

An Account of the History, Justification and Implications
of the Theological Concept of Reception

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In 1972 the eminent ecclesiologist Yves Congar wrote regarding reception that “even if this is not a dangerous theme, it is one that is not often examined.”¹ Since Congar’s article, many theologians have studied the theological concept of reception. I will explore the concept of reception as a traditional Catholic notion, the recovery of which has been facilitated by the Second Vatican Council’s reappropriation of earlier models of the Church. In doing so, I will examine the history and modern recovery of reception, theological justification of the concept, and implications for contemporary issues.

Günther Gassman states, “Reception has its roots in the Latin words *receptio* and *recipere* and indicates that something is received, accepted, taken over, taken up, welcomed, actively affirmed and included.”² Reception describes the active process whereby one entity claims as its own something which did not originate within itself. This imprecise notion, which seems to encompass a great deal of human activity, assumes a unique position when applied to the Church. As a mystery the Church is something that is at the same time human and divine. The Church is a human reality imbued with the divine life of God’s grace. The interaction of these two aspects makes the Church something that cannot be fully understood, although this does not diminish the necessity of theological reflection on the Church. When addressing the concept of reception in relation to the mystery of the Church, as an ecclesiological reality, the definition of reception must be refined. In relation to juridical matters some theologians prior to the Second Vatican Council applied the term in a narrowly defined exogenous manner. “Accordingly, reception would exist properly only in the case of the reception of specific synods by the

¹ Congar, Yves. “Reception as an Ecclesiological Reality,” translated by John Griffiths. In *Election and Consensus in the Church*, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo and Anton Weiler. New York, Herder and Herder, 1972. Pg. 43.

² Gassmann, Günther. “From reception to unity: The historical and ecumenical significance of the concept of reception.” In *Community – Unity – Communion: Essays in honour of Mary Tanner*, edited by Colin Podmore. London: Church House Publishing, 1998. Pg. 117.

universal Church or by a very large part of the Church, or by separate Churches.’³ Against this narrow definition of reception, Congar offered an alternative definition that has been the foundation of theological discourse regarding the concept. For Congar reception is “the process by means of which a church (body) truly takes over as its own a resolution that it did not originate in regard to its self, and acknowledges the measure it promulgates as a rule applicable to its own life.’⁴ Reception is understood as not merely submitting to a doctrine prescribed by an authority, but involves one local church community actively discerning the applicability of a teaching for itself. The Holy Spirit guides a local church in this process of claiming as its own and further advocating a teaching that did not originate within itself.

The definition of reception set forth rests upon certain understandings of the Church itself. The process of reception clearly cannot take place within a structure or understanding of the Church where mere submission is taken to be the process through which unity of belief is obtained. Submission is seen as normative where one body rules monarchically over the entire Church. On the other hand, an understanding of the Church as polycephalous fosters the process of reception. The Second Vatican Council recovered this model of the Church as having many heads, which facilitated the recovery of the concept of reception. The theology of the episcopate taught by the Council in chapter three of *Lumen Gentium* was one of collegiality. Every bishop has come to be understood as exercising his pastoral responsibility within his particular church. “The very ancient practice whereby bishops duly established in all parts of the world were in communion with one another and with the Bishop of Rome in a bond of unity, charity and peace ... [is] already an indication of the collegiate character and aspect of the episcopal order.’⁵ This

³ Congar, pg 44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 45.

⁵ *Lumen Gentium*. § 22. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

witnesses to the movement away from a hierarchical and Pope-centered understanding of the Church to one that sees the Church as a communion of local churches. This model of the Church underlies the recovery of the concept of reception.

Theologians reflecting on the mystery of the Church in the years following the Second Vatican Council have recovered the concept of reception, not invented it anew. According to Hermann Pottmeyer, “theological reflection on reception has focused on three points.” These are the “historical study of the phenomenon of reception,” “an accurate and systematic definition of reception and its role in the life of the Church,” and “the relationship between the part played by reception and the contemporary ecclesiology in a given period.”⁶ Turning to the first of these points, a historical account of the use of the concept bears out the fact that reception is a traditional Catholic notion.

Anton Houtepen writes, “Reception in its original biblical sense (*lambanein/apolambanien, deschesthai/apodeschesthai*) is one of the main characteristics of faith itself.”⁷ The term *lambanein* means “to take, to accept, or to seize,” while *dechomai* means “to receive, accept, approve, or assent to.” These terms are clearly resonant with the definition of reception given by Congar and used in this paper. According to Houtepen, one of the main characteristics of faith is the process of actively accepting and making applicable to one’s life a belief that originated outside of one’s own experience. He notes that this process is not an innovation, but rather is part of the foundational aspect of Christianity found in the Bible.

