

Research Article

Slovenian Post-Conciliar Contextual Theology: Anton Strle's Reception of Vatican II

Filip Veber* 

Faculty of Theology, Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum), Rome, Italy

Abstract

The article presents a case study of a local reception of the Second Vatican Council through the lense of a prominent Slovenian theologian, Prof. Anton Strle (1915-2003), and analyses his introductions to the four conciliar constitutions (*Lumen Gentium*, *Dei Verbum*, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Gaudium et Spes*), published alongside their Slovenian translations during and immediately after the Council. By means of descriptive textual analysis, the article provides an insight into reception of the Council in a small and linguistically limited environment of the post-WWII Yugoslavia. Key findings include: (1) Strle's pivotal role as a mediator of the Council in a linguistically small environment, fostering post-conciliar renewal through teaching and contextualization; (2) his exemplification of hermeneutic of fidelity, rooted in fidelity to the conciliar texts and the deposit of faith, doctrinal continuity and development; (3) the prominence of Ecclesial Christology in his reception, bringing together conciliar ecclesiology (Church as the Mystical body, sacrament and communion) with the centrality of Christ for the Church and the Council; and (4) practical applications urging the Church's Eucharistic gathering for evangelization of the world. By synthesizing Strle's understudied texts, this study bridges the gap of understanding the reception of the Council in smaller nations and linguistically limited environments, demonstrating Ecclesial Christology as the exemplary fruit of the hermeneutic of fidelity for faithful conciliar implementation in any age.

Keywords

Second Vatican Council, Hermeneutic of Fidelity, Ecclesial Christology, Anon Strle, Reception

1. Introduction

The sixtieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council offers a valuable opportunity to re-examine the Council's legacy through the lenses of local receptions and theological interpretations. As a universal event, the Council gave rise to diverse models of reception in different ecclesial, cultural and political contexts. Within the field of conciliar hermeneutics, the attention has increasingly turned to the regional and contextual theologians and pastoral leaders whose interpretations

contributed to the mediation of Vatican II's vision in specific contexts. The present article aims to contribute to this broader historiographical and contextual-theological inquiry by analysing the reception of Vatican II in Slovenia, taking as a "case study" the writings of a prominent Slovenian theologian, Anton Strle. He exemplifies a faithful model of post-conciliar contextual theology in Slovenia, where the universal doctrine of Vatican II is inculturated through pastoral reinterpretation

*Correspondence: Filip Veber (filip.veber@gmail.com)

Received: 24 December 2025; **Accepted:** 12 January 2026; **Published:** 29 January 2026



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and theological renewal, safeguarding tradition against misinterpretations. He offers a European counterpoint by prioritizing doctrinal permanence amid geopolitical tensions.

While the reception of the Council and the ecclesial and theological consequences of its reception, have been studied in major Western countries as well as elsewhere, smaller countries risk being overlooked or joined to one of the more prominent countries that has influenced its reception. While influences must not be discarded, it is necessary to consider specifics of local receptions and prominent figures that have shaped the ecclesial and theological landscape in smaller countries, usually conditioned by linguistic limits. Thus, this “case-study” is one of the first steps in bridging this gap, when it aims to present one of the prominent figures that have shaped the reception of the Council in Slovenia. For this reason, the article employs a descriptive textual analysis, in order to systematically summarize and synthesize Strle’s introductions to the conciliar documents, while showing where his introduction turns into interpretation. The article prioritizes the exposition of the primary texts through close reading, without advancing novel historical reconstructions. Furthermore, it must be noted that the present study aims to bridge the gap in the analysis of Strle’s reception of the Second Vatican Council, which has not been examined in recent scholarship. However, his work can be situated in the broader discussion on the reception of the Council and contemporary developments of contextual theologies. [20] Furthermore, it should be noted that the present article does not engage in a global comparative analysis of global interpretations of the Council, as this would far exceed the scope of this work. For this reason, the work is deliberately limited to the Slovenian context, to one of its most prominent theologians. [9]

After a brief biographical and historical introduction, situating Strle within his ecclesial and socio-political context, the article examines his interpretive introductions to the Council documents, with specific focus on his General Introduction and the introductions into the four main constitutions: constitution on the sacred liturgy – *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), dogmatic constitution on the Church – *Lumen Gentium* (LG); dogmatic constitution on the Divine Revelation – *Dei Verbum* (DV) and the pastoral constitution on the Church in today’s world – *Gaudium et Spes* (GS). [2] Through this, the article aims to critically assess the hermeneutical principles guiding Strle’s reading of the Council and its documents, and to place his work within the wider debate on the conciliar reception. [4] By doing so, we aim to shed light on a lesser-known but theologically significant voice in the post-conciliar period, while contributing to the international discussion on the legacy of the Council. The analysis emphasizes Strle’s hermeneutic of fidelity, and in the last section on Ecclesial Christology shows, how the theological principles of the Council came together in Strle’s Christological vision, which in itself is not new, but it speaks to his

theological vision under the influence of the Council and its documents.

