Slavs, the descendants of historical Rus. The historical-moral-eschatological mission of the Russian world is to save the world by restraining evil and to destroy all political attempts to establish universal hegemony, the subordination of humanity to a single evil principle.

### The Catholic Church, Ecumenism and the War

In the decades following Vatican II, in the spirit of the Decree on ecumenism, the Catholic Church joined international ecumenical dialogue. Rome has had a long-standing appreciation for Orthodoxy and Orthodox theology.<sup>25</sup> The Decree

24 The use of the figure of the Restrainer in Russian discourse is not new: David G. LEWIS, *Russia’s New Authoritarianism. Putin and the Politics of Order*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020, 193–214 (Apocalypse Delayed: Katechontic Thinking in Late Putinist Russia); Cyril HOVORUN, “Deus ex Machina of the War in Ukraine”, *RES* 15.3 (2023) 297–322 (301–302).

25 Pope Benedict XV established the Sacred Congregation for the Eastern Church as an independent congregation (*Dei Providentis*, 1917, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/orientchurch/profilo/rc\\_con\\_corient\\_pro\\_20030320\\_profile.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/orientchurch/profilo/rc_con_corient_pro_20030320_profile.html)), and founded the Pontifical Oriental Institute (*Orientis Catholici*, 1917, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/it/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_ben-xv\\_motu-proprio\\_19171015\\_](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/it/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xv_motu-proprio_19171015_)

on Ecumenism expressed high regard for Orthodox tradition, theology, liturgy and spirituality and recognised the particular governance and discipline of the Eastern Churches (UR 14–18). In the aftermath of the Council, the Vatican has taken a great interest in the dialogue with the Orthodox Church,<sup>26</sup> playing an important role in the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue.<sup>27</sup>

The Ecumenical Patriarchate proved to be a sincere partner of dialogue. Starting with the historic encounter between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem in 1964, relations continued to improve and meetings at the highest level multiplied. John Paul II visited Patriarch Demetrios shortly after his inauguration (1979) and Bartholomew visited Rome in 1995, with several joint events following (2002–2004). Benedict XVI visited Patriarch Bartholomew early on in his papacy (2006). In a first, Bartholomew attended the inaugural mass of Pope Francis (2013) and cordial relations developed between the two, materialised in several other encounters. The ecumenical patriarch was also present at the inaugural mass of

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orientis-catholici.html); Edward G. FARRUGIA, “Benedict XV and the Founding of the Pontifical Oriental Institute (1917): Foresight, Intuition, Hindsight”, in *Benedict XV: A Pope in the World of the ‘Useless Slaughter’ (1914–1918)*, edited by Alberto MELLONI, Giovanni CAVAGNINI and Giulia GROSSI, Turnhout: Brepols, 2020, 1581–1598, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.STR-EB.5.118849>. See also: Pontifical Oriental Institute, A Brief History, <https://orientale.it/en/about/history>, for further pontifical decisions strengthening the Institute by Pius XI, and Alessandro DI BUSSOLO, “Dicastery for the Eastern Churches”, *Vatican News* (19.08.2025), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2025-08/dicastery-for-the-eastern-churches.html>, for an overview of its history up to the present.

26 On the beginnings of the rapprochement: John CHRYSSAVGIS (ed.), *Dialogue of Love: Breaking the Silence of Centuries*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2014; for an overview of a number of issues in the postconciliar dialogue (with a focus on the problem of uniatism): Peter DE MEY, Jaroslav Z. SKIRA, Herman G. B. TEULE (eds.), *The Catholic Church and its Orthodox Sister Churches Twenty-five Years after Balamand* (BETL 326), Leuven: Peeters, 2022.

27 Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church (as a whole), <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-di-tradizione-bizantina/commissione-mista-internazionale-per-il-dialogo-teologico-tra-la.html>; for the US: John BORELLI and John H. ERICKSON (eds.), *The Quest for Unity: Orthodox and Catholics in Dialogue: Documents of the Joint International Commission and Official Dialogues in the United States, 1965–1995*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press / Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996.



Pope Leo XIV and the two met in Iznik for a commemoration of the Council of Nicaea (2025).

The relationship with the ROC was of particular interest for the Vatican, but proved very difficult, given the reluctance of the ROC to establish contacts with Rome. Alexei II did not invite Pope John Paul II to Moscow.<sup>28</sup> In spite of Rome's hopes for a détente with the arrival of Kirill (2009),<sup>29</sup> Pope Benedict was not welcome either. Pope Francis was determined to meet Kirill. An encounter of the two eventually took place, but not in Moscow (or Rome), but in Havana (2016), notwithstanding the difficult political context following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. The withdrawal of the ROC from all ecumenical dialogues in which the Ecumenical Patriarchate was involved, in the aftermath of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine [OCU] being granted the autocephaly,<sup>30</sup> also created problems for the Catholic Church. Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022) further complicated the situation but did not deter Francis from his readiness to visit Moscow. It came as a relief for Ukraine and for the international community scandalised by Kirill's support for the war that Francis eventually cancelled a planned meeting with Kirill in Jerusalem in June 2022. While no pope could so far visit Moscow, the ROC established relations with the Vatican at a lower level. Metropolitan Hilarion of Vokolamsk visited Pope Benedict on several occasions (2009, 2011, 2012), and the apparent common ground was the need to defend traditional values and condemn the persecution of Christians in the Middle East. Pope Francis met Hilarion more than a dozen times between 2013–2023. Over the last meetings, Hilarion raised with Francis the issue of the alleged persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church [UOC]. Most recently, Pope Leo XIV received Hilarion's successor, Metropolitan Anthony of Vokolamsk in July 2025 and the latter repeated the claim about the persecution of the UOC.<sup>31</sup>

28 "Patriarch Alexy II and dialogue", The Free Library (2004): Catholic Insight <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Patriarch+Alexy+II+and+dialogue.-a0126313733>.

29 Victor L. SIMPSON, "Vatican: Papal Trip to Moscow a Possibility due to Improved Relations with Russian Orthodox", *The Canadian Press* (17 September 2009).

30 Cyril HOVORUN, "The Issue of *Unia* in Relations between Moscow and Constantinople", in Peter DE MEY, Jaroslav Z. SKIRA, Herman G. B. TEULE (eds.), *The Catholic Church and its Orthodox Sister Churches Twenty-five Years after Balamand* (BETL 326), Leuven: Peeters, 2022, 119–129 (123–125).

31 Gina CHRISTIAN, "Pope Leo Meets with Top Russian Orthodox Cleric amid War, Strained Relations", *Catholic Standard* (29.07.2025), <https://www.cathstan.org/us-world/pope-leo-meets-with-top-russian-orthodox-cleric-amid-war-strained-relations>.



This brief overview shows the high importance Rome assigns to the relationship with the ROC and sheds some light on one of the reasons for which, as we shall see, the Vatican failed to appropriately react to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On the other hand, while Moscow was reluctant to permit a visit of a pope, under Kirill it has fostered a lower echelon but all the more influential representation in Vatican, to promote Russian ecclesial and political talking points.

The legacy of Pope Francis regarding the war in Ukraine is ambivalent, as are its ecumenical implications. On the one hand, Francis repeatedly expressed his solidarity with Ukraine, voiced sincere empathy with the victims and constantly called for prayer for the martyred people of Ukraine. He tasked Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, prefect of the Dicastery for the Service of Charity, with humanitarian missions, which materialised in ten visits to Ukraine up to April 2025.<sup>32</sup> The Pope rejected Kirill's attempt to legitimise the war and warned him against becoming "Putin's altar-boy".<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, some well-intended gestures, like the 2022 Good Friday Way of the Cross in Rome<sup>34</sup> and the dedication of both Russia and Ukraine to the Mother of God were unfortunate, as they did not distinguish between aggressor and victim, between the suffering of Ukrainians – the military defending their country and their families and the innocent civilians –, and that of the Russian military waging a war of aggression and inflicting terror on the occupied territories. Furthermore, several of Francis's statements reflected his bias for Russia. His claim that the war was provoked by NATO barking at the door of Russia, his exoneration of ethnic Russians for the war crimes committed in Ukraine by assigning them to other ethnic groups of the RF,<sup>35</sup> his praise of the "great Russia" of imperial rulers like Peter I and Catherine II, known for their military expansionism, reflected Russian talking points as well as Francis's personal

32 Paulina GUZIK, "Despite Fear in Ukraine, Keep Going, Pope Tells Cardinal Krajewski", *OSV News* (2024), <https://www.osvnews.com/despite-fear-in-ukraine-keep-going-pope-tells-cardinal-krajewski/>. A summary of these missions can be found here: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/tags/7510/cardinal-konrad-krajewski>

33 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-05/the-pope-i-am-ready-to-meet-putin-in-moscow.html>, <https://www.axios.com/2022/05/05/pope-russian-orthodox-putin-altar-boy>.

34 Thomas Mark NÉMETH, "The War Against Ukraine and the Churches: A Challenge to Theology," in Yury P. AVVAKUMOV – Oleh TURIY (eds.), *The Churches and the War: Religion, Religious Diplomacy, and Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine*, Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2024, 250–256.

35 SMYTSNYUK, "War", 45.

sympathy for (the oft-postulated) Russian greatness, a view avowedly linked to his formation.<sup>36</sup> The critique of the legal steps taken by Ukraine requiring the UOC-MP to sever ties with Moscow was also unfortunate; the Pope understood the legal provisions as an infringement of religious freedom, without an appropriate insight into the situation (the fact that many of its leaders and clerics failed to distance themselves from the aggressor state).<sup>37</sup>

More importantly, the established principles of Vatican diplomacy – the idea that Rome should be a *super partes* mediator in political and military conflicts, the Ostpolitik shaped during the Cold War, and the appreciation for Orthodoxy, rooted in ecclesiology, have prevented Francis from naming and condemning the aggressor state.<sup>38</sup>

The pacifism of Pope Francis, reflected in the departure from the concept of just war, also explains the difficulty with distinguishing between victim and aggressor and naming the latter.<sup>39</sup> Emphasising that respect for international law, in particular the UN Charter, and diplomatic solutions are crucial for preventing

36 Nicole WINFIELD, “Ukraine’s Catholic Bishops Tell Pope that his Praise for Russia’s Imperial Past ‘Pained’ Ukrainians”, *NCR* (6.09.2023), <https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/vatican-news/ukraines-catholic-bishops-tell-pope-his-praise-russias-imperial-past-pained>.