⁶ Pottmeyer, Hermann J. “The Reception Process: The Challenge at the Threshold of a New Phase of the Ecumenical Movement.” In *Ecumenism: Present Realities and Future Prospects: Papers Read at the Tantur Ecumenical Center, Jerusalem, 1997*, edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998. Pg. 152.

⁷ Houtepen, Anton. “Reception, tradition, communion.” In *Ecumenical perspectives on baptism, eucharist and ministry*, edited by Max Thurian. Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1983. Pg. 149.

Gassmann enumerates four ways in which reception is related to the Bible. First, “the Bible itself is to a large degree the result of reception.”⁸ An oral tradition preceded the written version of the Bible. The texts that the Hebrew people chose to regard as inspired scripture come from a variety of different sources, meaning that each community received the texts from other communities. Second, the Bible contains numerous examples of reception, in both the Old and New Testaments. “The fundamental connection between tradition and reception, i.e. receiving the tradition and handing it on – *paralambanein* and *paradidonai* – is already present when Paul refers (in rabbinic terminology) to the reception of tradition: ‘For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you.’”⁹ The Book of Acts records the first instance of an ecclesial act of reception in which the Antiochene community receives a letter from the apostles’ meeting: “Upon their arrival in Antioch they called the assembly together and delivered the letter. When the people read it, they were delighted with the exhortation.”¹⁰ It is worth noting that while the community of Antioch had been sent a letter with the authority of the apostles, they did not rejoice over it until having read it. The contents of the exhortation and its relevance for the Antiochene community, not the origin of the letter, determined its force. The third way in which reception relates to the Bible is that “the Bible has been received by the Church in the form of the biblical canon.”¹¹ Fourth, “the Bible is continuously re-received through interpretation and proclamation.”¹²

While the examples that the Bible provides of reception in the foundational period of Christianity are numerous, even more evidence of reception as a traditional Catholic concept is to be found in the history of the early Church. The ecumenical councils that punctuated the first

⁸ Gassmann, pg. 118.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 119.

¹⁰ Acts 4:30-31 NAB.

¹¹ Gassmann, pg. 118.

¹² *Ibid.*, pg. 118.

few centuries of Christianity began to formalize the process of reception. These councils have been the subject of much attention by theologians concerned with the concept of reception.

Before the councils ever formalized the process of reception, the Christian churches in the first centuries after Christ received from one another various aspects of the faith. Gassmann has identified five fields in which reception played an important role. These include “the formulation and reception of local/regional *creedal texts*,” “the development of a more formalized structure and concept of *ordained ministry*,” “the demarcation and reception of the *New Testament canon*,” the close interrelation between *traditio*, *receptio*, and *communio* developing with “the emergence of *local and regional synods*,” and “the gradual reception of *liturgical forms*.”¹³ The manner in which the distant Christian churches received these five areas and the ecclesiological model that developed from such matters set the stage for the first seven ecumenical councils of the fourth through eighth centuries.

The study of the concept of reception as it relates to the seven great ecumenical councils is more complex than during the biblical and early Church periods. As the processes of reception were formally defined, the divide widened between consensus achieved at the councils and the unity of faith achieved in local churches through the process of reception. Scholarly work following the Second Vatican Council tended to focus on the former to the exclusion of the latter. Theologians such as Ulrich Kuhn have begun to question this approach. Kuhn writes, “These councils ... spoke for the whole Church. What is decisive, however, for the validity of their decisions for the Church in later times, is the reception process which begins after the council.”¹⁴ Reception then is seen to be the process whereby local churches embody in liturgical, theological and spiritual aspects of their daily life the decrees of the councils. The

¹³ *Ibid.*, pg. 120.

¹⁴ Kuhn, Ulrich. “Reception – an imperative and an opportunity.” In *Ecumenical perspectives on baptism, eucharist and ministry*, edited by Max Thurian. Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1983. Pg. 167.

Jesuit theologian Edward Kilmartin states, “the claim to represent the whole communion of churches of the past and present had to be realized by the ability of the council to evoke reception by all the churches.”¹⁵ This process was neither necessarily smooth nor immediate. Congar notes that “the creed of Nicaea was ‘received’ *in toto* only after fifty-six years of contentions punctuated by synods, excommunications, exiles, and imperial interventions and violence.”¹⁶ The local churches did not receive the teachings of the councils simply on the authority of the bishops gathered there or the consensus that they reached. Rather, the local churches themselves determined whether or not they would appropriate the decrees as part of their own faith.