2. Life and Work of Anton Strle

The significance of Strle’s theological thought for Slovenia (at that time part of Yugoslavia) lies in the fact that in many aspects, he was a pioneer. Strle lived, worked, and prayed for almost fifty years in the building of the Faculty of Theology in Ljubljana.¹ After his doctoral thesis on the natural desire for the blessed vision in Aquinas in 1944, Strle began his teaching career in 1956 as a part-time professor of dogmatic theology, but was imprisoned for six months under charges of raising religious intolerance. On the May 10, 1958 he was promoted to the rank of lecturer and on June 12, 1958 Strle received the canonical mission to dedicate himself fully to teaching, and was active as a professor for thirty years (1956 - 1986). To remind the reader about the state and the situation of the Catholic Church in Slovenia in that time let us remember, that prof. Strle not only had to make a profession of faith, but also the anti-modernist oath. [18] The impact of Strle on the theological thought in Slovenia lies in his mark on many generations of theologians in Slovenia.² He wrote textbooks for every subject he taught and continually revised and edited them, including the newest developments in theology. He was up to date with the works of major theologians, such as De Lubac, Rahner, von Balthasar, Ratzinger, and others. He was also a member of the international Theological Commission (1974-1979), and the first member from Slovenia. His work was not restricted to the borders of Slovenia but was known abroad even in his later years. [16] We must mention the tribute offered to him by H. E. Joseph cardinal Ratzinger on occasion of the publication of the third volume of Strle’s *Selected Writings*:

“I got to know prof. Strle in 1974, when we met as members of the International Theological Commission. I think I must say that meeting him left a great impression on all the members of this community of thirty scholars from the most diverse countries of the world. Professor Strle otherwise always remained modestly in the background; he wanted to learn and speak only when he had something really original to say that others had not said. But it is precisely this modesty, that he steps into the background and gives priority only to a better knowledge of the truth, that attracted attention to him. A great inner light emanated from his humble and benevolent personality; we felt that this man was completely permeated by contact with God. Even if it was possible to see a deep ascetic life in him, this asceticism nevertheless spoke of something positive: an inner closeness to the Lord that put everything else in a secondary place. This life and thinking in communion with Christ gave Professor Strle that power of judgment and that ability to discern, which cannot come from mere scholarship.

¹ Today there is a memorial placed on the wall near the apartment where Strle lived until his death, located within the building of the Faculty of Theology in Ljubljana.

² Strle was a mentor to at least 100 graduates, accompanied 10 candidates for master’s degree and 10 doctoral students.

He had a keen sense of what is right and what is wrong, of what purifies faith and gives it growth, and of what destroys it; he could—in a word—discern spirits, and that made his judgment valuable and weighty.” [10]

This testimony of then cardinal Ratzinger shows that when considering Strle’s theological importance and his impact, we cannot separate it from his personality, and from his personal testimony.³ Furthermore, when the process for beatification of Strle began, then pope emeritus Benedict XVI wrote to: “What I wrote in 1991 for the Selected Writings ‘Gloria Dei - vivens homo’ (Glory of God - Living Man) remains completely my belief even now and can therefore be considered as a votum in the process for the beatification of the servant of God Anton Strle.” [17] These strong words, expressed even so many years later gives even more weight to his testimony quoted above.

3. Anton Strle’s Reception of Vatican II

Strle was up to date with all of the major developments in theology, including the Second Vatican Council. An important aspect of Strle’s opus can be summarised with the title of his book “The Council Documents,” where he translated all of the documents of the Council. At first, this work was published in little booklets between 1964 – 1966, as the documents were being promulgated.⁴ Afterwards, Strle revised all of the translations and wrote an extensive general introduction and special introductions for all of the documents and the ‘Messages’ that the council fathers prepared. In the end, Strle added to the existing 683 pages another 66 pages of general index containing the most important terms found in the documents. It is important to note that the translation prepared by Strle is still the common and standard translation used in Slovenia today, which speaks to the ability of Strle as a translator. In what follows we will briefly analyse the reception of the Second Vatican Council in Strle’s writings, as expressed in his introductions to the Council documents.

3.1. General Introduction

In a substantial general introduction, Strle first addresses the meaning of the Council clarifying that while the changes in the celebration of the liturgy or in the institutions might be needed (inasmuch it falls under the competence of the council fathers to change it), the real intention of the Council is that the Church would correspond as much as possible to the mission of salvation given by Christ [11]. Strle notes that the Council was eager to state that all baptised are part of the Church and responsible for the execution of the mission of salvation. [11] In this Strle draws greatly upon *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* to underline the importance and

urgency of this mission. In addressing the meaning of the councils in general, Strle insists that the council can only be understood when one understands the mystery of the Church, which is intrinsically connected to the Holy Trinity. [11] He offers a synthesis of his Christology:

“Christ is rather the speaking of God himself to his people. In Christ, God spoke his final and irrevocable word of salvation to humanity and all creation; at the same time, he also revealed the incomprehensible secret of his trinity, which wants to give itself to people in free love.” [11]

He goes on even further:

“Thus, the infallibility of the Church is something that necessarily follows from the irrevocability of the incarnation of the eternal Word of the Father, that is, from the fact that God, in Christ, definitively gave himself to humanity and its history.” [11]