37 Cindy WOODEN, “Pope Criticises New Law of Ukrainian Parliament: ‘Churches shouldn’t be Touched’”, *The Catholic Weekly* (27.08.2024), <https://catholicweekly.com.au/pope-criticises-new-church-law-in-ukraine/>. On the legal aspects: Liudmyla FYLYPOVYCH, “Security Challenges for Ukrainian Orthodoxy during the Russian-Ukrainian War”, *Studia UBB. Theologia Catholica Latina* 2 (2024) 63–80; Oleg SUKHOV, “Russian-linked Church Faces Potential Ban in Ukraine as it Remains Reluctant to Officially Cut Ties with Moscow”, *Kyiv Independent* (13.08.2025); Alya SHANDRA, “The Ukrainian Orthodox Church Says it Left Moscow. Documents Say Otherwise”, *Euromaidan* (9.07.2025).

38 SMYTSNYUK, “War”, 45–49; ID., “The Russian Orthodox Church and the Holy See: 70 Years of Political Ecumenism”, <https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2024/03/28/the-russian-orthodox-church-and-the-holy-see/>; Thomas Mark NÉMETH, “Pope Francis and Russia’s War against Ukraine”, *Studia UBB. Theologia Catholica Latina* 1 (2023) 92–109.

39 Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship (2020), 256–262, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html). On the paradigm shift marked by the FT: Cezary KOŚCIELNIAK, “Unjust Interpretations of a Just War: The Catholic Church’s Approach to the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict”, in Yury P. AVVAKUMOV – Oleh TURIY (eds.), *The Churches and the War: Religion, Religious Diplomacy, and Russia’s Aggression Against Ukraine*, Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2024, 257–268 (referring to his position as

wars (FT 257) may have sounded convincing in 2020 (although the occupation of Crimea and the Donbas war questioned this optimism). However, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by a country with a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, there remained no doubt that wars are not always preventable by negotiations and that international law can easily be broken. More importantly, Francis's critique of the notion of just war is based on its abuse (FT 258, "in recent decades, every single war has been ostensibly 'justified'"), and does not consider circumstances in which engaging in a war is without any doubt an act of self-defence.<sup>40</sup> The war against Ukraine made it clear that defensive military actions aimed at countering a war of aggression with explicit genocidal intentions fully meet the criteria of a just war.<sup>41</sup>

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"neo-Casarolism" and a departure from that of John Paul II, who had a better understanding of the realities of the Soviet Union).

- 40 "The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of the possibility of legitimate defence by means of military force, which involves demonstrating that certain 'rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy' have been met. Yet it is easy to fall into an overly broad interpretation of this potential right. In this way, some would also wrongly justify even 'preventive' attacks or acts of war that can hardly avoid entailing 'evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated'" (FT 258).
- 41 For a more realistic perspective: Manfred SPIEKER, "Christliche Friedensethik und der Krieg in der Ukraine. Warum die Lehre vom gerechten Krieg nicht überholt ist", *Communio* 5 (2022) 557–569; id., "Gerechte Verteidigung, *Herder Korrespondenz* 6 (2022). Drawing on Thomas Aquinas, KOŚCIELNIAK, argues for the legitimacy and applicability of the concept of just war to Ukraine's defensive war ("Unjust Interpretations of a Just War", 257–268). The provisions of international law also justify Ukraine's right to self-defence. Heinz-Gerhard JUSTENHOVEN, "Russia's War Against Ukraine: A Peace-Ethical Analysis," in Yury P. AVVAKUMOV – Oleh TURIY (eds.), *The Churches and the War: Religion, Religious Diplomacy, and Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine*, Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2024, 193–220: Ukraine's self-defence meets the criteria of the UN Charter (art. 51). The alternative of civil activism or nonviolent resistance is untenable in view of the widespread abuse on civil-rights activists and the suppression of civilian resistance. Surrender would not be a lesser evil, considering the widespread violence against the population, the mass deportations, the abduction of children, the torture of civilians and POW, the destruction of the infrastructure, aiming at the destruction and russification of Ukraine. See also Andreas TRAMPOTA, "Just War vs. Just Peace? Ethics of War and Peace between the Realism of Christian Eschatology and Unrealistic Utopia," in the same volume, 237–249 (Just peace is a preventive doctrine; just peace and just war

The emphasis on negotiations materialised in a number of diplomatic steps taken by the Vatican, including the mission of Cardinal Matteo Zuppi to Moscow, to call for the return of the abducted Ukrainian children,<sup>42</sup> and a telephone conversation of Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher with Sergey Lavrov.<sup>43</sup> These initiatives were no doubt well-intended. Apparently, the contacts between Rome and Moscow have contributed to the release of several groups of prisoners,<sup>44</sup> but did not enhance in any way the probability of a ceasefire and of peace negotiations. The meetings with Russian ecclesial and political authorities did certainly not change the mind of the aggressor state. Conversely, such visits and calls alleviate the international isolation of the RF and present Moscow as an important partner of discussion for the Catholic Church.

For decades, the MP has instrumentalised the ecumenical relations with the Catholic Church. In the sphere of ecclesial relations, it has used this dialogue to undermine the influence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, establishing itself as a recognised ecclesial leader within Orthodoxy and as an alleged defender of

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are complementary concepts. Christian theology must reckon with the existence of evil in human history and confront it.)

- 42 During his visit to Moscow, Cardinal Zuppi met infamous politicians (Yuri Ushakov, Assistant to the President of the RF for Foreign Policy Affairs, Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Beleva), and Patriarch Kirill, without achieving any commitment regarding the return of Ukrainian children. Roberto PAGLIA LONGA – Deborah CASTELLANO LUBOV, "Cardinal Zuppi: We are Trying to Bring Ukrainian Children Home", *Vatican News* (5.07.2023), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-07/cardinal-zuppi-we-are-trying-to-bring-ukrainian-children-home.html>.
- 43 Telephone conversation between the Secretary for Relations with States and International Organizations and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 04.04.2025, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2025/04/04/250404f.html>. The conversation was "aimed at stopping the military actions" and the Holy See reiterated the "willingness to continue its humanitarian effort in matters regarding the exchange of prisoners". The communiqué does not mention any commitment that would have been made by the Russian side regarding these matters.
- 44 As argued by Anatolii BABYNSKYI, who notes nonetheless the instrumentalisation of the Catholic Church for propaganda purposes and Moscow's disregard for the word of the Pope: "A Theologian Explains Why the Pope is 'Making Reverences' towards Russia", *RISU* (04.05.2023), [https://risu.ua/en/a-theologian-explains-why-the-pope-is-making-reverences-towards-russia\\_n139141](https://risu.ua/en/a-theologian-explains-why-the-pope-is-making-reverences-towards-russia_n139141).

traditional values. Furthermore, the MP has employed these discussions to promote Moscow's geopolitical agenda.<sup>45</sup>

To avoid a conflict with the ROC, notwithstanding the very good relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Vatican has not recognised the OCU, representing millions of Orthodox Ukrainians.<sup>46</sup> It is also striking that the Havana declaration takes over the Russian position on the Donbas war, presented as an internal (irresponsible) conflict inflecting suffering on peaceful inhabitants, and voices the hope of overcoming the "schism between the Orthodox faithful in Ukraine".<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the relationships with the MP were also prioritised over the aspirations and interests of Greek-Catholics in Ukraine.<sup>48</sup>

The compliance of the Vatican with the positions of the MP did not achieve the unity it had hoped. The MP has undermined the Catholic-Orthodox ecumenical dialogue, withdrawing all forums in which the Ecumenical Patriarchate had a leading role. Babynskyi shows how Rome has misread the intentions of the ROC, and has ignored its politicisation and political agenda, the lack of sincere interest in a theological dialogue based on mutual respect, truthfulness and willingness for transformation, and the deep anti-Western sentiment of the ROC. In addition, the view that the nationalistic tendencies of the ROC could be tamed by integration,

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45 SMYTSNYUK, "The Russian Orthodox Church", <https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2024/03/28/the-russian-orthodox-church-and-the-holy-see/> (noting how the Havana meeting between Pope Francis and Kirill (2016) was used to counter the influence of the Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete and to make Russia's military intervention in Syria palatable); Anatolii BABYNSKYI, "The Price of 'Unity Above Truth': Vatican-Moscow Relations and the War Against Ukraine", *RISU* (16.10.2025), [https://risu.ua/en/the-price-of-unity-above-truth-vatican-moscow-relations-and-the-war-against-ukraine\\_n159277](https://risu.ua/en/the-price-of-unity-above-truth-vatican-moscow-relations-and-the-war-against-ukraine_n159277).

46 SMYTSNYUK, "The Russian Orthodox Church", <https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2024/03/28/the-russian-orthodox-church-and-the-holy-see/>; BABYNSKYI, "The Price of 'Unity Above Truth'", [https://risu.ua/en/the-price-of-unity-above-truth-vatican-moscow-relations-and-the-war-against-ukraine\\_n159277](https://risu.ua/en/the-price-of-unity-above-truth-vatican-moscow-relations-and-the-war-against-ukraine_n159277).

47 Havana 26–27, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/february/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160212\\_dichiarazione-comune-kirill.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/february/documents/papa-francesco_20160212_dichiarazione-comune-kirill.html). Also Ihor RANTSYA, "La Déclaration de La Havane de 2016 et son interprétation en Ukraine dans le contexte de la réception du document de Balamand", in Peter DE MEY, Jaroslav Z. SKIRA, Herman G. B. TEULE (eds.), *The Catholic Church and its Orthodox Sister Churches Twenty-five Years after Balamand* (BETL 326), Leuven: Peeters, 2022, 153–167 (156–160).

48 BABYNSKYI, "The Price of 'Unity Above Truth'", [https://risu.ua/en/the-price-of-unity-above-truth-vatican-moscow-relations-and-the-war-against-ukraine\\_n159277](https://risu.ua/en/the-price-of-unity-above-truth-vatican-moscow-relations-and-the-war-against-ukraine_n159277).

theological and cultural exchanges and ecclesial contacts has proven to be just as misguided as the Western European efforts to transform Russia into a democracy through political and economic integration.<sup>49</sup>

The path taken by Pope Leo seems ambiguous for the moment. On the one hand, in a 2022 interview, as bishop of Chiclayo, Robert Prevost was very clear about the nature of the war, the imperialistic intentions of the aggressor state, the crimes against humanity perpetrated by Russia, and the need to speak out about these matters.<sup>50</sup> As pope, he has repeatedly spoken with empathy about the suffering of Ukrainians, called for peace, and expressed the willingness of the Vatican to host peace talks. However, he has also emphasised the efforts of the Holy See to maintain neutrality and argued that “a number of different actors have to push hard enough to make the parties that are at war say, enough is enough, and let’s look for another way to solve our differences”.<sup>51</sup> (The principle of remaining a *super partes* mediator was also obvious from the welcome of Metropolitan Anthony of Vokolamsk.<sup>52</sup>) Speaking of the “useless killing after these years of people on both sides” because of which “people have to somehow be wakened up to say, there’s another way to do this” seems to continue equating the loss of the victim and of the aggressor, as well as the unwarranted optimism regarding the chances of dialogue. It seems thus that no major change should be expected in the position

49 BABYNSKYI, “The Price”, *ibid.*

50 Entrevista al obispo de Chiclayo, monseñor Robert Prevost, *Semanario Expresión* (Apr 13, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/live/dQ3Y2CgPgl4>, from min. 9.05. For an English translation: “The Words of Robert Prevost, the New Pope Leo XIV, on the Invasion of Ukraine” (5.11.2025), <https://www.outono.net/elentir/2025/05/11/the-words-of-robert-prevost-the-new-pope-leo-xiv-on-the-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

51 Charles COLLINS, “Pope Leo says NATO ‘has not started’ conflict with Russia”, *Crux* (2025.09.17), <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2025/09/pope-leo-says-nato-has-not-started-conflict-with-russia>.

