

## Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils (2 Volumes)

Edited by Norman P. Tanner  
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2400p \$195

The publication of these two volumes is a significant event: For the first time we have an English translation of all the decrees (that is, of all the finally approved documents, such as creeds, determinations, canons, constitutions, decrees and declarations) of the 21 ecumenical councils, as they are recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, from the Council of Nicea (325) to Vatican II (1962-65).

This work is based on a collection entitled *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, published in its third edition in 1973 by the *Instituto per le Scienze Religiose* in Bologna, Italy. It contains the conciliar documents in their original version (and in Latin if the original was not in Latin), with a preface by Hubert Jedin and a general introduction by Giuseppe Alberigo; also with introductions and appropriate bibliographies for each of the councils and 10 indices (chronological, biblical, conciliar, patristic, liturgical, canonical) of references to the Roman magisterium, to personalities, authors and topics handled by the councils—a great help for researchers. Now we have it all in English, plus the original texts in pages facing their translations.

The English version was done by 28 British Jesuits, many of them internationally known for their work in theology or history—a team superbly qualified to handle so many historically conditioned and doctrinally sensitive texts. When it comes to genuine scholarly work about the councils, there is no substitute, of course, for the original texts. But a good translation can still do yeoman service in our age, which is not renowned for the knowledge of ancient languages. The task of the translators could not have been easy, as anyone knows who has ever struggled with rendering the nuances of ecclesiastical Greek or Latin (of diverse ages) into lucid and modern English. How many times, when the translators depart, interpreters must be called in to clarify the English! Not so with this work. As far as I could ascertain, the old documents have come alive at the hands of the translators, and they can make fascinating reading in smooth and flowing English while remaining faithful to the original meaning. Tanner, the editor, notes:

“The aim has been to provide an accurate and readable translation, not a literary masterpiece.” The translation is substantially all that, and we have a literary piece as well.

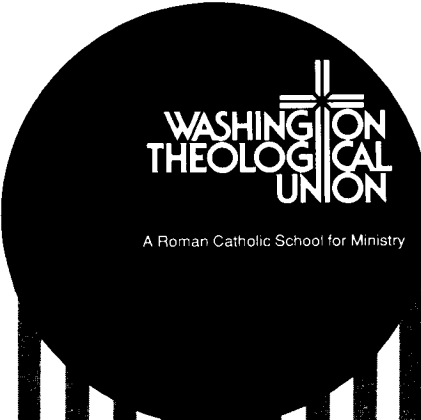
A minor issue: When in the original texts the same expression carries the same meaning, it should be rendered consistently with the same English words. I counted three different translations for *sacra scriptura*; also for *anathema*, and noticed other similar occurrences.

A more delicate issue: When the original expression does or can carry different meanings (especially when much depends on those meanings), the translators should follow a clearly declared policy: Either they should use the same English word throughout and let the reader struggle with the meanings, or they should try to convey the different meanings through appropriately varied English expressions—thus effectively becoming interpreters (and being ready to take the blame for it). I counted four different translations (that is, interpretations) of the sensitive term *obsequium*, used by Vatican II, but I discovered no principle guiding their selections. This problem is compounded when an original word has no equivalent in English; for the sake of precision, an editorial device should be worked out to alert the reader to the situation.

An issue of terminology: At times, the translators do not seem to be familiar with accepted (or rejected) technical expressions—*institutum religiosum*, by Vatican II again, is incorrectly rendered as “religious foundation” (which has another meaning), nor should it be called “religious congregation”—a description that the Vatican II and the Code of Canon Law have studiously avoided.

Undoubtedly, there is a wide and open market for this work. All who are interested in theology or church history should have it on their desk. I fear, however, that it will remain confined to libraries since few persons will be able to afford it. A paperback edition (perhaps in one volume, English only, since the collection in the original languages is readily available) should be brought out soon. The light of the councils must not be kept under a bushel—in this case, the price playing the role of the bushel. Overall, these two volumes are a remarkable achievement and a well-conceived contribution to alleviate the theological (and cultural) needs of our times.

LADISLAS ORSY



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