For Strle it is clear that the infallibility springs from the very foundations of the Church, because ultimately God cannot be mistaken, for it lies not in the power of man, but of God, who is the foundation and Head of the Church. [11] Drawing from the mystery of the Church, Strle explains that bishops, not inasmuch as they are human, but by the grace and gifts of the Holy Spirit, can be infallible, rejecting on one hand any sort of conciliarism, and on the other hand, not diminishing their role and clearly distinguishing the difference between ordinary and extraordinary authority. [11] Strle dedicates abundance of space to show in what sense the Second Vatican Council be considered in continuity with the First Vatican Council, and yet how it must also be distinguished from it. In LG 18 the council fathers stated that they walk the path of the First Vatican Council and in accordance with it, they promulgate the following teachings. Strle makes an important excursus:

“Thus, what the First Vatican Council had in its plan regarding the doctrine of the Church and also its work, actually remained a torso, an unfinished work. The doctrine of the primacy of the Pope and his infallibility lacked inclusion in the greater horizon of the entire doctrine of the Church, and because of this alone, it met with a greater misunderstanding among many people, and many times downright denigration.” [11]

Strle notes the great ecclesial dimension of the First Vatican Council and gives us a framework, of how the Council intended to proceed from top to bottom. Following the constitutions *Dei Filius* and *Pastor Aeternus* was to be a substantial draft on the Church, with a special focus on the role of bishops. There was also a draft on pastoral problems and questions of that time, but these documents were never discussed, due to the interruption of the Council. [11] The work of the Council, interrupted by war had to be carried out by the Church. Strle reminds us that the definitions of the First Vatican Council

3 For another very recent and detailed biography of Anton Strle see Marija Jasna Kogoj, Božji služabnik Anton Strle [Servant of God Anton Strle] (Salve, Ljubljana 2022).

4 Let us just briefly note at this juncture, that seeing that Slovenian language is a

very minor language in itself, it is quite an achievement, that the first translations of the Council Documents were made almost simultaneously with the promulgations and with the translations into other world languages. This is an important achievement, which we owe to Strle and his tireless work.

removed what remained of the Gallican thought that was threatening the unity of the Church and strengthened the role of the papacy, noting that as every single authority in the Church is called to serve like the Son of God, the pope is no exception to this rule. [11]

Strle spends significant time on what does the term “pastoral nature” of the Council actually mean. While previous councils responded to heresies, the Second Vatican Council was completely dedicated to the spiritual and pastoral task of the Church. [11, 21] Strle underlines that while the Council did not explicitly use the anathema forms like the previous councils, this does not mean that the present Council did not refute theological or moral errors: “With declarations that are pastorally important, the Church Council also necessarily pronounces this or that theological doctrine, which more or less approaches religious truths, as the members of the Church are obliged to do.” [11] What is even more interesting is that Strle without any doubt acknowledges that what precisely is meant when speaking of the pastoral nature of the Council “it is not so easy to say exactly.” [11] Strle notes that none of the previous councils could renounce the pastoral nature of their work. Whether this was more explicit or implicit is a different question, but all of them were oriented towards salvation and redemption. Strle also acknowledges that individually in the texts it can be rather difficult if not impossible to set a clear boundary between the moral and theological principles and the charismatically ‘open’ guidelines. [11] Taking this into consideration, he is clear that in many cases this gave later rise to a foul interpretation of the Council, in the aftermath. [11] Following this, he explains the danger of misinterpreting the notion of “aggiornamento” that was often used by pope John XXIII. While Strle is clear that the pope has chosen this word rather than reform or reformation, he is clear on one point:

“So, it is not a matter of the Church adapting the Gospel and ‘diluting’ it in order to make it ‘acceptable’ for ‘modern man’. It is about the fact that the Church takes into account the problems of the people of its time in its transmission of the gospel of authentic salvation.” [11]

Strle gives us the only acceptable explanation of “aggiornamento,” because only by distancing ourselves from conforming to the world, we can embrace the “aggiornamento” and understand the depths of the Council itself. At the same time, we must not fail to acknowledge that misinterpretations of “aggiornamento” and the “spirit of the Council” arose afterwards, as Strle also acknowledges. One aspect he underlines (adopting the words of Karl Rahner) is that the Council was the Council of the Church about the Church. And while at the beginning, over seventy proposals and drafts were prepared for the Council, they all had one thing in common, the Church and different aspects of the mission of the Church. Drawing on Rahner, Strle outlines (and slightly modifies) the list of the documents based on their ecclesiological content. On the top of the list is *Lumen Gentium* which illustrates the basic principles of the Church, what the Church is, its essence,

foundations, etc. Second point is the inner life of Church: documents dealing with the *munus sanctificandi* (liturgy), *munus regendi* (bishops, Oriental Churches), *munus docendi* (Divine revelation, catholic education), Estates of the Church (life and service of the priests, formation of priests, on the time-appropriate renewal of religious life, on the apostolate of the laity). The third point is the mission of the Church ad extra: its relationship with the non-Catholic Christians and non-Christians, its relationship with the world and worldview pluralism. [11]

Another aspect that Strle presents us with is entitled “Obligation of individual decrees,” which is one of the topics on which there has been much discussion ever since. Strle notes:

“In fact, in none of its texts did the Second Vatican Council intend to speak with the last and final declaration of its highest teaching authority in the Church - nowhere did it pronounce real dogmatic (faith definitively binding) definitions. In any case, this Council also appeared and spoke as the highest ecclesiastical Magisterium; but nowhere with the highest judicial power, so that faithful would be obliged to accept its statements as dogmatic truth.” [11]

While Strle later adds that the Council did stay firm in building on proclaimed truths of faith and dogmas, we are left perplexed on the balance between the pastoral and dogmatic character of the Council. On the one hand it is argued that the Council presented a discontinuity in not explicitly presenting the dogmas of faith, while on the other hand, some underline the continuity that was showed in recalling the teachings of the previous councils, Popes and the Magisterium on relevant topics. However, the pastoral character remained precisely in not presenting obligations to the faithful but guiding them to the fullness of truth. The problems that arose after the Council are something that perhaps was not taken enough into consideration, but with enough time-distance we may be able to evaluate the importance of this.

One last point that Strle makes is on the language of the Council and use of Sacred Scriptures. While not every document was under the same scrutiny, this also reflects in the documents themselves. Strle shows that while the pastoral language of the documents is praiseworthy, it many times led to a preaching character, which is not fitting for the documents of the Council. On the use of Scripture, Strle notes that while this is evident, it would be a mistake to make it the only language, since the Council does not intend to make a biblical interpretation, but the biblical references are only meant as additional affirmation. [11] Following this, Strle presents a brief timeline of the Council [11] and some statistics on the council fathers [11] and briefly elaborates on the participation of the Slovenian bishops at the council. [11] Let us now take a short look at his introduction into the four constitutions of the Council. [5]

3.2. Introduction to Sacrosanctum Concilium

The constitution on the sacred liturgy “*Sacrosanctum Concilium*,” was the first document promulgated by the Council,

and Strle makes some interesting connections in this regard. While the introduction itself is not extensive, Strle's passion and love for the Church and the sacred liturgy are evident.

Strle firmly underlines the fact that *Sacrosanctum Concilium* has to be seen and understood as a prelude into the entire deliberation of the Council and the fact that this was the first document that was presented to the council fathers, is no mere accident, but he considers it an act of Divine Providence. While Strle praises the reform of the liturgy and underlines the need for it (he reminds us that about one quarter of all proposals before the Council were concerning the liturgy), he is not naïve about it, acknowledging that it was because of the human weaknesses that many times the reform remained on the exterior level, and did not concern the interior, which was the main goal of the Council. [12]

Strle makes an important connection between SC and LG: to enable even more the Church to fulfil its mission for the universal redemptive-salvation task, not just the reform of the liturgy, but a deeper understanding and deeper appreciation and care for the liturgy is needed in the Church. Only in this way the Church can advance its work for the unity of Christians. It is for this reason that Strle firmly underlines the sacramental essence of the Church, referencing SC no. 2. Furthermore, here we can sense the connection with the LG, where the Church is characterised and referred to several times as a sacrament of salvation or with regards to its sacramental essence. [12] In this context it is worth mentioning Strle's reference to the common priesthood of the laity, on which he elaborates more in detail in his introduction to LG. But in the context of the liturgy, Strle is clear: article 14 of SC, making a reference to the common priesthood on this basis demands full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful. [12] What is interesting, but not surprising is that Strle never defines what this active participation really means, yet following the constitution itself, he uses this specific language on many occasions, never going more in depth into its meaning. This comes as no surprise, considering that the Magisterium did not define this term, which has caused many problems in the aftermath of the Council. However, this also signals caution on the part of Strle, showing that he does not want to go into definitions that might be against the Magisterium.

Strle dedicates a significant amount of his introduction to the second chapter of the Constitution, on the sacred Eucharist, concerning himself with the sacrifice of the Mass. He notes that the words such as "*representatio*" and "*renovatio*" were abandoned in favour of the terms such as "mystery" and "memorial." While Strle does not explicitly show his dissatisfaction with this, one can sense this from the long explanation he dedicates to justify this change in the language of the Council (referring to his remarks from the general introduction on the language of the Council). He makes a brief, yet dense excursus on the meaning and history of the "*anamnesis*," showing that the mentioned change is not wrong, but it derives from the ecumenical language employed by the council fathers.

From this brief exposition, tackling only some of the most

important points Strle makes, we can see that for him the liturgy, celebrated in the sacraments of the Church culminating in the sacrament of the Eucharist, remains the sacramental essence and heart of the Church. One way in which Strle shows this is by dedicating substantial space to these first articles of SC, while merely summarising the remaining of the Constitution. [19]

3.3. Introduction to *Lumen Gentium*

When introducing *Lumen Gentium* (LG), Strle first briefly reassumes the path leading up to the present document, followed by a brief summary of the content with some explanations. Here, we wish to only outline some of the more intriguing and relevant points.

