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Loïc Figoureux. *Henri de Lubac et le Concile Vatican II (1960-1965)*. Bibliothèque de la Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique 102. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2017. viii + 426 pp. Sources, bibliography, and index. €94 (pb). ISBN 978-2-503-57528-5.

Review by Joseph Flipper, Bellarmine University.

Henri de Lubac, SJ (1896-1991) discovered he was named to the Theological Preparatory Commission of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in July 1960 from reading a newspaper. Pope John XXIII had announced the Council, which would convene Catholic bishops from around the world in January 1959. The appointment of de Lubac was a complete surprise. The French Jesuit was known for his *ressourcement*, the return to the sources, of the patristic period for the renewal of the contemporary Catholic Church. He had been active in the “spiritual resistance” to Nazism and anti-Semitism during the Second World War, and his opposition to the Vichy government was well-known. As a historian, his writings spanned patristic, medieval, and modern theology, and included topics such as atheism, biblical exegesis, mysticism, the supernatural, interreligious dialogue, sacraments, and the church. Since June 1950, de Lubac had been relieved from his position teaching at the Catholic Faculties of Lyon and from the Jesuit residence of Lyon Fourvière. This suspension was imposed upon de Lubac by his Jesuit superiors out of caution due to his involvement with the *nouvelle théologie* controversy. He was prohibited from teaching and his writings had been subject to censorship. He was exiled from Fourvière to Paris, because Lyon was perceived by some Roman theologians as a hotbed of theological modernism. Thus, his restoration to the good graces occurred by way of his selection for the Preparatory Commission for the Council, which convened over two thousand bishops in a gathering that would chart the future of the Catholic Church.

Loïc Figoureux's *Henri de Lubac et le Concile Vatican II (1960-1965)*, written as a thesis under the direction of Jacques Prévotat, examines the contribution of Henri de Lubac to the Second Vatican Council, from his selection and contribution to the preparatory phase of the Council to his selection as a *peritus* (a theological advisor without voting rights) by Pope John XXIII, and participation in the Council meetings themselves. Figoureux depends upon daily notes maintained by de Lubac during his participation in the Council, including formal and informal meetings, interventions, and reflections, which became *Carnets du Concile*.^[1] *Carnets* went through several redactions, however. De Lubac edited the original notes taken daily during the Council into six notebooks. These notebooks have not been recovered. Photocopies of typed redactions of the original notes are extant, however, and provide a window into de Lubac's immediate memorialization of the events of the Council. They contain material more personal than that in *Carnets*.

Henri de Lubac et le Concile Vatican II is a narrowly-focused study of de Lubac's work during these years. More than a study of an individual, however, the book is a study of the Council itself through the window of Lubac's activity. At stake in the Council was not only the resolution of theological controversies but also the identity of the Catholic Church amidst the new challenges of modernity. Figoureux approaches Vatican II as "an event where a new thought is elaborated, is searching for itself, thanks to a gathering of certain theologians coming from all walks of life" (p. 3).

Part I examines the preparatory phase leading up to the Council. Between January 1959, when John XXIII officially announced Vatican II, and July 1960, when de Lubac was informed of his participation, a critical period of the council--the antepreparatory phase--had already happened. The Curia at the Vatican had already collected and analyzed *vota*--reports from bishops, religious superiors, and institutions that would outline conciliar priorities for the Council to take up--and produced reports summarizing the responses. De Lubac "had little hope that...the council would take into account the advances of theological research" (p. 15). His pessimism was based on previous experience. During the *nouvelle théologie* controversy, neo-Scholastic theologians in Rome, including the great Dominican friar Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange (1877-1964), accused de Lubac and others of promoting a relativistic "new theology" that undermined the perennial foundations of Catholic doctrine. The heart of this dispute was a difference over the nature of theological truth, one that can be traced back to the Roman Catholic Modernist Crisis (1902-1907).^[1] Can there be multiple expressions of truth, though imperfect, expressed in the language of the times? Or is truth only capable of being conveyed through scholastic formulae, the scientific form of theology? There was also a political dimension underlying *la nouvelle théologie* controversy, for the divisions were still raw between those, like de Lubac, who supported the resistance and those who supported the Vichy government.

