January 25, 2009, marked the fiftieth anniversary of Blessed Pope John XXIII’s surprising announcement of the ecumenical council that would be called Vatican II. In the last several years we have seen the completion of several major projects that present a kind of “second generation” assessment of the achievements of the council. A “first generation” assessment had been presented soon after the council by people who had, for the most part, been active participants in the conciliar process, the most notable among these works being the five-volume *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) edited by Herbert Vorgrimler, and the commentaries appearing in the French *Unam Sanctam* series, published in Paris by Les Éditions du Cerf. In the 1970s the massive Ante-Preparatory and Preparatory documents were published by the Vatican Press, followed by the *Acta Synodalia* or word-for-word daily proceedings of the council.

In early 2009, Paulist Press published the last of its eight-volume “Rediscovering Vatican II” series, written by scholars who were alive during the council, but who have only come into their own as theologians in the post–Vatican II years. While these volumes offer readers serious scholarship, they are not meant to be highly academic or technical studies. They are rather more accessible commentaries that will help general readers understand the complexities and developments of the sixteen documents that the council issued. Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy, the highly respected former president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, authored the first volume on the documents on Christian Unity and Non-Christian Religions (*Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue* [2005]); the documents on the church, bishops, and Eastern Churches are authored by noted ecclesiologist Richard R. Gaillardetz (*The Church in the Making* [2007]); Australian theologian Maryanne Confoy has written the commentary on the documents on religious life, priesthood, and priestly formation (*Religious Life and Priesthood* [2008]); missiologist Stephen Bevans and ecumenist Jeffrey Gros are the authors of the final volume in the series on the Decree on Missionary Activity.

*Steven Bevans, S.V.D.*, is *Louis J. Luzbatek, S.V.D., Professor of Mission and Culture at Catholic Theological Union.*

Each book treats the document or documents under study in exactly the same way. A first section discusses the history of the document, while a second section presents a summary of its content. Then a reflection on the document’s implementation is presented, followed by a discussion of the “states of the questions” that the document had engaged. The result is a set of commentaries that help readers understand the background of the council documents and also orients them to the present and future. These volumes should be immensely helpful for students of the council in the future and a great review for those of us who lived through the council a half century ago.

Perhaps the most important work by the “second generation” of Vatican II scholars is the four-volume commentary on the council edited by eminent theologians Peter Hünermann and Bernd Jochend Hilberath and published in 2005. These commentaries are followed by a volume edited by Hünermann on the council and the “signs of the times” today, published in 2006 (Hünermann and Hilberath, *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil* [Freiburg: Herder]; Hünermann, *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil und die Zeichen der Zeit Heute* [Freiburg: Herder]). Unfortunately for those who do not read German, these volumes have not been translated into English. Still, no serious study of Vatican II can afford to ignore this work of truly amazing scholarship.

On the other hand, the six-volume *History of Vatican II*, edited by U.S. theologian Joseph A. Komonchak and the late Italian historian Giuseppe Alberigo, completed in 2006, has been published in a number of languages and is easily the most important history of the council to be published to date (Leuven: Peeters / Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books). More comprehensive histories of the council will certainly be written in the future, and written perhaps with more objectivity. Nevertheless, the several decades’ distance between the council’s end in 1965 and the appearance of the first volume of this history in 1995 have been able to give the various contributors access to the volumes of material that appeared after the council, as well as to private papers, memoirs, and diaries of bishops and theologians who participated in the council’s deliberations and debates (though they did not have access to the papers of Paul VI). This is not necessarily a set that one would want to read cover to cover at one time, but it provides a treasury of resources—in text, notes, and bibliography—for any close study of the council and its development from its convocation in 1959 to its conclusion in 1965. Giuseppe Alberigo also published a shorter, far less complex history of the council that probably every pastor or pastoral worker should read. It is entitled *A Brief History of Vatican II* and was published by Orbis in 2006.

Alberigo’s and Komonchak’s perspective on the council has not gone unchallenged. In 2005, for example, Italian Archbishop Agostino Marchetto published *The Ecumenical Council Vatican II: A Counterpoint for Its History* (*Il Concilio ecumenico Vaticano II: Contrappunto per la sua storia* [Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005]), in which he spoke strongly against Alberigo’s interpretation. For Marchetto, Alberigo’s and Komonchak’s magnum opus has an anti-curial bias, paints an unflattering picture of Pope Paul VI, and—most
damningly—urges an interpretation that emphasizes the council’s discontinuity with past church teaching. Marchetto’s position, on the other hand—and this is a position seemingly backed by high Vatican authorities—is that what is most important about the council is its continuity with the past, not its novelty. It is in continuity with the past, Marchetto argues, that Vatican II needs to be interpreted, not in some vague “spirit of the council.”

In his 2005 Roland Bainton lecture at Yale Divinity School, U.S. American church historian John W. O’Malley set forth to refute Marchetto’s position. The lecture was subsequently published in the journal Theological Studies (March 2006), and after two astute responses to O’Malley’s article were received (written by U.S. historian Stephen Schloesser and Australian theologian Neil Ormerod and published in the June and December 2006 issues of Theological Studies), the three articles were collected in a book. Added as well was a fourth article by Joseph Komonchak in Vatican II: Did Anything Happen? edited by David Schultenover (New York: Continuum, 2007). All the articles are brilliant contributions to the debate about the significance of Vatican II, but O’Malley’s clearly sets the tone. After laying out several ways in which Vatican II is clearly discontinuous with other ecumenical councils—its sheer size, the length and quality of its preparation, its international participation, its duration—O’Malley emphasizes one particular aspect of difference that he considered particularly important. This was the council’s tone: not, as in previous ecumenical gatherings, one of Roman legal language and authoritarian rhetoric, but a language that was pastoral, a language of persuasion. This, to my mind, is one of the most significant pieces ever written about the council and one that every woman and man engaged in pastoral ministry needs to read. The entire book is important; O’Malley’s article is a must.

Almost twenty years ago, at a lecture at Catholic Theological Union, the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin urged its faculty and students to continue studying and researching the documents and the history of the Second Vatican Council. Their profound significance, the Cardinal said, had not yet been fully grasped by the church. Twenty years later and fifty years since the day in St. Paul Outside the Walls when John XIII surprised the church and the world with the announcement of a council, these words are still true—and perhaps even more so. The several newly completed projects surveyed by this essay will certainly help the church to pursue Cardinal Bernardin’s charge—and his legacy.