Strle notes that the Council underlined the sacramentality of the Church in Christ, pointing towards the theological debate whether the Church is the "pre-sacrament" or "fundamental sacrament," but underlines: it was not the task of the Council to solve a theological debate, which follows then the pastoral nature of the Council, a question underlined before. [13] What is worthy of the focus is Strle's reassumption of the second chapter: *De Populo Dei*. He starts with the emphasis of the Council that the Church, the people of God, does not include all people of the planet, but at times looks like a small flock. [13] This emphasis shows Strle's distance from the idea of the "anonymous Christians." However, he is ambiguous shortly after when speaking about the article 14, which addressed the need of the Church for the salvation of people. Strle states that the statement "*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*" is expressed in a careful wording of "*salvari non possent*," which could be interpreted not that there is no salvation outside of the Church, but that there is no salvation without the Church. While Strle notes that this would underscore the notion of Christ as the Saviour and Redeemer, stating there is no salvation without the Church can be rather imprecise in a sense that the Church is not the one who brings salvation – this was brought to us by Christ, as Strle notes. But it is true, in accordance with the first articles of LG, that the Church is a sacrament of salvation and therefore without the Church who continues the redeeming work of Christ on earth, there would be no salvation (at least in the sense of what we now conceive as the ordinary, regular way for salvation). [13]

However, another point is added in this regard, when Strle notes that Council speaks about the full incorporation into the Church (*plene incorporantur*), which in his understanding means that incomplete incorporation is also possible, meaning that only formal incorporation is not sufficient. He goes further saying that one must affirm that Catholics living in mortal sin, are not fully incorporated into the Catholic Church, and therefore deprived of the Spirit of the Lord, which is a *conditio sine qua non* for a person to be considered fully incorporated and part of the Catholic Church. [13]

Another aspect of the second chapter is the emphasis in the article 10, on the common priesthood (*sacerdotium commune*).

While many times we have been led to believe that it was this Council that “invented” this, Strle makes no such claim, but moves in the other direction: “...which, after a long period of neglect with Pius XII, regained its homeland right in the Catholic Church: common priesthood (sacerdotium commune) of all believers.” [13] Strle explicitly claims that the emphasis of the common priesthood of the faithful is nearly something that the Council underscored in a more specific and explicit way.

Concerning the third chapter on the hierarchical structure of the Church, with a special regard to the order of bishops (*De Constitutione Hierarchica Ecclesiae Et In Specie De Episcopatu*), Strle addresses article 19, focusing on the notion of collegiality. He notes that LG uses the terms collegiality and solid/firm community as convertible concepts. He states: “This is to remove the notion that everyone in the congregation has equal rights and that Peter does not have supreme leadership among the apostles.” [13] Strle remarks that this is the incorporation of the infallibility of the Pope into the infallibility of the Church, that was meant to be made at the First Vatican Council. [13] A similar characteristic is displayed when Strle speaks about grace as “grace in the Church” and that the clergy, religious and laity are not three parts of the Church, but in the Church. [13]

3.4. Introduction to Dei Verbum

When introducing the constitution *Dei Verbum* (DV), Strle immediately notes, that this was one of the documents, where theological opinions and the conciliar debates were very heated already before the Council. Strle goes back into the drafting of the document, which was at the beginning addressed as “*De Fontibus Revelationis*” (On the sources of Revelation), noting that the debates were so strong, that the preparatory commission had to be redrafted with new members, and it was only in 1964, that the draft was presented to the assembled council fathers. [14] Strle is clear that while the status of the “dogmatic constitution” does give a special weight and importance to this document, this is not an obstacle to point out also some of the less-fortunate formulations within the document. [14]

The first thing that Strle notes is that it is not the intention of the constitution to answer fundamental theological questions, but to show what the Church believes. An important distinction that Strle makes is that the teachings of the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council regarding the Divine Revelation, is not changed by the Second Vatican Council, but only more explicitly stated, since both of the mentioned councils had certain presuppositions and therefore only certain things were stated explicitly. Strle underlines the importance of the notion of salvation history (DV 2), which culminates in Jesus Christ. In this regard, Strle underscores the importance of the personalistic understanding of Divine Revelation by the council fathers, as expressed in the document. In this respect Strle, shows that also the response to the revelation is first and foremost personalistic, meaning something

personal and integral, not only an act of a consent of intellect to the articles of faith, which is why DV describes faith as a personal response to God. However, this response is only possible by the grace of God. Strle concludes this section noting that the second chapter (DV 7-10) underlines that all members of the Church are subjected to the Word of God and the Sacred Tradition, which are not in itself sources of revelation, but make it present and realise it amongst us. [14]

Next, Strle notes that the final draft and the present text of the constitution, do not use any more the term “*Veritatis salutaris*,” the salvific truth, as the first drafts intended to. However, the current text shows that the Scripture is the truth which God wanted to have it written, because of our salvation, which according to Strle leads to the same point. This is followed by an explanation of the importance of the historical and critical exegesis for interpreting the Scripture. However, Strle together with the text of the constitution underlines, that after such analysis has been made, it is subjected to the judgment of the Church. Furthermore, such an approach to the Scripture must never be understood as the only possible or acceptable one, for the Church always needs to express the entire truth of faith, not simply scientific results. [14] What is interesting here is the parallel that Strle continues to draw (based on the text of the constitution), between the Scripture and the Eucharist, drawing also back to different articles of SC (such as no. 7, 24, 51, 56, etc.). What is even more interesting is that Strle underlines here the importance of the wording “*suprema regula*,” as a direct response to the question of the evangelicals on the role of Scripture in the Church, meaning if it is a norm, law, etc. In this regard, Strle also strongly rejects any way of understanding the council texts as supporting the “two-source theory,” which was very much present in the years following the Council of Trent. [14]