The necessity of the local churches to receive the decrees of the councils was understood by the council fathers themselves. Hermann Josef Sieben best describes the formal notion of reception that grew out of these councils. “Sieben found that a consistent view emerged from Nicaea I to Nicaea II (787). It was determined by the notions of *consensio antiquitatis et universitatis* and the function of the Spirit who grounded the horizontal and vertical consensus.”¹⁷ The council fathers understood the need to ground their teachings not only in the Church in the past (*antiquitatis*), but in the universal Church of the present (*universitatis*). Guided by the Holy Spirit, the council fathers were able to maintain the divine aspect of the Church while answering the concrete needs of the Church as a human institution. The last of the seven great ecumenical councils, Nicaea II, “proclaimed that for a Council to be considered ecumenical, it had to be received by the *praesules ecclesiarum*, and primarily by the pope.”¹⁸ That the decrees had to be received by all the bishops indicates the importance of the local

¹⁵ Kilmartin, Edward J. “Reception in History: an ecclesiological phenomenon and its significance.” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21 (1984). Pg. 48.

¹⁶ Congar, pg. 46.

¹⁷ Kilmartin, pg. 48.

¹⁸ Congar, pg. 48.

churches in the process of reception. The understanding of reception as an ecclesiological concept, one that deals with the mystery of the Church, keeps one from conflating it with a concept of mere social history. The Church is imbued with the grace of God and thus the vertical dimension of the received faith must likewise be taken into account.

After the period of the seven great ecumenical councils the use of the concept of reception as defined by Congar began to wane. The ecclesiology in the Roman Catholic Church began to shift from that of a communion of local churches acting collegially to one that focused on the pope and obedience to his decrees. Ecclesiology shifted from polycephalism to monarchism. With this change in contemporary ecclesiology, the concept of reception changed as well. In response to the Protestant Reformation and threats to Church authority the “post-Tridentine church, excessively hierarchical, reduced reception to an aspect of constitutional law.”¹⁹ Removed from the context of polycephalism, the theological reality which reception embodied lost its justification. Reception no longer addressed the vertical and horizontal aspects of consensus, guided and grounded by the Holy Spirit. Reception became an empty signifier, a symbol devoid of meaning, put to the use of supporting legalistic decrees and an ecclesiological absolutism.

The concept of reception was further devalued of its theological import by its association with Gallicanism, which reached a codified formulation in seventeenth century France. Gallicanism insisted that reception on the part of the universal Church was necessary for any papal teaching to be considered infallible. The use of the concept of reception fit the motives of those who espoused Gallicanism, theologians who “tended chiefly to a restraint of the pope's authority in the Church in favour of that of the bishops and the temporal ruler.”²⁰ The decline of Gallicanism

¹⁹ Gassmann, pg. 122.

²⁰ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1913. s.v. “Gallicanism,” by A. Degert. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06351a.htm>

resulted in the subsequent mistrust of the use of the concept of reception as one that might propound Gallicanist tendencies.

The above historical account of the phenomenon of reception has shown the concept to be one that is traditionally Catholic. The historical use of reception serves to show that contemporary theologians who make use of the concept are respecting the *consensio antiquitatis*; they have recovered the concept of reception, not invented it anew. The historical precedent of the concept of reception is the primary justification for its recovery and use in contemporary theological discourse.

This precedent is not the only justification for the contemporary recovery of the concept of reception. Congar offers an important theological justification for reception. Reception “derives from a theology of communion, itself associated with a theology of local churches, a pneumatology and a theology of tradition and a sense of the profound conciliarity of the Church.”²¹ Beyond this, two concrete conditions underlie the theology of reception. First, “the universal Church cannot err in faith.” Second, “consensus, or unanimity, is an effect of the Holy Spirit and the sign of his presence. It is the Holy Spirit who brings about the unity of the Church in space and time.”²²

Concerning the first condition, the universal Church is to be understood as a communion of local churches, animated by the Holy Spirit. Congar writes, “The whole body of the Church, which is structured locally as individual churches, is enlivened by the Holy Spirit. The faithful and the churches are true subjects of action and free initiative.”²³ The faithful and the churches are not merely passive recipients of the teachings from Church authorities. They undertake an

²¹ Congar, pg. 60.

²² *Ibid.*, pg. 63.

²³ *Ibid.*, pg. 62.

active process of appropriating teachings unto themselves. The faithful discern the truths of the matter and in so doing cooperate with God in the determination of their own lives.