52 CHRISTIAN, “Pope Leo”, <https://www.cathstan.org/us-world/pope-leo-meets-with-top-russian-orthodox-cleric-amid-war-strained-relations>. If the communiqué of the ROC cited here is to be trusted, Leo “expressed gratitude” to Patriarch Kirill and “noted the importance of developing relations with the Russian Orthodox Church.” For Cyril HOVORUN’s assessment of Pope Leo’s meeting with Anthony of Vokolamsk and his position: Комментарий для Вот Так о встрече митрополита Антония Севрюка и папы Льва XIV (July 27, 2025), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcK6767OHX8> (automatic translation can be enabled).

of the Vatican. Moscow on the other hand refused the Vatican's offer to act as a mediator of peace negotiations. (Ukraine appears to count on a mediation for the sake of returning abducted children and prisoners of war.<sup>53</sup>)

### **The World Council of Churches and the Invasion of Ukraine**

The WCC's response to the Russian aggression, from the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas to the full-scale invasion, has been feeble and flawed. After an early, appropriate reaction, most of the official statements failed to adequately distinguish between victim and perpetrator, to name the aggressor state and condemn the church supporting it. To this day, despite the scandalous statements of its hierarchy, the ROC remains a full member of the WCC and is held in the highest regard.

In the first weeks of the war, several statements were made, and public letters were exchanged. The reaction of the WCC was very prompt. Acting general secretary Ioan Sauca spoke out twice, already before the full-scale invasion (on January 25 and February 22), hoping that the war could be prevented.<sup>54</sup> On the day of the invasion, the WCC denounced the "use of deadly armed force to resolve disputes that could be resolved by dialogue", called for the protection of human life, an end to armed hostilities, respect for international law and borders, and dialogue.<sup>55</sup> On March 11, the WCC condemned the attack on the maternity hospital in Mariupol and on numerous civilian facilities (hospitals, kindergartens, schools, apartment

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53 "Ukraine Delegation Meets Pope Leo to Discuss Children Held in Russia", *WaPo* (November 21, 2025), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/11/21/pope-leo-ukraine-russia-children/>.

54 January 25: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-ukraine>; February 22: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-statement-on-ukraine>.

The WCC and its member churches urge peace for the people of Ukraine. Instead of geopolitical rivalry, the parties should consider the suffering war brought to children, women, and men. Prayers should be made for de-escalation and dialogue, all the more as members of the people of God are found on both sides of the confrontation. The February statement calls for respect for international law and borders, and for a return to the principles of the Minsk agreements. The latter request is naïve and harmful for Ukraine, because these did not prevent the invasion but only prepared the ground for the full-scale war.

55 <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-calls-for-an-immediate-end-to-the-current-armed-hostilities>.



buildings), the bombing of towns and villages, the violation of humanitarian law, and the attacks on civilians, which amounted to war crimes and crimes against humanity. It called for the protection of human dignity, a ceasefire, and the resolution of the conflict through negotiations.<sup>56</sup> These appeals did not change the determination of the aggressor state but were clear and correct.

Sauca's letter of March 2 to Patriarch Kirill was also sincere and fair. He pointed to the tragic situation in Ukraine caused by the war, the immense suffering, the loss of human life, and the flight of civilians fearing for their lives. As acting general secretary and as an Orthodox priest, he asked the patriarch to raise his voice on behalf of the suffering brothers and sisters, the majority of whom belonged to the Orthodox Church. He urged him to intercede with the authorities to stop the war, the bloodshed, and the suffering, and to make efforts for peace through dialogue and negotiations.<sup>57</sup> Kirill's response was cynical.<sup>58</sup> He claimed that Sauca's intercession would violate WCC documents establishing the independence of member churches and the principle of non-interference. Kirill dressed the Kremlin narrative in pious language. The conflict was not the fault of the Russian or the Ukrainian people, born from the same Kyivan baptismal font, united by their common faith, their saints, their prayers, and their common destiny. Western leaders were to blame for the expansion of NATO, threatening Russia, the arming of Ukraine, for imposing anti-Christian views on the Ukrainian population, the restriction of Russian language, and the Russophobia manifest in sanctions. It would be too long to discuss in detail the falsity of these accusations. But it is striking that the discourse of the head of the ROC is identical with that of Putin and his political propagandists.

On March 19 Olena Zelenska, the wife of the Ukrainian president, turned to Sauca in a moving personal letter, describing the unimaginable tragedy of the civilian population, of children, and asked that the WCC, a defender of peace, brotherhood, and social justice, to act as an advocate of Ukrainian victims, as

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56 <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-of-rev-prof-dr-ioan-sauca-wcc-acting-general-secretary-on-ukraine>.

57 <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/letter-to-his-holiness-kirill-patriarch-of-moscow-and-all-russia-russian-orthodox-church>

58 In Russian: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/response-by-hh-patriarch-kirill-of-moscow-to-rev-prof-dr-ioan-sauca>, in English: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/response-by-hh-patriarch-kirill-of-moscow-to-rev-prof-dr-ioan-sauca-english-translation>

Ukraine's active moral ally, a mediator of humanitarian aid. She asked the WCC to raise its prophetic voice, telling the world the truth about the war, condemning it and speaking up on behalf of the civilian population.<sup>59</sup>

The WCC did not find its prophetic voice. The subsequent statements of the acting general secretary (starting from the spring of 2022) up to those of the new general secretary are examples of bothsidesism. Following Zelenska's letter, Sauca addressed not only the leader of the aggressor state but also President Zelensky.<sup>60</sup> Speaking of the suffering and despair on both sides, highlighting the suffering of Russian mothers, wives, and children, he likened those defending their country and families with the army of the aggressor, and equated the suffering of civilians exposed to Russian terror with the that of the relatives of the soldiers of the aggressor state. Claiming that ending the conflict and finding a peaceful solution depended on both presidents, he implicitly blamed the victim for the unwillingness to yield to the aggressor. Unnamed actors allegedly attempted to create a new division of the world and a new world order, a process in which the two presidents were not to be instrumental, nor allow a family conflict to turn international. In this reading, the West (the USA) was to blame for the war and Putin was implicitly portrayed as having launched an armed conflict out of necessity. On April 19, the acting general secretary appealed to Patriarch Kirill, asking him, the spiritual father of millions of Orthodox believers in Russia and Ukraine, to use his moral authority to speak out and call for an Easter ceasefire.<sup>61</sup> Sauca complained that the WCC had unsuccessfully interceded with political leaders (i.e., the presidents of the two countries) for peaceful negotiations and a ceasefire. Here too, the plural suggests that both sides bore responsibility for the continuation of the conflict. In both letters Sauca adopted the Russian narrative of a fraternal, family conflict.

The inter-Orthodox consultation in Cyprus preceding the Karlsruhe assembly (organised by the WCC) is particularly problematic.<sup>62</sup> While condemning wars (!),

59 <https://silerenonpossum.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Olena-Zelenska-letter.pdf>

60 2022.03.13, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-acting-general-secretary-letter-to-the-presidents-of-russia-and-ukraine>.

61 <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-acting-general-secretary-letter-to-his-holiness-kirill-patriarch-of-moscow-and-all-russia-russian>

62 Report of the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation for the 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, 2022 "Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity" Organized by the World Council of Churches & Hosted by the Orthodox Church of

the report called “upon all the parties involved in the conflicts to do everything within their power for the urgent establishment of peace and for ensuring safety in Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the whole world” (§24). The text concealed the identity of the aggressor and implied that peace depended on the victim, moreover that Russia’s security was threatened. The report adopted the language of the “Russian world”, speaking of suffering brotherly people. Hilarion, at that time the metropolitan of the Orthodox Church in Hungary, belittled the suffering caused by Russia, using the misleading notion of a shared family and communion that included the Ukrainian Orthodox.<sup>63</sup> He spoke with astonishing cynicism about the peace-making and humanitarian actions of the ROC during the “armed confrontation” in Ukraine. While it is well-known that during the siege of Mariupol the Azovstal plant was the last refuge for civilians, that Russian forces blocked all humanitarian aid deliveries, and that after capitulation civilians were deported to Russia or to the occupied territories, being prevented from reaching free Ukrainian territory,<sup>64</sup> Hilarion claimed that the ROC rescued the civilians held in Azovstal and provided humanitarian assistance to those fleeing to Russia, including children.<sup>65</sup>

Ahead of the WCC General Assembly in Karlsruhe, the open support of the ROC for the aggression prompted multiple calls to the WCC to suspend the membership of this church. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, unequivocally condemned the war against Ukraine as “a nakedly aggressive, unprincipled act

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Cyprus, Paralimni, Cyprus, May 10-15, 2022, in Ioan SAUCA – Vasile-Octavian MIHOC (eds.), *Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Karlsruhe. Christ’s Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity*, Geneva: WCC, 2022, 9–18 (§24).

63 HILARION, “Reconciliation”, 54, 56.

64 Human Rights Watch, “We Had No Choice”. “Filtration” and the Crime of Forcibly Transferring Ukrainian Civilians to Russia (2022.09.01.), [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2022/09/ukraine0922\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2022/09/ukraine0922_web.pdf).