In the end, what is most important for Strle as underlined in his introduction, is that the Church decided to speak about the Sacred Scripture with new fire and vigour. For Strle, this is of central importance for showing that Scripture is fundamental for the Catholic Church. On the other hand, Strle also emphasizes certain amount of freedom of the exegesis of the text and interpretation of it, which however must be always made on the foundation of a deep faith and with great reverence for the sacred text. It is only then that one can understand and uncover the greatness of the word of God. [14]

3.5. Introduction to Gaudium et Spes

While the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), was also one of the council documents which has ignited great debates around the topics it covered, Strle approaches GS with great care and moderated pace, in order to clearly outline the teachings of the Council. However, the 26-page introduction is not a small task to embark on, which is why, we will only pin-point some of the most important points that Strle approaches.

Strle outlines the making of the pastoral constitution, which

was drafted from what were at the start four different documents, and it subsequently undergo several different forms, before it was presented to the council fathers. Strle puts greater emphasis on the fact that the pastoral constitution comes from the Council itself, more than any other document that the Council promulgated. This is because GS refers directly to the pastoral nature of the Council. [15] However, the following should be noted:

“It is certainly questionable whether anyone transfers the biblical image of the - one and only - good shepherd to the Church or to its office-bearers (although this was done several times at the Second Vatican Council). If, despite many misgivings, we accept this image, then it has to be said: first and foremost, it speaks to us of the way in which the shepherd follows the sheep he has handed over to him to where it has gone, even if it has gone astray. This is the point to bear in mind when we speak of a 'pastoral' constitution.” [15]

This can also be characterized as a contradiction or at least a characteristic that is and has been criticized on several occasions. Strle shows that the pastoral nature of the Council stands in the fact that the shepherd follows the sheep, even if it wanders onto the wrong path. Here, it is required to explicitly contradict Strle, because not only do we need to apply the parable of the Good Shepherd to the Church and its authorities, but it seems that Strle implies that the Church (shepherd) is to follow its people (sheep). Without any further distinctions, such a view should not be encouraged. However, if we are to understand this in the sense that the shepherd follows the sheep and brings it back from where it wandered off, then we can accept what Strle says. Furthermore, Strle does not address (as also the constitution does not) the question, what is meant with “the world.” Strle claims that the world means humans, yet the Council itself seems to contradict this, when it states that the constitution develops teachings about the world and the humanity. [15]

Furthermore, regarding GS 36, which speaks about the autonomy of the earthly realities and GS 37, which speaks about an unhealthy attachment of some Christians to progress, one can note that Strle defends Teilhard de Chardin, showing that the warning of GS 37 is not to be applied exclusively to de Chardin, but to all people that can be characterized as having unhealthy attachment to progress. [15] However, the problem arises a little later, when Strle states that GS does not use the word “supernatural” and instead of using the axiom “*gratia non toglit naturam*,” speaks about how the Divine does not destroy the human nature (referring to GS 41 and 42). Furthermore, Strle states, that the Council adheres to de Chardin and his idea that everything is moving towards one single omega point. [15] Yet, the problem that seems to arise from this explanation on the mentioned articles is the non-usage of the axiom that grace does not destroy the nature, as well as the fact that the entire constitution does not use the word “supernatural.” While Strle indeed is correct in saying that the fullness of the relationship between nature and grace comes forward in light of Christ, it can be problematic to refer here

to de Chardin and his theory, because the council itself in GS 45 does not. On the other hand, the rejection of the classical axiom of “*gratia non toglit naturam*” is not explicit in the constitution and even Strle here refers to speeches of Paul VI and not to the actual articles of the constitution. As long as one adheres to the sacramental understanding of the Church, where the Church is the instrument of the Divine grace in this world, which is in accordance with the instrumentality of the human nature of Christ, and adheres to the understanding of the Church as the mystical body of Christ, the absence of the word “supernatural” in the constitution can be seen as questionable, because it can lead into contradiction and questionable theories.

Lastly, Strle, when explaining the 5th chapter of the second part (GS 77 and onward), says that while the Council did confirm the right of people not to take up arms if their consciousness forbids them to do so, it is praiseworthy that the Council does not enter the debate regarding a badly formed consciousness. [15] This is interesting, because we have the Magisterium affirming the right to conscientious objection, yet in Strle’s interpretation of GS, the Council does not speak here about a badly formed consciousness. [15] While we could agree that this is not a place to address the matter directly and enter into theological discussion in this regard, it is however a point which can raise questions over the fact that nowhere in the documents does the Council give expression of an opinion or teaching on the matter of badly formed consciousness, which in the case of arms, can lead to the decision of declining to take up arms or to do so. Another question is that for Strle this appears to be an important step forward of the Council. The question at hand is, what kind of victory or victory over whom or what? The Council would need to urgently address these questions, if not at this very point, at least in another document or in a sort of explicative note at the end of the document. The complete absence of this, can pose some very important questions and speculations, which however exceed the intentions of the present article.