The second condition answers the question of how the faithful and churches can “come to that unity as living independent subjects.”²⁴ As a mystery, the Church is a divine and human institution animated not only by the actions of its members, but by the will of God made manifest in the Holy Spirit. Congar proposes “that there are two means of arriving at unanimity: obedience, and reception or consent.”²⁵ The former predominates when the Church is conceived of as a monarchical institution, as was the case during the later Middle Ages and in the post-Tridentine Church. The latter predominates when the Church is conceived of as a communion of local churches, as was stated in the first condition for the theological justification of reception. As demonstrated, this ecclesiological model of the Church was dominant in the early Church and subsequently recovered in the Second Vatican Council’s teaching on the collegiality of the episcopate. It is during these two eras that the concept of reception was also used in the manner that Congar defines it.

Congar extends the theological justification of reception by showing the connection between the concept and a correct understanding of the Trinity. “If, in trinitarian theology, the consideration of the hypostases is not obscured by an affirmation of the unity of nature, but is instead fully developed, one may also, in ecclesiology, see personal subjects communicating in a unity which is not imposed on them so as to obscure them as individuals.”²⁶ A correct understanding of the relationship between God the Father, Christ, and the Holy Spirit leads to a correct ecclesiology; a heretical or unbalanced understanding of this very same relation leads to an ecclesiology that is likewise unbalanced. In seeing each of the Persons of the Trinity as

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 62.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 62.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 64.

possessing the fullness of the divine life according to their distinctive personhood, so too will all of those of the universal Church be seen as “a communion in which each individual is alive to whatever another may reveal to him.”²⁷

A final aspect of Congar’s theology of reception concerns the relationship of the aforementioned theology and the juridical implications. Regarding a decree from legitimate Church authority, Congar said, “reception is not constitutive of the juridical quality of a decision. It has no bearing on the formal aspect of the action, but on its content. It does not confer validity, but affirms, acknowledges and attests that this matter is for the good of the Church.”²⁸ With regard to the councils examined in the historical analysis of the phenomena of reception, Congar articulates that “it is not the juridical correction of a Council or its properly formal structure that ensures its authenticity, but the content of its teaching.”²⁹ Such teaching and “the validity of Councils derives from their expression of the faith of the Apostles and the Fathers, the tradition of the Church.”³⁰ Congar makes it clear that reception does not concern only the form by which given teachings are formulated, but the truth of the matter pronounced upon, which is guarded by the Holy Spirit.

I would like to advance a third justification for the use of the concept of reception, based on the work of the American philosopher William James. Broadly considered, the foundation of Pragmatism, James’s theory of truth, is not identical to the theological justification of reception provided by Congar. There is, however, a certain resonance that could be explored in future works. James states, “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 64.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 66.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 52.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 53.

process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verifi-cation*. Its validity is the process of its valid-*ation*.”³¹ In much the same way, reception confirms the truth of a teaching already true by virtue of coming from the Holy Spirit. It must be noted, however, that while the process of verification makes an idea true for James, Congar holds that a teaching is true in itself because of its relation to the teachings of the apostles and that the process of reception is merely a verification of that inherent truth.

I note a second similarity between theological justification of reception and the Pragmatist theory of truth in its insistence on the effectiveness of a teaching. A core tenet of Pragmatism’s conception of the truth is that “the possession of truth, so far from being here an end in itself, is only a preliminary means towards other vital satisfactions.”³² Truth and usefulness are not seen as separate realities for the Pragmatist, but rather different names for the same process of verification: “True is the name for whatever idea starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience.”³³ In much the same way, Congar states, “the reception of a Council is identical with its effectiveness.”³⁴ A teaching that the faithful and local churches do not receive is one that has not made an impact on their lives and is not useful. In addressing the non-reception of Nicaea II by the Frankish theologians, Kilmartin notes, “the matter did not really touch their lives of faith. When conciliar decisions do not relate directly to the life of faith of a church, one can hardly expect that they will be considered important or even understandable.”³⁵ While the Pragmatist account of truth may not be accepted as a justification

³¹ James, William. “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth.” In *Pragmatism*, collected in *William James: Writings 1902 – 1910*, edited by Bruce Kuklick. New York: The Library of America, 1987. Pg. 574.

³² *Ibid.*, pg. 574.

³³ *Ibid.*, pg. 575.

³⁴ Congar, pg. 48.

³⁵ Kilmartin, pg. 50.

for the concept of reception, it does bear a certain resemblance to the theological justification for reception offered by Congar.

