

# Australian Hierarchy at Vatican II

(written in 2007 by Thang Vu during his seminary formation towards the priesthood)

## Part IV: Assessment of the Historical Importance of Vatican II

Murphy noticed in his thesis a number of technical problems regarding the Australian hierarchy at Vatican II.<sup>1</sup> First, it was not easy to obtain the interventions made by Australian bishops and they were in Latin. That was why Murphy always acknowledged the contribution of Dr. Russell Davies who translated these texts for him. Second, some bishops made suggestions for amendments too trivial or brief to form part of the analysis of this thesis. Technically, such suggestions may have been interventions but the gist of their subject-matter was usually brought out with greater clarity in lengthier submissions.

Third, the records in the *Acta Synodalia* relating to commission lists and other procedural matters cannot be categorised as interventions per se. Nor can Cardinal Gilroy's usually brief statements at Central Preparatory Commission meetings during the preparatory phase. Finally, a few bishops submitted more than one written intervention on the same topic or submitted what was essentially the text of an already delivered speech. Having acknowledged these qualifications, it is reasonable to regard the following preliminary analysis as strongly indicative of the extent of Australian involvement.

*Table IV: Interventions and Speeches of Australian Fathers at Vatican II*

Session	Australian Interventions	Foreign Interventions signed by Australians	Speeches
I	8	1	11 speeches by Australians: Young, Muldoon (4), Gilroy (3), Cahill, Goody, Carroll compared unfavourably with the Italian (171), French (137), Spanish (113), American (88) and German (70) contributions. <sup>2</sup>
II	16	5	
III	29	9	
IV	11	10	

<sup>1</sup> Murphy, *Australian Hierarchy and Vatican II*, 318.

<sup>2</sup> Murphy, *Australian Hierarchy and Vatican II*, 318.

Based on the study of Part III, I totally agree with Murphy's conclusion that

the Australian hierarchy participated in the debates and processes of Vatican II to a degree *more than* commensurate with their age, education, health, ingrained (and almost irremovable) prejudices, ecclesiastical influence and geographical isolation.<sup>3</sup>

This contradicts the assessment of almost every historian who has had occasion to discuss their role at Vatican II during the past 30 or so years. It would of course be an exaggeration - one assiduously avoided in this work - to claim the Australian bishops achieved an intellectual status comparable to those Council Fathers from Europe who so brilliantly planned and directed affairs.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, Murphy indicated that Australian bishops contributed significantly to improve at least three conciliar documents: ecumenism, through the intervention of Archbishop Beck, they helped to ensure a more liberal interpretation of responsibility for the divisions of the sixteenth century; on religious liberty, they were the key influence in encouraging the Archbishop of Armagh to plead successfully for the recognition of parental rights in relation to parochial schooling; finally, their forthright intervention as a Conference on education brought a much needed degree of realism to a discussion hopelessly theoretical and Eurocentric.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore their openness at least to participation and occasionally to reform was portended in the ante-preparatory phase when most attempted to offer Rome fitting suggestions for conciliar examination.<sup>6</sup>

It also been argued that it was a new *Romanita* that led the pilgrims and progressives of the Australian Conference over the *threshold of modernity* towards a different vision of the Church and a renewed insight into their own responsibilities at home.<sup>7</sup> However was the new *Romanita*, a *therapy of distance*? Perhaps the first development overturned the hierarchy's loyalty towards Popes John and Paul and an expectation of Roman stasis. This encouraged an

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<sup>3</sup> Murphy, "The Far Milieu Called Home," 366.

<sup>4</sup> Murphy, *Australian Hierarchy and Vatican II*, 319.

<sup>5</sup> Murphy, *Australian Hierarchy and Vatican II*, 319.

<sup>6</sup> Murphy, "The Far Milieu Called Home," 367.

<sup>7</sup> Murphy, *Australian Hierarchy and Vatican II*, 320.

acceptance (sometimes grudging to be sure) of the Council's direction and schemata.<sup>8</sup> Living at a distance from Rome allowed the bishops to immerse themselves in all of the little councils of Vatican II and be actuated by the new papal-hierarchical paradigm to participate quite positively and thoughtfully in conciliar processes. Perhaps just as lay-Catholics later obeyed the Council's directives out of a reverence for episcopal authority, so too did the Australian bishops accept the orientation of the Council because of their unswerving loyalty to the office and person of Pope John XXIII. By establishing so firmly his credentials for caution, Paul VI also won their respect; this time in a way that drew to an end their pilgrimage and had definite consequences.