At the end of this brief section, we can note that Strle makes an important and interesting analysis of the pastoral constitution, which is enriched by his explanations of pre-conciliar debates and the process of drafting of the certain pieces or articles of the document. This sheds some more insight into understanding the document itself, as well as helping us to understand better certain discussions, debates as well as critics surrounding certain questions which are raised.

4. Ecclesial Christology in Strle: A Synthetic Interpretation

The above expositions of Strle’s introductions into the four conciliar constitutions, show how these texts apply the Council’s teaching to an Ecclesial Christology of Strle, where the Council documents – most prominently *Lumen Gentium* –

serve as an interpretive key for understanding Christ in relation to the Church and Her mission in the modern world. This shows that Strle does not treat the above texts as abstract principles, but rather as a living guide for the Church's Christ-centred self-understanding. Thus, this section illustrates the implications of the above expositions and provides an example of Strle's proper interpretation of the conciliar teaching. While Strle never developed a systematic Ecclesial Christology, nor did he articulate an explicit hermeneutical framework for understanding the Council, the recurring Christocentric and Ecclesiological motifs present in his introductions into conciliar documents permit a synthetic interpretation. This section thus does not explore or reconstruct an explicit doctrine of Strle, but proposes an interpretative reading of his reception of the Council, taking into consideration also his hermeneutic of fidelity.

While Strle's Christology is strongly shaped by Aquinas and Thomistic principles, Strle remains faithful to the Church and its living Tradition by reshaping his Christological vision in line with conciliar teaching, which is both Christocentric and ecclesiological. [1, 3, 22] In this sense, Strle's ecclesial Christology is essentially characterized by both mentioned characteristics of the Council. This shows that on the one hand, Strle remains faithful to the Catholic Church and its living Tradition, the Magisterium, always with the goal to illuminate and point towards Christ. On the other hand, this is shaped by the pastoral focus of the Council and its ecclesiology, culminating in *Lumen Gentium*. The central Christological lines of the Council emerge here:

"Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church. Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission." (LG 1)

The Constitution continues:

"He [God the Father] planned to assemble in the holy Church all those who would believe in Christ. Already from the beginning of the world the foreshadowing of the Church took place. It was prepared in a remarkable way throughout the history of the people of Israel and by means of the Old Covenant. In the present era of time the Church was constituted and, by the outpouring of the Spirit, was made manifest." (LG 2)

These lines frame Christ relationally: God the Father foreshadowed the Church before all ages; the Son constituted it through the Eucharist; the Holy Spirit consecrates and illuminates it. (LG 1-5) The Council emphasized the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, with Him as its Head and the Church being present in the world like a sacrament. Strle's introductions perfectly align with this vision, when he always aims to

present Christ as the Word made flesh and the Head of the Body. Furthermore, Strle integrates this Eucharist-Church connection [6], adopted from the Council, underlining the Church gathering around the altar (*fons et culmen*), where the Church is constituted and made present, renews its visible unity. The Church thus becomes the sacrament of Christ in the world – a visible sign and instrument of His grace in this world: gathered by the Father, believing in the Son, illuminated by the Holy Spirit. Strle's introduction shows the Council's Christocentrism on a practical scale, aligned with his hermeneutic of fidelity, to transmit the faith through ecclesial lenses. As Strle shows already in his general introduction, for him, Ecclesial Christology is the hermeneutic key of the Council, grounding the Church's mystery in Christ's self-gift through His Incarnation and Paschal mystery. This lens frames the *aggiornamento* of the Council as a faithful transmission of salvation in the midst of modern challenges, modelling the hermeneutic of fidelity through the Church as the Body and Sacrament of Christ.

Strle's application resonates deeply with the conciliar Christocentrism, as emphasized for example in GS 10 and GS 45. While the conciliar documents, and especially *Lumen Gentium* focus on the Church's mystery, nature and relation to the modern world, this ecclesial focus is essentially Christocentric: the Church as the sacrament of Christ reveals Him as the light of the nations (LG 1), Head of the mystical Body (LG 7), and as inaugurator of the Kingdom through the Eucharist (LG 3). Scholars highlight this novelty in official magisterial teaching, this completely Christocentric theology, which integrates on the one hand, ecclesiology and on the other hand, engagement of the Church with the world. Strle's introductions advance this vision in a practical manner, to show how conciliar ecclesiology illuminates Christ's ongoing presence in the mission of the Church in the world. In sum, this applies the teachings of the Council by placing the Church as Christ's mystical body at the center, gathered around the Eucharistic sacrifice, in service of the mission of evangelization. [6, 20] This liturgical dimension reflects the Council's constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and its centrality of the Eucharist. The fact that Ecclesial Christology can be traced there, shows the centrality of the liturgy, as well as Strle's understanding of Christ's sacramental presence as truly the essence of the Church on the way to its eschatological fulfilment. Furthermore, Strle's Ecclesial Christology shows that the Sacred Scripture, while having such a central place in the Church, must be understood and interpreted inside the Church, in obedience to Christ and the Magisterium, springing from the living Tradition of the Church.