The Preparatory Commission was made up of bishops and cardinals, along with several theological experts, who drafted the documents that would shape the Council's work. Although de Lubac, Yves Congar (1904-1995), and René Laurentin (1917-2017) were invited to participate in the Theological Commission as consultants, this commission was controlled largely by the Holy Office and was run by the very people who had advocated for sanctions upon them. The implications of their nominations were ambiguous. Did this constitute a rehabilitation and, thus, a rehabilitation of the renewal of theology associated with these figures? Or, was the nomination an attempt to coopt their voices?

Figoureux shows that the *nouvelle théologie* controversy did not end with *Humani generis*, but extended into the Council itself. De Lubac's influence during this period, as Figoureux argues, was primarily through the reaction against him. Examining the *vota* submitted by the Pontifical seminaries in Rome, Figoureux shows they were shadowboxing against de Lubac and *la nouvelle théologie*. Figoureux argues that de Lubac was a theological pluralist who could not accept the "total, definitive synthesis" (p. 89) that was the goal of neo-Scholasticism. Describing de Lubac's thinking, Figoureux writes, "the Christian Mystery cannot be locked in neo-Scholastic Thomism, any more than in any other system of thought" (p. 91). The majority on the commission opposed historically-conscious accounts of doctrine as forms of doctrinal relativism. Many bishops wrote *vota* seeking conciliar condemnation of the perceived errors of *la nouvelle théologie*. One bishop called for a declaration "*contra errores P. De Lubac*" (p. 49). Other theological advisors on the commission published articles and books denouncing de Lubac's work. Relitigating previous scholarly arguments, the majority sought to end debate by

condemning a stream of non-neo-Scholastic theologians in documents on divine revelation, the deposit of faith, and the church. Although Henri de Lubac had very little obvious power within the Theological Commission to sway its direction, Figoureux indicates his presence raised the expectation of the inclusion of diverse voices, an expectation that caused disappointment with the release of the documents crafted by the Commission.

Part II treats the period of the Council, from 1962 to 1965. After a disappointing period on the Preparatory Commission, Henri de Lubac was surprised to be appointed by the John XXIII to serve as a *peritus*, a non-voting expert at the Council. The question was whether the bishops at the Council would simply follow the route prepared for them by the preparatory commission or would find their own voice. The Pope said, the “certain and unchangeable doctrine...must be explored and expounded in the manner required by our times. For it is the one and the same deposit of faith itself and the same truths.... But the manner in which they are annunciated is another, while keeping the same meaning and judgment.”[3] The Pope asked for the church to turn itself to the present time and to address humanity in a new way so that it could communicate the same Gospel. John XXIII called for an *aggiornamento* [bringing up to date] of the church. What *aggiornamento* meant, however, was contested at the Council.

Dramatically, in the first session of the Council, the bishops rejected the documents on revelation and the church that they expected to ratify and embarked on developing their own. De Lubac’s theological work became part of the search for new ways of communicating the Church’s message. He was invited to private meetings in the apartments of bishops to discuss and critique working documents, and even educate the bishops on recent theological and historical research. Alternative texts were being copied and circulated, attributed sometimes to Karl Rahner, Congar, de Lubac, and others. Figoureux examines the radically personal and historical elements of de Lubac’s thinking—the result of his *ressourcement* of the patristics and his reading of scripture—and its effect on the mode of thinking at the Council. De Lubac desired the Council to express God’s revelation as God’s personal action in history and presence rather than as an “ensemble de vérités” (p. 237). He desired to see Christ’s redemption of humanity as the “reestablishment of a unity lost” due to sin, not just as a juridical outcome. This major change that takes place at the Council was, in de Lubac’s estimation, necessary in order to communicate faith to the modern world.

The central question of the book is “what was de Lubac’s impact on the council?” Figoureux explains, “His direct influence on the Council, through his work in the commission, is very weak and does not match his status as a great theologian, nor his symbolic importance.” (p. 392.) It certainly didn’t match the other *periti* at the Council, who were invited to work on important sub-commissions. Paradoxically, Figoureux suggests, de Lubac was locked out of any direct impact because his writings—on the church, on the supernatural, and on theological paradox—were supremely influential and divisive. French bishops saw him as a potential liability and mostly did not meet directly with him. Figoureux demonstrates that de Lubac’s closest relationships were with a bloc of equatorial African bishops with whom he met frequently and with several South American bishops.