65 HILARION, “Reconciliation”, 56–59. The role of the ROC in the abduction of children from the occupied territories is well-known. Vladyslav HAVRYLOV, “The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Forcible Deportation of Ukrainian Children”, *Collaborative on Global Children’s Issues*, Georgetown University (26.10.2023), <https://globalchildren.georgetown.edu/responses/the-role-of-the-russian-orthodox-church-in-the-forcible-deportation-of-ukrainian-children>, Ed VULLIAMY, “‘We had to Hide Them’: How Ukraine’s ‘Kidnapped’ Children led to Vladimir Putin’s Arrest Warrant”, *The Guardian* (18.03.2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/18/how-ukraine-kidnapped-children-led-to-vladimir-putins-arrest-warrant-russia>.

of violence against a neighbouring Christian nation”, called the use of Christian language to justify it unacceptable, and criticised the leaders of the ROC for their silence on the slaughter of innocents. Williams argued that the ROC should be expelled from the WCC in view of its blessing the war.<sup>66</sup>

In an open letter to the leadership of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the WCC, German Lutheran theologians and historians pointed out that the presence of the ROC, spreading war propaganda, at the Karlsruhe assembly, contradicted the WCC’s conviction that war “is contrary to the will of God” (Amsterdam, 1948) and undermined the credibility of ecumenical efforts. The signatories urged the WCC and EKD to clarify their stance on the war and the behaviour of the ROC leadership, and to ensure that the perspective of the victims was heard. They requested the EKD to suspend the dialogue with the ROC, to strengthen ties with Ukrainian churches, and to focus on the suffering of the Ukrainian population. The WCC was asked to ensure the representation at the highest-level of both Ukrainian Orthodox churches and of Ukraine’s Protestant churches. The signatories urged the WCC to consider suspending the membership of the ROC.<sup>67</sup> The EKD and the WCC were demanded to “demonstrate their solidarity with the priests, pastors, deacons, and ordinary Christians who are risking their lives by resisting the war propaganda in Russia and elsewhere” (6), instead of focusing on the hierarchy of the ROC. This call points to a problem of the current ecumenical paradigm, namely the exclusive focus on institutional relations, on the hierarchy of the member and partner churches (specifically that of the ROC). This is true for the WCC, the EKD and the Catholic Church. This restriction of the ecumenical relations to the hierarchy of a church, notably when

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66 Jonathan LUXMOORE, “Rowan Williams Adds his Voice to Calls for the WCC to Eject Russian Orthodox Church”, *Church Times* (5.04.2022), <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/8-april/news/world/rowan-williams-adds-his-voice-to-calls-for-the-wcc-to-eject-russian-orthodox-church>.

67 “Brief an die EKD und ÖRK: Klare Zeichen gegenüber dem Moskauer Patriarchat setzen”, NÖK (3.06.2022); Katharina KUNTER, Ellen UEBERSCHÄR, “Open Letter to the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches”, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42.5 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2148.2364>. For the problematic response of the EKD to the war and to this initiative, on the German Ostpolitik of the 1970s, see the excellent analysis of Katharina KUNTER, “Still Sticking to the Big Brother. History, German Protestantism and the Ukrainian War”, *Studia UBB. Theologia Catholica Latina* 1 (2023) 71–91.

this ignores Christian teaching, ecumenical charters, human rights, and the most basic moral principles so blatantly, is highly problematic. This insight requires a reconsidering of the priorities and a focus of ecumenical relations on those church members and groups that are exposed to repression because of their faithfulness to Christian ethical principles.

In July 2022 an international group of theologians, scholars of religion, historians, and sociologists, belonging to various denominations, addressed a letter to the WCC, expressing their dismay at the tragic situation in Ukraine due to the unjust war waged by the RF, calling attention to the suffering of the civilian population, the war crimes, the devastation of the country and its cultural and religious heritage.<sup>68</sup> The justification of the military invasion by the ROC was incompatible with the position of the WCC on promoting a just peace and supporting the vulnerable.<sup>69</sup> The signatories urged the WCC to suspend the membership of the ROC until it clearly condemned the war against Ukraine, and asked the WCC to ensure the representation of all Ukrainian churches beginning with the Karlsruhe assembly.

The WCC did not respond to any of these calls. Before the Karlsruhe assembly, the Central Committee decided against the exclusion or suspension of the ROC, arguing that the WCC is a platform for dialogue and that exclusion would require a lengthy procedure. One of the largest delegations in Karlsruhe was that of the ROC. Lower rank representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox churches were invited as guests but could not contribute to the final statement or vote, whereas the ROC was part of the drafting committee, could criticise the final statement, and in spite of the bothsidesism that favoured Russia, voted against it.<sup>70</sup>

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68 “The International Network of Scientists Calls to Deprive the Russian Orthodox Church of Membership in the World Council of Churches”, *RISU* (27.07.2022); Andrew LOUTH, “Should the WCC Expel Patriarch Kirill?”, *Public Orthodoxy* (26.08.2022); Jonathan LUXMOORE, “WCC Again Urged to Suspend Russian Orthodox, as Conditions Worsen in Ukraine”, *Church Times* (29.07.2022). The initiative grew from an international conference organized by the Centre for Biblical Studies of the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj on *Religion and Politics in the Context of the War against Ukraine* (June 24-25, 2022).

69 *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (F&O Paper no. 214), 2013, §64, [https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/The\\_Church\\_Towards\\_a\\_common\\_vision.pdf](https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/The_Church_Towards_a_common_vision.pdf); Statement on the Way of Just Peace (10<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, 2013), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-the-way-of-just-peace>.

70 KUNTER, “Still Sticking to the Big Brother”, 82–89.

The Karlsruhe final statement addresses the war against Ukraine,<sup>71</sup> referring clearly to the Russian invasion and the suffering of Ukrainians and condemns the illegal and unjustified war in unequivocal terms. It rejects the misuse of religious language and authority to justify armed aggression and hatred. Yet, it contains several problematic assertions. The appeal to all parties involved in the conflict to respect international humanitarian law “especially with regard to the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, and for the humane treatment of prisoners of war” is an expression of bothsidesism, since the Ukrainian civilian population suffers in many ways from Russian occupation, and Russian cruelty toward POW is staggering. It is hard to understand the appeal addressed to church leaders in both Russia and Ukraine to raise their voices against the killing, destruction, deportation, and disenfranchisement of the Ukrainian population, as if the Ukrainian churches would have incited to these acts. It is also incomprehensible that while criticising the increasing militarisation and weapons proliferation, the Statement calls on European governments and the international community to promote peace and non-violent conflict resolution but does not call on Russia to end the war. In doing so, it ignores the fact that the war would end immediately with the withdrawal of the Russian army, moreover, it implicitly questions Ukraine’s right to self-defence, which depends precisely on the supply of weapons. Finally, the repeated claim that the WCC is a platform and safe space for encounter and dialogue for all member churches, a dialogue enabled by the presence of the ROC delegation, passes under silence the ROC’s grave responsibility in justifying the war. At the assembly, the Russian delegation made no constructive initiatives toward dialogue or reconciliation. Its representatives did not condemn the war and dismissed the statement as ridiculous.

The ecclesial situation in Ukraine, the war and the circumstances of the latest WCC general assembly have highlighted a further problem. While the WCC membership of the ROC is unquestioned, the membership of the Ukrainian churches remains unresolved to this day, primarily because of the opposition of the ROC. The UOC-MP could so far participate in WCC assemblies only as part of the Russian delegation. This meant that while the general tendency in Orthodox churches was to obtain recognised status (autocephaly) for national/

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71 “War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region”, Statement by the WCC 11<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Karlsruhe, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/war-in-ukraine-peace-and-justice-in-the-european-region>.

regional churches, the ROC has appropriated the right to decide over the churches representing millions of believers belonging to other countries, in view of its pretended “canonical territory”, which overlapped with that of the former Soviet Union.<sup>72</sup> After the full-scale invasion, on May 27, 2022, the UOC-MP declared its independence from the Moscow Patriarchate,<sup>73</sup> but its status remains unclear (neither “independence” nor “autonomy” are canonical categories). The MP, as reflected on the WCC’s official website, continues to treat it as part of the ROC, as a “self-governed church with the right of broad autonomy”.<sup>74</sup>

Meanwhile, the autocephalous OCU, recognised by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, could not become a member of the WCC due to the opposition of the MP, and the WCC was unwilling to overcome this obstacle. Again, institutional ecumenical considerations prevailed. After the outbreak of the war, the OCU was allowed to apply for membership, but no decision has been taken; in Karlsruhe it could participate only as an observer.<sup>75</sup> In June 2025, the Central Committee of the WCC met in Johannesburg, but did not approve the membership of the OCU (while admitting four Protestant churches whose number of members is well below that of the OCU).<sup>76</sup>

After the assembly, a WCC delegation headed by Ioan Sauca visited Moscow, for talks with Patriarch Kirill, in the hope that these discussions could advance peace and reconciliation, stop the bloodshed, and avert the danger of a nuclear catastrophe. The report of the visit on the WCC website created the impression

72 On the relatively recent emergence of the notion of canonical territory in ROC discourse: Jacob LASSIN, “Delineating Canonical Space in Russian Orthodox Church and Ukrainian Orthodox Church Online Media”, *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 67.1–2 (2025) 64–80 (65–66), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2025.2496059>.

73 FYLYPOVYCH, “Security Challenges”, 63–80.

74 Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), <https://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/russian-orthodox-church-moscow-patriarchate>.

75 Cyril HOVORUN, “The Institutionalized Ecumenism and the Ukrainian War: a Critical Approach”, *Religion in Praxis* (25.10.2022), <https://religioninpraxis.com/the-institutionalized-ecumenism-and-the-ukrainian-war-a-critical-approach/>.

76 The Apostolic Pentecostal Church International from Liberia, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (Malawi), the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, and the Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany (with 71956 members). Central Committee, June 2025, <https://www.oikoumene.org/events/central-committee-meeting>; also WCC welcomes four new member churches.



that the parties agreed in condemning the “holy war”.<sup>77</sup> However, this does not correspond to reality. As Hovorun notes, the patriarch did not speak of a holy war but of a SMO and of “metaphysical war”. He did not condemn the war; instead, he again portrayed Russia as a victim of political circumstances and dismissed the appeal by saying that churches should not add fuel to the fire.<sup>78</sup>

There is also a deeper problem with the position of the WCC and other ecclesial bodies, which Katharina Kunter calls the “dialogue dogma”.<sup>79</sup> When a church is entirely refractory to dialogue in the true sense of the word and its hierarchy is so thoroughly politicised that it becomes an instrument of an aggressor state, openly promoting war propaganda, encouraging a war that leads to thousands of deaths, no meaningful dialogue can take place. More seriously, overlooking the grave responsibility of the ROC and pandering to it at the cost of truth distorts the role of ecumenical bodies and ecumenical relations. Ecumenical bodies become irrelevant if not outright responsible for condoning such attitude. As Hovorun remarks, by unconditionally permitting the ROC to participate in the Karlsruhe general assembly and through the visit to Moscow, the WCC allowed itself to be instrumentalised, offering a broad international platform for the war narratives of the Kremlin. It did not succeed however in promoting genuine dialogue; conversely, it discredited the ecumenical movement.<sup>80</sup>

77 “His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, WCC acting general secretary meet in Moscow, agreeing that war cannot be holy”, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/his-holiness-patriarch-kirill-wcc-acting-general-secretary-meet-in-moscow-agreeing-that-war-cannot-be-holy>.

78 HOVORUN, “Institutionalized Ecumenism”, *ibid.* Also “WCC Communique: His Holiness Patriarch Kirill Meets with WCC Acting General Secretary”, (19 October 2022), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-communique-his-holiness-patriarch-kirill-meets-with-wcc-acting-general-secretary>.