Ecclesial Christology exemplifies Strle's reception and interpretation of the Second Vatican Council, as the Church's own hermeneutic of fidelity. Christ, the glorified Head is eternally united with His mystical Body the Church, making the Church the *locus* where the salvific truth is present in the midst of historical *aggiornamento*. Strle himself does not invent Ecclesial Christology, but it is a fitting name that we can

apply to his interpretation of the Second Vatican Council. It represents a crossroad or a meeting place of Strle's hermeneutic of fidelity, his Christocentrism and at the same time also the *aggiornamento* of the Council, with perpetual fidelity to the Magisterium, Tradition and the texts of the conciliar documents.

5. Conclusion

The five introductions analysed above illuminate Strle's reception of the Council, not only as a universal ecclesial event, but as a call to contextual theology, which faithfully interprets and applies the Council's teachings within the specific historical, cultural and ecclesiastical realities. Strle took it upon himself to be the pioneer of the post-conciliar renewal in Slovenia, under the heavy burden of the communist dictatorship of Yugoslavia. Strle understood the importance of the event and the need to present it to his students and a wider public, which he has done precisely through the introductions. Strle approached the Council as a turning-point which demands a critical engagement, bridging universal teachings of the Church with the concrete needs of the local Church. At the same time, he ensured continuity in the midst of historical conditioning.

In the immediate aftermath of the Council, Strle focused on translating the conciliar documents and disseminating them widely, and implementing the teachings and principles of the Council. His efforts exemplify the emphasis of contextual theology on inculturating the Gospel. As a professor of dogmatic theology, Strle prioritized expanding on the documents not only to his students, but also to the wider audience, deliberately translating the sometimes-ambiguous language into the lived experience of the Church which was shaped by the tensions of the post-war communism in Yugoslavia. His dual role both as a translator and interpreter of the documents show a pastorally oriented hermeneutic, with a strong theological foundation, which was not immune to the local challenges.

Responding to the call for "*aggiornamento*" of pope John XXIII, Strle made it his primary task as a professor to revise all of his theology textbooks and to integrate the conciliar emphasises, such as those on Christology and Soteriology. He made several updates to these textbooks, mainly by inserting the new theological movements made by the Council, particularly by the documents, which he quoted at length. This enormous work was not only a result of his desire to keep up with theological developments, but a direct response of the call to. What the Pope initially intended only for the Code of Canon law (meaning to 'update' it); Strle made with university textbooks. In his textbook for Christology and Soteriology, Strle reflects:

"I wanted to write a new treatise that would correspond as closely as possible to the instructions of the Second Vatican Council and to the many new directions and emphases that also arose in Christology and soteriology. But time ran out."

[8]

This Neo-Scholastic structure of the course, infused with conciliar renewal clearly reveals Strle's nuanced contextualization: progression in understanding the Tradition through the Holy Spirit, while rejecting any type of overzealous step into an unclear direction. While it might seem that Strle was one of many theologians who accepted and promoted the Council, it is only upon a closer examination that the essence of Strle's relation with the Council emerges. In his general introduction Strle reveals a type of sadness, due to many misinterpretations and abuses of the Council and its documents. Strle is not naïve; he is fully aware of the dangers that somewhat vague language of the Council presents and what is the correct way that we must follow if we are to remain faithful to the Church. For Strle, the Council is not 'point zero,' but is understood in the continuation with the tradition of the Catholic Church. [11] In other words, the tension between innovation and doctrinal fidelity was greatly felt during the 1970s and 1980s in regions like today's Slovenia, which was – as many others – strongly shaped by the pre-conciliar manuals in terms of theological formation.

In this sense, Strle's introductions exemplify a strict hermeneutic of fidelity to the Council and its teaching, something which was by no means an easy task, given the great range of interpretations, already in the immediate aftermath of the Council. By prioritizing the Council's authority over speculation, Strle offers a model for reception that safeguards the integrity of the faith, and invites theologians to serve the Church. [14] Strle does not provide us with his own elaboration on what Ecclesial Christology is, or what is his interpretation of the Second Vatican Council. In this sense, the Ecclesial Christology is the mode of understanding both Strle and his theological contribution, as well as his reception and understanding of the Council, because it reveals his theological basis, rooted in the hermeneutic of fidelity.

In conclusion, Strle's reception and interpretation of the Council through its documents emerges from the analysis presented above, models contextual theology as ecclesial and committed, by employing the hermeneutic of fidelity. He is not a revolutionary, but is careful and contextual, as well as institutionally committed – ecclesial. Strle's interpretation reflects Slovenia's unique historical-ecclesial circumstances, fostering continuity and diversity. As a case study, Strle demonstrates how local Churches implement the Council: distinguishing the unchangeable truths from contextual expressions and offering insight for ongoing renewal, which is faithful to Christ. As such, Strle reflects the broader pattern of post-conciliar theologians who were seeking to understand and interpret the Council within the living tradition of the Church, with attention to its broader historical context and developments, as well as doctrinal continuity. [7] In this sense, Strle's work provides us with a case-study of how the Council was received and implemented in local Churches, considering the position of today's Slovenia on a cross-road between Eastern and Western Europe, their influences, contexts and ecclesial realities.

Abbreviations

SC	Sacrosanctum Concilium - Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy
LG	Lumen Gentium - Dogmatic Constitution on the Church
DV	Dei Verbum - Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation
GS	Gaudium et Spes - Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World

Author Contributions

Filip Veber is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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