Henri de Lubac was torn by the contention between parties at the Council, when the conservative minority blocked the reformist majority, creating a stalemate. He feared the majority would become “an extremist anti-curialist—read anti-Roman—faction, quite analogous to inverse extremism” (p. 283). As the conciliar majority gained sway and began to shape the

documents, de Lubac remained uneasy. He anticipated that the document that would become *Gaudium et spes* might be profoundly misunderstood, that its stance of openness to modernity and dialogue with the world would be mistaken as a neglect of the centrality of Christ and the loss of the supernatural vocation of humanity. He feared it could encourage the secularization he saw in France.

Figoureux asks whether de Lubac underwent a “reactionary turn” (p. 392). During the Council, de Lubac (and the other *periti*) were seen as symbols of a progressive wing of the church. After the Council, he was recast as a conservative. Figoureux presents de Lubac as a figure who was fundamentally pessimistic, unsatisfied with the *intégristes* and *progressistes*, both of whom misunderstood *aggiornamento*. His pessimism deepened over the situation of the Church in France as well as over the Jesuit order: “It is a crisis, as perhaps we have not seen before, and the decay advances, under the mask of progress. The Council is a beautiful effort of renewal, but it is taken by many to be wrong, others make a stubborn opposition to it, most are disinterested in it or take it as a pretext to sow the worst disorders” (“Letter to Patrick Moloney,” p. 355). As Figoureux notes, de Lubac’s fellow Jesuits sometimes saw him as having an anguished temperament, always worried, and always armed for a fight. He was a man of “extreme and sometimes scrupulous sensitivity” (p. 371). Despite his pessimism, Figoureux remarks, he stayed remarkably consistent: “Before all, he remained faithful to the inspiration of his youth” (p. 392).

Vatican II was a great intellectual debate, which set the stage for the unfolding of Catholicism over the past 70 years. Yet the rifts at the Council are roughly the same as those present today. This is why, in theological circles, de Lubac remains a controversial figure. For some, he represents the radical departure from a stable doctrinal tradition on grace, the supernatural, and the role of the church. And his *nouvelle théologie*, which seemed to reign at the Council, led the church to conform itself to the world and to dilute its mission. For others, he was a conservative, unwilling to fully embrace the sea change brought about by the Council. The many recent studies on Henri de Lubac indicate his ongoing importance, symbolic and real, for understanding the development of contemporary Catholic thought.[4]

Figoureux’s study gets at the heart of the matter, and certainly demystifies Henri de Lubac’s role at the Second Vatican Council. This rich, well-documented examination of de Lubac is essential for understanding his impact at Vatican II and it deepens the understanding of the rifts that marked the Council and that continue to shape the Catholic experience.

NOTES

[1] Henri de Lubac, *Carnets du concile*, 2 vols. (Paris: Cerf, 2007). This edition was annotated by Loïc Figoureux.

[2] For an overview of the debate over *la nouvelle théologie*, see Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie–New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

[3] John XXIII, Second Vatican Council, “Speech on the Occasion of the Solemn Opening of the Most Holy Council” (Oct. 11, 1962), <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/speeches/1962.index.html>

[4] Among these Jacob Wood, *To Stir a Restless Heart: Thomas Aquinas and Henri de Lubac on Nature, Grace, and the Desire for God* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2019); Alexandre Uwizeye, “La maternité et la catholicité de l’Eglise-Famille de Dieu: un apport de Henri de Lubac à l’ecclésiologie africaine,” Diss. (Paris: Collège des Bernardins, Ecole cathédrale, Faculté Notre-Dame: 2018); Randall S. Rosenberg, *The Givenness of Desire: Concrete Subjectivity and the Natural Desire to See God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); Jordan Hillebert, ed., *T & T Clark Companion to Henri de Lubac* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Igor Agnostini, *Attualità di Henri de Lubac : il desiderio naturale di vedere Dio nella storia* (Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2017).

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