The concept of reception holds important implications for several contemporary issues in the Church. In the theological discourse surrounding ecumenism, reception has become what Gassmann terms the “new holy word.”³⁶ Kuhn acknowledges that “the problem of reception has thus emerged as a key problem of the ecumenical movement.”³⁷ The ecumenical project of bringing together different church bodies to formulate statements of agreement is one that surely involves a process of reception. The document that has been the most widely studied with regard to its far reaching ecumenical implications is *Baptism – Eucharist – Ministry*, produced by the Faith and Order commission of the World Council of Churches. In calling upon each church to respond to the document, the Faith and Order commission has asked each church to evaluate its ability to receive the document. The response of the churches was not to be only an official response, but an actual process of reception. Houtepen draws on the theology of communion and local churches that underlies the concept of reception:

If ‘reception’ does not apply to texts alone, but to the living reality of faith itself; if by ‘receiving’ a dogmatic statement of another church or of the ecumenical dialogue, churches recognize those other churches as faithful to the apostolic tradition; then ‘reception’ not only expresses a rational ‘consensus’ or ‘mutual understanding’; it also is the beginning of ‘acceptance’ and of ‘homology’: common confession, which is an essential condition for communion and unity. Ecumenical reception is not the signature under a contract, but a kiss of peace among sister churches.³⁸

The ecumenical project thus relies on the process of reception as defined by Congar. Reception is to be understood as the process of local churches receiving agreements made with other local churches. The issue becomes more than formal agreements made between legitimate authorities of particular churches. It assumes the status similar to the teachings pronounced upon by the early ecumenical councils. The decrees may be true; however, their effectiveness depends upon

³⁶ Gassmann, pg. 117.

³⁷ Kuhn, pg. 163.

³⁸ Houtepen, pg. 153.

their reception by the universal Church, the People of God. Kuhn notes that “this allows for the possibility of insisting on the responsibility of the whole people of God in the development of church doctrine.”³⁹ How this process of reception will be accomplished in so many churches, representing so many differing structural conditions, remains one of the challenges of the ecumenical movement.

The teachings of *Humanae Vitae* represent another contemporary issue with implications for reception. Those to whom *Humanae Vitae* was directed have not received its teachings. Cardinal Avery Dulles examines potential reasons for the non-reception of *Humanae Vitae*. Dulles harkens back to Congar’s understanding as reception being equated with effectiveness. The opposition to contraception pronounced in *Humanae Vitae* is clearly not an effective teaching since it has not affected the lives of those to whom it was directed. It is certainly not the case, as Nicaea II was for the Franks, that the teaching treated addressed matters that “did not really touch their lives.” The matter of effectiveness here was the ability of the magisterium to convey to the faithful in a manner that could be understood and appropriated as their own belief, the essential teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. Dulles, however, does not feel it necessary for the magisterium to do so: “it must be recognized that the primary task of ecclesiastical authority is to give testimony to the truth rather than to persuade.”⁴⁰ While this may be the case, the non-reception of the teaching has rendered it ineffective and unless ways are found to reformulate the teaching, it will remain ineffective. Dulles points out that non-reception is, however, part of the ongoing reception process. “In some cases the magisterium profits from carefully considered criticism

³⁹ Kuhn, pg. 165.

⁴⁰ Dulles, Avery. “*Humanae Vitae* and *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: Problems of Reception.” In *Church Authority in American Culture: the Second Cardinal Bernardin Conference*, introduction by Philip J. Murnion. New York: Herder and Herder, 1999. Pg. 25.

coming from faithful and obedient Catholics in order to nuance traditional doctrine.’⁴¹ This is indeed the case with the teachings of *Humanae Vitae*, although unless the criticism is heeded, the reception process will have come to a complete halt, rendering the teaching permanently ineffective.

The concept of reception is one that belongs to Catholic tradition. The history of its use confirms that reception is an active process that was fundamental in the creation and transmission of Church teachings. The justification for the use of reception in ecclesiological discourse relies not only on its being a traditional Catholic concept, but in being a concept that is consonant with the theological framework of the Church. Reception has once again become an important issue following the ecclesiological recovery of collegiality at the Second Vatican Council, a structure present in the early Church. Issues of reception and non-reception play an important role in the ecumenical movement as well as in contemporary Church teachings, such as the prohibition of contraception. Reception will continue to be an important matter of ecclesiology as the Holy Spirit continues to guide the universal Church in advancing teachings to deal with our changing human situation, and ensuring the unity of faith both with tradition and all the faithful that Christ intended for the Church.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 28.

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