On the local scene, experimentations in liturgical gestures, texts and other aspects of divine worship had become *alarming* by 1966 - many priests believing erroneously, according to Rome, that it was necessary to put into effect as quickly as possible the orientation given by the Council.<sup>9</sup> Questioning Rome's authority to make decisions regarding liturgy was also unacceptable: local Church theology and awareness must not weaken the no less necessary awareness of the universal church. The Australian bishops tended to agree with Pope Paul's caution, however liberally inclined they may have been. However, having completely ignored or, at best, bowdlerised the role of the Australian hierarchy at Vatican II, they had yet to prove that the Council's emphasis on the importance of the *local Church* had permeated their own *historical* thinking.<sup>10</sup>

As Stirling remarks, the Australian hierarchy's quiet and effective contribution was exemplified 20 years after the conclusion of the Council.<sup>11</sup> At the 1985 Synod of Bishops which assessed how well the Council had been implemented throughout the world, Archbishop Rush, as president of the Australian Episcopal Conference, made a plea before Pope John Paul II and the bishops for greater practical adherence to what the Council had taught

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<sup>8</sup> Murphy, "The Far Milieu Called Home," 368.

<sup>9</sup> Murphy, *Australian Hierarchy and Vatican II*, 322.

<sup>10</sup> Murphy, "The Far Milieu Called Home," 368.

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Stirling, *A Distant View of the Vatican* (Melbourne: Harthorn Press, 1975), 267.

regarding collegiality and the relationship of the local Church to the universal Church.<sup>12</sup> Most importantly, however, was to clarify still further the role of the Church in a modern world where even baptised Catholics were drifting away from Christian faith.<sup>13</sup> What the Archbishop came to believe about the importance of the Council for the Church was just as applicable to its effect on the Catholic hierarchy of Australia: “Some people say the Council was responsible for all the ills faced by the Church; God help us if there had not been a Council.”<sup>14</sup>

Ormond Rush helpfully suggests that we must continue to engage in the reception of Vatican II.<sup>15</sup> Reception is neither a one-dimensional process of logical deduction nor the assertion of particular preferences. In fact, reception is an ongoing and open-ended activity that cannot be independent of our continued conversion and growth in discipleship. This is so because, to draw on Ormond Rush’s fine analysis, reception requires:

The creative involvement of human beings in the decisions of history and in the creative interpretation of “what God would want” the church of the future to be...the human receivers of revelation are to be portrayed as active participants in discerning the way forward, co-deciders with God's Spirit, assuring continuity through creative discontinuity....What has been given as the ultimate criterion, the *regula fidei* is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which must be received over and over in the power of that Spirit who “will guide you into all truth” (Jn 16:13).<sup>16</sup>

In the light of Rush’s outline of reception, it is evident that Vatican II was itself an event of reception, particularly through its *ressourcement*. This reception, however, was not a neat and seamless process. In fact, the documents of the Council were the product of debate, disagreement, conciliation, and compromise.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps, then, reception is a multi-layered, even messy, process. This suggests that our reception of Vatican II’s documents can be authentic only if we remain willing to engage in a similarly multi-layered process.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Murphy, "The Far Milieu Called Home," 368.

<sup>13</sup> Murphy, *Australian Hierarchy and Vatican II*, 326.

<sup>14</sup> Murphy, "The Far Milieu Called Home," 369.

<sup>15</sup> Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (New York: Paulist, 2004), 76.

<sup>16</sup> Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II*, 76.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Komonchak, "Is Christ Divided?: Dealing with Diversity and Disagreement," *Origins* 33 (17 July 2003) (2003): 146.

<sup>18</sup> 'Still relevant? Vatican II Forty Years On ', <http://compassreview.org/spring05/2.html>; Retrieved 30 July 2007.

On a personal note, I have enjoyed studying the Australian hierarchy's involvement at Vatican II. It has certainly enriched my priestly formation as I am preparing for ministerial priesthood for the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

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