79 KUNTER, “Still Sticking to the Big Brother”, 86.

80 HOVORUN, “Institutionalized Ecumenism”, *ibid.* (he also notes that the WCC failed to give the ROC the opportunity to assume responsibility, repent, and purify itself, because it remained silent about its complicity in supporting the war); *Id.*, “How to Not Build a ‘Potemkin Village’ of Ecumenism and Peacemaking”, *NÖK* (15.06.2023), <https://noek.info/hintergrund/2949-how-to-not-build-a-potemkin-village-of-ecumenism-and-peacemaking>; Petr KRATOCHVÍL, “Nesoulad v církvích podkopává jejich morální autoritu během války”, *Proboha!* (23.12.2024), <https://proboha.cz/magazin/vyber-redakce/petr-kratochvil/2024/12/nesoulad-v-cirkvich-podkopava-jejich-moralni-autoritu-behem-valky/>.

The same occurred during the visit of the new WCC general secretary, Jerry Pillay, to Moscow (following that to Kyiv) in May 2023, where he essentially sought to ingratiate himself with the MP. During the meetings and in the subsequent statements, he echoed the Russian narrative. He expressed concern about the alleged discrimination against the UOC-MP and the restriction of religious freedom (despite the position of the Lutheran president of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations), yet he failed to address the grave violations of religious freedom in the occupied territories and in Russia. Speaking of nationalism in vague, impersonal terms, he did not raise his voice against open Russian imperialism. Since the delegation was not given permission, they did not visit Ukrainian prisoners of war or abducted children. Using Hovorun's fitting metaphor, the acts of the WCC amount to "a Potemkin village of ecumenism and peacemaking".<sup>81</sup>

The WCC needed two weeks to respond to the decree of the WRPC (*The Present and Future of the Russian World*, discussed above), which called the Russian invasion a holy war.<sup>82</sup> The statement signed by Jerry Pillay claimed that the notion of "holy war" was incompatible with Patriarch Kirill's earlier statement, according to which "holy war" referred to a metaphysical war, not to an armed conflict, and that a war cannot be holy. Further, so the WCC, the decree of the RWPC contradicted the condemnation of the war by the final report of the Karlsruhe general assembly, drafted with the participation of the ROC.<sup>83</sup> The WCC rightly rejected the idea that the invasion of Ukraine could be regarded as the national liberation struggle of the Russian people "against the criminal Kyiv regime and the so-called collective West behind it", as well as the claim that Ukraine should fall within Russia's exclusive sphere of influence. At the same time, the surprise of the WCC at these positions, as well as the request to Kirill to clarify whether this decree expressed indeed the position of the ROC, reflect a striking naivety.

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81 HOVORUN, "How to Not Build a 'Potemkin Village'", <https://noek.info/hintergrund/2949-how-to-not-build-a-potemkin-village-of-ecumenism-and-peacemaking>. He discusses the hate speech proffered by Leonid Gorbachev, sanctioned by Ukraine, and the fact that Mikhail Gundyayev, Kirill's nephew, continues to work at the WCC headquarters in Geneva.

82 KRATOCHVÍL, "Nesoulad", <https://proboha.cz/magazin/vyber-redakce/petr-kratochvil/2024/12/nesoulad-v-cirkvich-podkopava-jejich-moralni-autoritu-behem-valky/>.

83 WCC Statement on Decree of XXV World Russian People's Council (12.04.2024), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-statement-on-decree-of-xxv-world-russian-peoples-council>.

Numerous statements by Kirill made his stance entirely clear. The open letters mentioned earlier, which called for the suspension of the ROC membership in the WCC, clearly drew the attention of the governing bodies of the WCC to the fact that the ROC openly supported the military aggression against Ukraine. The urgent clarifying meeting Pillay requested from Kirill in April 2024 did not materialise. (Kirill had proposed a preliminary meeting, with the participation of the representatives of the ROC at the WCC.)<sup>84</sup>

At the meeting in Johannesburg in June 2025 of the WCC Central Committee issued a “Statement on Threats to Peace and People’s Security: A Kairos Moment for Just Peace” which addressed a number of military conflicts, including the war in Ukraine.<sup>85</sup> It detailed the increasing number of Russian missile attacks on civilians and infrastructure, mentioning the number of victims of the largest attacks on Kryvyi Rih, Sumy and Kyiv between April and June 2025, and mentioned that many others were recorded on an almost daily basis; these were “wrongdoings of the Russian authorities in their ongoing invasion and war against the Ukrainian people”. However, in the spirit of bothsidesism, it also noted with concern the reports of attacks impacting passenger trains in Bryansk and Kursk (Russia) in late May and early June, attributed to Ukraine, without mentioning that Russia used the routes for military purposes, and without checking the truth of the Russian reports. Thus, the WCC equalled these events with Russia’s deliberate, widespread and constant attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, claiming hundreds of victims (the list could be continued with further horrific attacks up to the present day).<sup>86</sup>

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84 “Report of the WCC General Secretary Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay at the WCC Executive Committee Meeting Convening in Paralimni, Cyprus, 21–26 November 2024”, 18–20, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/report-of-the-wcc-general-secretary-at-the-executive-committee-in-paralimni-cyprus>.

85 24 June 2025, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-threats-to-peace-and-peoples-security-a-kairos-moment-for-just-peace>.

86 See the critique of Cyril Hovorun, “Der ÖRK und Russlands Krieg: Komplizenschaft durch vorsätzliche Blindheit”, *NÖK* (2.07.2025), also “The World Council of Churches and Ukraine: Between Condemnation and Complicity”, *One Church* (July 1, 2025), <https://ecerkva.com/en/news/1384-the-world-council-of-churches-and-ukraine-between-condemnation-and-complicity>. (He details the circumstances of the train accident in Bryansk, showing that the WCC was not concerned with verifying the report.)

The lack of moral clarity, the conciliatory, even friendly attitude of the WCC toward the ROC, shows that the most important institution of the ecumenical movement is profoundly politicised and vulnerable to (church-)political manipulation to such an extent that it is unable to speak out and act in the spirit of truth and justice. This has to do partly with the tremendous influence of the ROC within the WCC both at the level of leadership structures (having five representatives in the Central Committee) and informally, through Orthodox churches sympathetic to Moscow, other churches with traditional pro-Russian sympathies, and through Russia's presence in the global South. This is why the WCC has reacted so weakly to Patriarch Kirill's discourse legitimising the war. Further, the representatives of the various churches are not free from political and ideological prejudices and misconceptions which Russian propaganda has been spreading for decades. These include the negative perception of Ukraine, the blame of the West (the US, NATO) for the Russian invasion, and the claim that the allegedly decadent West is attacking Christian values.<sup>87</sup> Ultimately, the WCC has proved to be just as powerless in handling crises linked to wars as the UN in resolving international political crises.

### **The European Churches, the Charta Oecumenica (2025), and a Statement**

The new Ecumenical Charter addresses war briefly, in chapter 11 ("Striving for Peace and Reconciliation"), in one paragraph.<sup>88</sup> Chapter 13 ("Journeying with Migrants, Refugees and Displaced People") may also touch on the subject implicitly, although war is not mentioned among the many factors driving migration.

In a time when a European country faces an unprecedented aggression since almost four years (eleven years, considering the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas war waged by Russia since 2014), the discussion of war and peace is

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87 On the way politics are interwoven in the responses of the churches and the claim of remaining apolitical conceals clear political views and decisions: Stefan KUBE, "'To Put Politics Aside'? Reflections on Theological and Non-Theological Factors Within Ecumenical Dialogue', in Yury P. AVVAKUMOV – Oleh TURIY (eds.), *The Churches and the War: Religion, Religious Diplomacy, and Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine*, Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2024, 139–152.

88 Conference of European Churches and Council of European Bishops' Conferences, *Charta Oecumenica Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe* (2025), <https://www.ccee.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/11/Charta-oecumenica-PDF-con-guideline-A4-final2.pdf#page=5.07>

abstract and amounts to a set of platitudes. Wars are ineffective in resolving controversies between nations and non-violence is always preferable. Churches should pray for peace as a divine gift and actively work to build it every day through justice and love. The Charta evokes Christ's call for love for enemies and endorses reconciliation by offering and seeking forgiveness. Working for peace means creating spaces for dialogue among people of good will, laying the groundwork for justice and peaceful coexistence.

The only merit of the chapter consists in the acknowledgement of the right to self-defence (though not with these specific words): while wars are ineffective in solving conflicts between nations, the signatories "recognise that we are sometimes confronted with the tragic reality of choosing between allowing violence to continue or using force to end it".

The churches commit themselves to promoting peace, creating spaces of encounter, undeterred by the war, using religious resources to foster healing and peace, and actively supporting efforts toward reconciliation. The idea of spaces of encounter and dialogue, mentioned twice, echoes the response of the WCC about the reason the ROF was not suspended or excluded for supporting the Russian aggression.

The Charta has nothing to say about the injustice of the wars of aggression, about the responsibility and the accountability of the perpetrators (even if only as a general principle), and it does not acknowledge the suffering of the victims of the war. The commitments do not encompass solidarity with and support for the victims of military aggression. The commandment of love for enemies is extrapolated without any further discussion to international military conflicts. The emphasis on reconciliation without any distinction between perpetrator and victim ultimately sustains injustice and undermines the human dignity of the victims.

A very different statement was published recently by the participants in a conference organised by the Conference of European Churches [CEC] in collaboration with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Orthodox Church of Finland, *Churches Confront the 'Russian World' Ideology* (Helsinki, 1–3 December 2025). The conference has joined around ninety church leaders, and representatives of churches, national councils of churches and scholars.<sup>89</sup> The final statement, on "Resisting

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89 Conference Statement Shares How Churches Can Confront "Russian World" Ideology (8.12.2025), <https://ceceurope.org/conference-statement-shares-how-churches-can-confront-russian-world-ideology>.

Empire, Promoting Peace” is particularly clear in critiquing the unprovoked war against Ukraine and its ideological backing, the ideology of the ‘Russian world’, and in addressing the theological problems related to the use of this ideology to back the war. The statement formulates clear commitments on resisting imperial ideology and building peace and reconciliation.<sup>90</sup> Its limited impact, however, is related to the fact that the Statement is not an official statement of the CEC but reflects the position of the church representatives and scholars attending.

## Conclusions

The war against Ukraine, the most terrible armed confrontation on the European continent after World War II, has revealed the failure of the churches and of the institutional ecumenical movement in addressing a war of aggression. Well-entrenched concepts, like promoting change through integration (the motor behind the Ostpolitik), neutrality, the myth of (institutional) dialogue allegedly capable of solving all conflicts, pacifism and its younger and more subtle version, just peace (meant to replace the concept of just war), have all failed.

In most cases, church leadership and ecumenical bodies have proved unable to respond to the most basic expectation: to distinguish clearly between victim and aggressor.

Bothsidesism, the idea that responsibility and suffering are equally present on both sides, is one of the major problems, as it transfers responsibility, at least in part, onto the victim, and exonerates the perpetrator (who often remains unnamed). By emphasising the suffering of the aggressor state, it minimises the suffering of the innocent victims and the role of the perpetrator. Bothsidesism allows thereby the continuation of aggression.

Religious clichés, like the repeated appeals to dialogue, peace, brotherhood, and reconciliation, do not offer an adequate response to a war of aggression. In the absence of justice and fairness, these commendable principles and values turned to be empty slogans.

The churches and ecumenical bodies have failed to realise that ecumenical relations cannot be equated with diplomatic affairs engaging the hierarchy of a

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<sup>90</sup> *Resisting Empire, Promoting Peace: Churches Confront the ‘Russian World’ Ideology. Conference Statement*, [https://ceceurope.org/storage/app/media/2025-news/Helsinki%20Conference%20statement\\_final.pdf](https://ceceurope.org/storage/app/media/2025-news/Helsinki%20Conference%20statement_final.pdf)

given church, but must consider the faith, experiences, and suffering of the entire church, notably of its persecuted members. Further, as important as diplomacy would be, the churches cannot act as political institutions, without a clear, truthful stance on a war of aggression.

A change of paradigm in institutional ecumenical relations is direly needed. However, the stance of most churches (apart from the Ecumenical Patriarchate) and of the major ecumenical bodies over the past four years leaves little room for optimism. For the moment, some reason for hope can be found only in the statements of certain church representatives and groups of scholars.

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## HOSPITAL PASTORAL CARE AS THE REALIZATION OF THE CHURCH'S MISSIONARY IDENTITY IN LIGHT OF THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

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**Abstract.** This article examines hospital pastoral care as a practical expression of the missionary identity of the Catholic Church in the light of the ecclesiological paradigm shift that emerged with Vatican II. Based on the documents of the Council, this work shows how the missiology, ecclesiology, lay participation, and ecumenical perspective promoted by Vatican II have contributed to a new conception of contemporary hospital pastoral care. I explore the way the new ecclesiological paradigm reflected in the conciliar documents and its reception in Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* have shaped the understanding and practice of hospital pastoral care as part of the mission of the Catholic Church.

**Keywords:** hospital pastoral care, Second Vatican Council, *Evangelii Gaudium*, missionary identity, healing ministry, involvement of the laity, ecumenical cooperation

This article examines the way the ecclesiology, missiology, Christology of Vatican II documents, and the conciliar vision of lay participation in the mission of the Church, as well as their reception in the *Evangelii gaudium* of Pope Francis have reshaped the mission of the Catholic Church to the sick, – especially as manifested today in pastoral care and hospital chaplaincy. The inquiry is not merely theoretical but emerges from urgent contemporary needs, such as the spiritual needs of patients, family members, and healthcare workers.<sup>2</sup> This ministry

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- 2 George FITCHETT, Steve NOLAN, *Spiritual Care in Practice: Case Studies in Healthcare Chaplaincy*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015.

Article history: Received 10.04.2025; Revised 29.08.2025; Accepted 10.09.2025.  
Available online: 22.12.2025; Available print: 30.01.2026.

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attempts to respond to contemporary challenges that include cultural pluralism, health inequalities, pandemics, and spiritual hunger amid secularisation. In this context, the presence of the Church among the sick takes on renewed significance. The practice of hospital pastoral care allows the Church to be truly present in the world, particularly on those “peripheries” (EG 20–24) where Pope Francis repeatedly called her to encounter Christ in those who suffer.<sup>3</sup>

This study intends to highlight of those aspects of the teaching and theology of the Second Vatican Council that define the current practice of hospital pastoral care. The documents of Vatican II<sup>4</sup> provided a renewed theological vision that reshaped the way the Church understands its mission, its healing ministry, its relationship to the world, to other denominations and the role of all the baptised. By returning to the Gospels as the sources of ecclesial life, the Council reminded the Church that caring for the sick is not an optional charitable activity but flows from the very nature of the Church.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the conciliar documents, I look at the ecclesial paradigm change proposed by Pope Francis in the *Evangelii gaudium*.

### The ecclesiology of Vatican II and the missionary identity of the Church

Vatican II effected a profound shift in the self-understanding of the Church, moving toward a more biblical and communal vision.<sup>6</sup> Central to this transformation was the definition of the Church as the People of God (LG 9–17). This ecclesiology is intrinsically missionary: the Church exists not for itself but to serve God’s saving plan for the world. Stephen B. Bevans goes even further, arguing that the dogmatic

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- 3 Therese M. LYSAUGHT, “Las Periferias y El Pan: Pope Francis, the Theology of the People, and the Conversion of Catholic Bioethics”, *Perspectivas Teológica Bioética* 51.3 (2019) 421–442.
  - 4 I have used the English translation of the conciliar documents available on the Vatican website: *Documents of the Second Vatican Council*, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/index.htm](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm).
  - 5 Therese M. LYSAUGHT, “Bringing Christ to Christ: The sacramental and trinitarian heart of the Church’s healing ministry”, in Alexander RÖDLACH, *SVD Health Professionals Participating in God’s Mission to Heal*, Rome: 2023, 130–144.
  - 6 Ormond RUSH, “Roman Catholic Ecclesiology from the Council of Trent to Vatican II and Beyond”, in Paul AVIS (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 263–292.

constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, “opens with a missionary vision”<sup>7</sup>. In this interpretation, the Church appears as an instrument whose very existence derives from its missionary commitment, namely its service, witness, and proclamation of the Gospel. As *Ad Gentes* affirms, the Church is “missionary by her very nature” (AG 2), sent forth to make the Kingdom of God present in every dimension of human existence (AG 1, 12, 42).

The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) further develops this vision by calling the Church to be present in the world, particularly where human dignity is threatened and where suffering is most acute. The opening words resonate profoundly: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” (GS 1). This statement asserts the radical solidarity of the Church with suffering humanity. The Church cannot remain indifferent to or distant from the concrete realities of human pain; rather, recognising these realities and responding to them defines the very identity of the Church. Hospital pastoral care can be seen therefore as a concrete embodiment of this principle, as chaplains and pastoral caregivers enter into the lived experience of patients, families, and healthcare workers, manifesting the care of the Church in areas marked by vulnerability and suffering.

In the vision of *Ad Gentes*, the missionary identity of the Church is inseparable from an attitude of deep solidarity. As Bevans shows: “Witness begins with solidarity.”<sup>8</sup> Those who carry out the mission of the Church are called to enter into the concrete reality of those they serve and to listen respectfully to their cultural, social, and religious experience. This missionary commitment must be characterised by an unwavering respect for human dignity and must show solidarity with all people, regardless of their social status, religious affiliation, or cultural background. This solidarity also includes caring for those who suffer and are in need, as AG 12 and AG 21 emphasise.<sup>9</sup>

Hospital chaplaincy embodies this paradigm particularly vividly. Pastoral care providers stand by the suffering, their relatives, and healthcare workers in times of illness and mourning. Pastoral care ministry enables patients to experience that

7 Stephen BEVANS, “Revisiting Mission at Vatican II: Theology and Practice for Today’s Missionary Church”, *Theological Studies* 74.2 (2013) 261–283.

8 BEVANS, *Revisiting Mission*, 261–283.

9 BEVANS, *Revisiting Mission*, 261–283.

they are not alone, that someone listens with love and acceptance, that they can share their spiritual anxieties and dilemmas, that someone accompanies them in their suffering and search for meaning, and that, when desired, someone prays with them.<sup>10</sup> Their presence and service bring this solidarity to life at the sickbed. In this pastoral activity, solidarity takes on a tangible form: the support of hospital pastoral caregivers, regardless of their worldview, religious identity, or social status. This ministry makes God's love concrete and real, fulfilling the mission of the Church to be "the universal sacrament of salvation" (LG 48).

According to Klára Csiszár and László Németh SVD, the missionary outreach of the Catholic Church entails not only a geographic movement but an existential one: it means going forth toward the poor, the wounded, to all those who suffer.<sup>11</sup> In this perspective, the traditional *missio ad gentes* evolves into a *missio ad vulnera* – a mission directed toward the wounds of humanity – which is always carried out as a *missio in misericordia*,<sup>12</sup> a mission embodied in mercy. Such mission is therefore vital to the identity of the Church while simultaneously exerting a healing and liberating effect on human life.<sup>13</sup>

Pope Francis' vision, articulated in *Evangelii Gaudium*, has shaped the image of a Church "which goes forth" (EG 20–24), leaving behind its comfort zone, to encounter Christ on the existential peripheries (EG 183, 207, 275). Francis underscores that the missionary identity of the Church is inseparable from this dynamic movement of *going forth*, modelled on the ministry of Jesus. Christ's call to "go and make disciples" (Matt 28,19–20) requires the Church to leave behind familiar structures in order to reach the geographical and existential *peripheries* – those places marked by suffering, exclusion, or spiritual abandonment. A truly

10 Khadijeh HATAMIPOUR et al., "Spiritual Needs of Cancer Patients: A Qualitative Study", *Indian Journal of Palliative Care* 21 (2015) 61–67; Ana Claudia MESQUITA et al., "Spiritual Needs of Patients with Cancer in Palliative Care: An Integrative Review", *Current Opinion in Supportive and Palliative Care* 11.4 (2017) 334–340; Andrew OLDNALL, "A Critical Analysis of Nursing: Meeting the Spiritual Needs of Patients", *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 23 (1996) 138–144.

11 László NÉMETH SVD, Klára CSISZÁR, *Gyógyító szeretet. Bevezetés a katolikus missziológiába*, Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 2022.

12 Klára CSISZÁR, "Filmrezension: Missionsverständnis nach Papst Franziskus im Lichte des Neuen Films von Wim Wenders", *Studia UBB. Theologia Catholica Latina* 63.1 (2018) 91–97.

13 CSISZÁR, "Filmrezension", 91–97.

missionary Church takes the initiative because God has first taken the initiative in loving humanity (1 John 4,19). Following Jesus' example, missionary disciples step forward boldly, seek those who have drifted away, accompany the wounded, and offer hospitality to those on society's margins (EG 20–24). This outward movement is not optional but constitutive of discipleship, revealing the Church as a community that bears fruit through compassionate presence and active engagement with the most vulnerable.<sup>14</sup>

This missionary dynamic, while given new emphasis by Pope Francis, is rooted in the ecclesiology of Vatican II and ultimately in the ministry of Christ. Understanding hospital pastoral care through the lens of the Church “which goes forth” reveals its profound theological significance as an embodiment of the missionary identity of the Church. While the ministry of the Church involves a service to the world, the Church is also enriched by the world (GS 44). Through its service to the sick, the Church fulfils its mission and reveals its identity even more clearly.

### Returning to the healing ministry of Jesus

One of Vatican II's most significant contributions was its return to Scripture, particularly the Gospels, as the primary source for understanding the life and mission of the Church. This *ressourcement*,<sup>15</sup> this return to the sources enabled a recovery of Jesus' own practice as the normative pattern for ecclesial life. In the Gospels, healing is not incidental to Jesus' ministry but central to it.<sup>16</sup>

The healing ministry stands as one of the most enduring expressions of the identity of the Church, deeply rooted in the life and mission of Jesus Christ. Throughout the Gospel narratives, Jesus' encounters with the sick reveal not merely acts of compassion but the very essence of the Kingdom of God breaking into human history. This healing dimension of Christ's mission was not meant to cease with his earthly ministry; rather, it was explicitly entrusted to his disciples and, through them, to the Church.<sup>17</sup> Crucially, Jesus entrusted this healing ministry

14 Klara A. CSISZAR, “Missionary. Existential. Spiritual. Perspectives for the Work of the Church after the Pandemic”, *Studia UBB. Theologia Catholica Latina* 67.1 (2022) 5–16.

15 Gerald O'COLLINS, “*Ressourcement* and Vatican II”, in Gabriel FLYNN and Paul D. MURRAY (eds), *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2011, 372–391.

16 LYSAGHT, *Bringing Christ*, 130–144.

17 LYSAGHT, *Bringing Christ*, 130–144.

to his disciples. In sending out the Twelve, he explicitly commanded them to “heal the sick” alongside proclaiming the Kingdom (Luke 9,2; Matt 10,8). This mandate establishes healing as constitutive of apostolic mission. It is not temporary but foundational, defining the mission of the Church for all time.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, the healing ministry of the Church, particularly as expressed in contemporary hospital pastoral care, is not peripheral but central to missionary identity. Rooted in Jesus’ own ministry and explicitly entrusted to his disciples, care for the sick has characterised Christian communities from their origins.<sup>19</sup>

Therese Lysaught points out that the decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* also contains a reference to seeing Jesus in our fellow human beings, in those in need (AA 8).<sup>20</sup> The Christological perspective that supports this insight is based on Matt 25,31-46 and defines the Church’s attitude towards the sick. In this eschatological discourse, Jesus identifies himself with those who suffer: “I was sick, and you visited me” (Matt 25,36).<sup>21</sup> This identification results in a profound theological shift: the sick are not merely the beneficiaries of charitable activities, but in a mysterious way, the presence of Christ becomes experiential through them. This Christological perspective radically transforms the Church’s understanding of illness, suffering, and the vocation of those who care for the sick. Pastoral care is not merely a work of mercy toward others, but an encounter with the Lord himself, who is present in those who suffer.<sup>22</sup> The sick person becomes a *locus sacramentum* – as the Eucharist – a place for encountering the crucified and risen Lord.<sup>23</sup> This theological inversion has profound implications for pastoral care. It means that when chaplains enter a patient’s room, they are not merely bringing Christ to the sick; they are encountering Christ already present in the sick, the persons who suffer.<sup>24</sup>

### **Involvement of lay believers in the mission of the Church**

Among Vatican II’s most consequential insights was its affirmation that all the baptised share in Christ’s threefold office of priest, prophet, and king (LG 31), and

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18 Lysaught, *Bringing Christ*, 130–144.

19 Lysaught, *Bringing Christ*, 130–144.

20 Lysaught, *Bringing Christ*, 130–144.

21 Lysaught, *Bringing Christ*, 130–144.

22 Lysaught, “Las Periferias”, 421–442.

23 Lysaught, “Las Periferias”, 421–442.

24 Lysaught, *Bringing Christ*, 130–144.

therefore laity participate in the mission of the Church (AA 3-4).<sup>25</sup> This teaching overcame centuries of clericalism that had largely restricted active ministry to the ordained. The Council proclaimed unambiguously: “For this reason the laity, dedicated to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvelously called and wonderfully prepared so that ever more abundant fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them” (LG 34). This calling extends to all dimensions of church life, including the ministry of the Church in hospitals and hospital pastoral care.

Within the missiological framework outlined above, the Second Vatican Council formulated a fundamental principle: works of charity – including care for the sick – are not secondary activities but constitute the “inalienable duty and right” of the Church (AA 8). More specifically, indicating that service to those who suffer occupies a place of honour in the mission of the Church, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* addresses care for the sick as a form of lay apostolate, and affirms that “some works by their very nature can become especially vivid expressions of this charity” (AA 8). This also means that lay healthcare workers participate in the healing ministry of the Church.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, this can also be interpreted explicitly from the perspective of pastoral care. Lay pastoral caregiver can also carry out the mission of the Church and represent the Church in a hospital setting. This means that hospital pastoral care is provided not only by hospital chaplains and monastics, but also by lay professionals, as common today. Lay ministries allow the Church to be present in many secular healthcare institutions.<sup>27</sup> This does not question the indispensable character of the priestly ministry, since in crises caused by illness and suffering<sup>28</sup> the need for the sacraments, for confession, the Eucharist, and the anointing of the sick, becomes even more pressing. These two components of hospital chaplaincy – priestly ministry and pastoral care – complement each other fruitfully in practice.

The increasing involvement of lay pastoral caregivers represents a significant development in contemporary hospital pastoral care practice. While the primary task of hospital chaplains is to respond to requests for the sacraments, lay pastoral caregivers also play an important role in providing individual pastoral care. This

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25 BEVANS, *Revisiting Mission*, 261–283.

26 LYSAGHT, *Bringing Christ*, 130–144.

27 Megan BEST *et al.*, “This Ward Has No Ears: Role of the Pastoral Care Practitioner in the Hospital Ward” *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* 28.2 (2022) 179–193.

28 Paul M. ZULEHNER: *Übergänge. Pastoral zu den Lebenswenden*, Wien: Patmos, 1990.



cooperation provides even more space for responding to diverse spiritual needs and for ecumenical cooperation.<sup>29</sup> Their service embodies the vision of Vatican II regarding the mission of the laity and their presence in the world as leaven. In hospital settings characterized by religious and cultural pluralism, lay pastoral caregivers navigate complex landscapes, offering spiritual support that respects diverse backgrounds while witnessing to Christian faith through their attitudes and actions.<sup>30</sup> Their presence demonstrates that participation in the mission and healing ministry of the Church is not only the responsibility of priests and religious orders but the vocation of every baptised person called to serve suffering humanity.

Pope Francis invited those who participate in the mission of the Church to do it in a synodal way. Synodality, “walking together”, involves recognising that the entire People of God shares responsibility for the mission of the Church. Our task is to build the Kingdom of God together, through dialogue, finding the role of different charisms and ministries in this process.<sup>31</sup> The recent Synod on Synodality has shown that a synodal practice involves mission, communion, and participation, – three dimensions that must always operate together.<sup>32</sup>

In hospital pastoral care, synodality means recognizing that ministry to the sick is not only the responsibility of the chaplain but flows from the whole Christian community and requires active participation from lay members. Synodality also means that the Church is committed to solidarity, dialogue, and mutual learning with people of different religious traditions and worldviews. This approach is particularly important in hospital pastoral care, where the effectiveness of this ministry is determined by interdisciplinary cooperation with healthcare professionals and constructive partnership with different denominations.

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29 Carmen SCHUHMANN, Annelieke DAMEN, “Representing the Good: Pastoral Care in a Secular Age”, *Pastoral Psychology* 67 (2018) 405–417.

30 Simon PENG-KELLER, *Healthcare Chaplaincy as Specialised Spiritual Care. The Christian Call for Healing in a Global Health Context*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2024.

31 XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. *A Synodal Church in Mission*. First Session. Synthesis Report, 2023, Introduction, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf> (entry: 5 August 2024).

32 XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. *A Synodal Church in Mission*, Chapter 1, “Synodality: Experience and Understanding,” subsection “Convergences”.

## Ecumenical and interreligious dimensions

Contemporary hospitals are, by their very nature, spaces characterised by pluralism in terms of worldviews and religions.<sup>33</sup> Hospitals – with the exception of those maintained by churches – are secular institutions where patients are viewed from a medical perspective. Patients, relatives and healthcare professionals bring their own religious and sociocultural backgrounds with them,<sup>34</sup> so hospitals may be inhabited by Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and people without religious affiliation. This religious diversity makes hospitals a privileged place for ecumenical and interfaith encounters. The commitment of Vatican II to ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) and interreligious dialogue (*Nostra Aetate*) is put into practice in hospital pastoral care, where Catholic pastoral caregivers and hospital chaplains are in daily contact with members of other denominations.

Interfaith dialogue presents both greater challenges and remarkable opportunities. While preserving their Christian and denominational identity, pastoral caregivers often accompany patients of other faiths or no faith, respecting everyone's beliefs in accordance with the norms professional ethics, while providing authentic spiritual support. This requires spiritual maturity and pastoral sensitivity, neither imposing the Catholic faith nor abandoning it, but bearing witness to Christ through pastoral presence and service. Referring to non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate* teaches that the Catholic Church “rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions” (NA 2), recognising that God's grace is at work beyond the visible boundaries of the Church. Hospital pastoral care becomes a space where this recognition takes concrete form, as pastoral workers collaborate with colleagues from other religious traditions and respect the spiritual resources that patients bring with them from their own faith communities.

The daily practice of hospital chaplaincy shows that ecumenical cooperation and the sharing of tasks between chaplains and hospital pastors belonging to different denominations are useful for effective pastoral care.<sup>35</sup> When representatives of

33 George FITCHETT *et al.*, “Spiritual Care: The Role of Health Care Chaplaincy in Spirituality, Religiousness and Health”, in Lucchetti GIANCARLO *et al.*, *Religion, Spirituality and Health: A Social Scientific Approach* 4, Cham: Springer, 2019, 183–206.

34 Orsolya PÁL-JAKAB, Júlia FARKAS, “A betegek spirituális szükségletei és a kórházi lelkigondozás szerepvállalása”, *Studia Theologica Transsylvaniensia* 27.1 (2024) 224–244.

35 Hans DUESBERG, “Ökumenische Zusammenarbeit im Krankenhaus”, in Michael KLESSMANN (ed.), *Handbuch der Krankenhausseelsorge*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013, 254–265.

different denominations coordinate their work – dividing up clinical units, supporting each other's activities, and referring patients to each other – they are able to make pastoral care more accessible and provide higher quality care. Such cooperation improves accessibility for patients, relatives, and healthcare workers, as chaplains can focus on a specific department rather than trying to cover the entire institution on their own. In addition, ecumenical teamwork creates a professional community in which supervision, case discussion, and mutual support are realised, strengthening both pastoral competence and the quality of pastoral presence.<sup>36</sup> This cooperation embodies the hope of the Council for Christian unity, demonstrating that what unites Christians – commitment to serving suffering humanity in Christ's name – outweighs the divisions that separate them.

## Conclusions

This article examined hospital pastoral care in light of the Second Vatican Council as a practical expression of the missionary identity of the Church, reflecting on the current practice of hospital pastoral care along the four central dimensions of the teachings of Vatican II. This study shows that the theology of the Council still contributes to the pastoral activities of the Church in hospitals, and within that, to contemporary hospital pastoral care.

First, the ecclesiology outlined in *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes* presents the Church as fundamentally missionary in her nature. This mission cannot be understood only in geographical terms but extends to every dimension of human life. Hospital pastoral care embodies, puts into practice, this missiology of Vatican II, by rendering the mission of the Church to the sick present and concrete.

One of the main paradigms of the Council is the return to Scriptures, as part of the larger process of *ressourcement*. The Church is called to ground her praxis in Jesus' ministry. The Gospels shows that the healing ministry is at the centre of Jesus' activity. Healing is closely linked to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God (Luke 9,2; Matt 10,8). Hospital pastoral care is deeply rooted in Jesus'

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36 Orsolya PÁL-JAKAB, Júlia, FARKAS, A kórházi lelkigondozás ökumenikus szemlélete és többdimenziós emberképe, in Mónika KRASZNAY (ed.), *Pasztorálpszichológiai Tanulmányok I. A pasztorálpszichológia hozadéka és kihívásai ma*, Budapest: Pünkösdi Teológia Főiskola, 2024, 124–46.

healing ministry, which he entrusted to his disciples as their mission, alongside the proclamation of the Good News.

*Apostolicam Actuositatem* puts forward a Christological perspective that shows Jesus identifying with the sick (Matt 25,36). This Christology, which has characterised the Church from the beginning, radically changes the way we think about the sick. The Church recognises Jesus in the suffering person, thus the sick person becomes a bearer of Christ, a *locus sacramentum*. The decree calls on lay people to engage in acts of charity. Pastoral ministry at the sickbed is not only the responsibility of priests and religious but can also be performed by lay professionals. The participation of the laity opens up new possibilities for making pastoral care more accessible for patients, relatives and health care workers.

Perspectives from *Unitatis Redintegratio* and *Nostra Aetate* highlight the ecumenical and interreligious dimensions of hospital pastoral care. In the pluralistic world of hospitals, where chaplains support patients of different religions on a daily basis and work together with colleagues from different denominations, these conciliar insights prove to be particularly valuable for the cooperation required by the shared ministry to the suffering.

In sum, hospital pastoral care is deeply rooted in the theology of the Second Vatican Council and puts it into practice. Through these four dimensions – the missionary identity of the Church, Jesus’ healing ministry as reflected in the New Testament, the involvement of the laity, and ecumenical-interreligious openness – hospital pastoral care is linked to the ecclesiological vision of Vatican II. Hospital pastoral care is an integral part of the mission of the Catholic Church and makes God’s healing love tangible at the bedside, manifesting the presence of Christ among the suffering and vulnerable.

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## Book review

**MÁTÉ-TÓTH ANDRÁS: *AZ IRGALOM KULTÚRÁJA. KONVIVENCIA KELET-KÖZÉP-EURÓPÁBAN* [THE CULTURE OF MERCY. CONVIVENCE IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE], BUDAPEST: GONDOLAT, 2024, ISBN 9789635565573.**

*Reviewed by Richard Tinca<sup>1</sup>*

As a Hungarian from Transylvania, I am a member of a minority shaped by a wounded historical consciousness, by the inner compulsion of cultural self-preservation, and by the persistent experience of social and institutional dependency. Certain components of the ontological insecurity intrinsic to minority existence resonate with the affective legacy of East-Central Europe – an inheritance that András Máté-Tóth, scholar of religion and theologian, comprehensively interprets in *Az irgalom kultúrája. Konvivencia Kelet-Közép-Európában* [*The Culture of Mercy. Convivence in East-Central Europe*], (Budapest: Gondolat, 2024). According to his central thesis, the social and religious dynamics of the region can be adequately understood only if wounded collective identity is placed at the core of the analytical framework. Such wounds, he argues, cannot be erased, yet they may be transformed: the path toward healing is convivence, the cultivated quality of coexistence that transcends the logic of retribution and mere tolerance and locates the social possibility of shared restoration within the culture of mercy.

One of the central questions animating the work of András Máté-Tóth concerns how the social transformations of post-socialist East-Central Europe can be rendered analytically intelligible through the methodological apparatus of religious studies. The volume under review serves as the concluding part of a comprehensive trilogy. The first volume examined the applicability of Western secularisation paradigms, arguing that these models fail to capture the historical experiences and deeply embedded collective dispositions of the region. Continuing this line of thought,

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the second volume placed the concept of wounded collective identity at its centre, – a notion that reappears in the present work as a fundamental organising principle.

This volume seeks to steer the interpretation of the past, present, and prospective trajectories of East-Central Europe by integrating sociological, religious studies, and literary perspectives. Its stated aim is to render the interpretation of social reality accessible beyond a narrowly defined academic community, making its analyses intelligible to non-specialists as well. Nevertheless, the conceptual vocabulary is consistent and transparent throughout, and the structure of the volume is clear. The argument proceeds from reframing the role of the intellectual through the culture of mercy, toward the vision of convivence.

The paradoxical title of one of the chapters, “The usefulness of the useless intellectual”, points to the idea that the now marginalised role of the intellectual needs to be rethought. In this spirit, the author reimagines an intellectual archetype that may appear anachronistic: that of the intellectual who lives in the moral realm of “eternal values” and communal responsibility, caught in the tension of a twofold commitment to ideas and to the community.

As a literary illustration, the first chapter is framed by the ethical tendency novel of Ferenc Sánta, *Az ötödik pecsét* [*The Fifth Seal*], whose storyline stretches from the exchange of ideas at the table to the brutal imagery of torture. The closing episode of *The Fifth Seal*, in which an apparent act of betrayal becomes an allegory for saving another human being, seems to subtly emphasise the responsibility of the intellectual. Could this reading unintentionally relativise Julien Benda’s cautioning against the *Treason of the Intellectuals* (*La Trahison des Clercs*, 1927), in which detachment from public life no longer embodies freedom but rather an aestheticised form of indifference?

András Máté-Tóth locates Europe’s historical self-understanding in the spiritual legacy of the Christian tradition. He describes Europe as “irreversibly Christian”, an evocative way of articulating its cultural continuity, though such exclusivity is difficult to sustain today. In his interpretation, the future of Europe and the renewal of Christianity presuppose one another: the continent continues to draw its identity from the Christian tradition, while the credible renewal of the Church may offer guidance amid contemporary crises.

While a homogeneous framing of East-Central Europe would at times benefit from greater differentiation, the author’s paradigms of security-seeking and vulnerability may still provide a coherent structuring logic for the region. As he argues, despite its historically compromised position, the Church remains a decisive

actor in the identity discourses of the region. By reinforcing its credibility, it could make a substantive contribution to strengthening social resilience. A persistent challenge in this process is the traditional coalescing of national ideology and the Church. The author rightly cautions that the emotionally charged atmosphere of the region can easily generate a form of patriotism infused with religious overtones, that becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile with the Gospel's universal commandment of love.

One of the principal merits of András Máté-Tóth's latest volume is that it develops and applies new theoretical approaches grounded in the distinctive identity patterns of the region. He proceeds in the same manner when he examines religious and social transformations not through the paradigms of modernity and secularisation, but from the vantage point of securitisation and wounded collective identity. The latter points to a trauma-centred form of collective memory rooted in historical and existential wounds, traceable to the loyalty pressures generated by the intermediary geopolitical status of the region. For centuries, the region has been a buffer zone between great powers, producing a persistent sense of threat and, through the resulting lack of autonomy, a profound longing for sovereignty. Thus, the securitising function of religion in the region can serve as both a source and an instrument of security.

A distinctive merit of the book is that the author goes beyond diagnostic analysis, articulating an incipient form of a utopian vision of a "good society." He does so while drawing on the theories of major international thinkers. He refers, for instance, to the concept of "good society" proposed by sociologist of religion Robert Bellah, envisioning the cultivation of attentiveness and the common good as an alternative to the erosion of social cohesion brought about by individualisation. He also reinterprets the health paradox formulated by Kopp and Skrabski, arguing that a healthy society requires an integrated anthropological view of the person, coupled with the strengthening of cultural factors and solidarity.

The creation of a good society may begin with a process of collective healing, which requires not only a cultural memory capable of a nuanced interpretation of past wounds and a practice of critical self-reflection, but also the uncovering of the affective heritage of the region. This affective heritage is expressed in recurring emotional patterns that bolster collective narratives of victimisation woven into social and political debates.

Grief work can become productive only when societies are able to step out of the emotional spiral attached to their losses and to transcend the region's characteristic

regressive debates about the past. At that point, collective resilience can give rise to a forward-looking paradigm shift that transcends interpretive schemes rooted in historical injuries. This process may also be nourished by the macro-level resources of religious heritage. The process finds its proper frame in the notion of convivence: a culture of coexistence defined by mutual responsibility, commitment to the common good, and recognition-based social practices.

The restoration of wounded collective identity can thus be sought in the culture of mercy. Mercy, as both a universal concept and an existential experience, is capable of transcending the perpetrator-victim dichotomy, rehabilitating the norms of forgiveness and repentance, and creating space for communal reconciliation. The Christian norms of repentance offer ethical patterns that can be secularised and may still provide meaningful social orientation today.

This perspective may become a defining organising principle for the future of the region, serving as a normative condition for the strengthening of resilience and the practice of convivence. In response to deeply embedded structural sin, the author opens the possibility of structural grace, urging the creation of institutions that replace the logic of structural sin with institutions of structural grace. In this way, the ethos of mercy may become the normative framework for both convivence and resilience.

The concluding chapter, drawing on the analogy of Damascus, illustrates the post-socialist region's search for direction. After the regime change, in East-Central Europe, the myth of Western European prosperity did not produce a sense of fulfilment but a prolonged state of being on the road. The measure of a good society lies not in indicators of success but rather in its willingness and ability to attend to the vulnerable. By creating the culture and structures of mercy, the region may move beyond a paradigm of catching up with the West and instead draw upon its own experiences and vulnerabilities to imagine the possibility of a more merciful society.

The volume is not merely an intellectual manifesto but, by stepping beyond the structured reality of academia, the author charts practical directions that go beyond mere diagnostic description. The timeliness of the work is indisputable, appearing as it does in a perilous historical moment when war in the immediate neighbourhood, the rise of populism, and growing social inequalities are reshaping the affective structures of everyday life. All indications suggest that social tensions will continue to intensify in the near future. Yet this should not discourage us from setting out on the path of mercy and moving toward the possibility of a more peaceful social coexistence. As an attempt to answer the question of how, this volume serves as a compass that invites further reflection.