During four years in session, Vatican Council II held television audiences rapt with its elegant, magnificently choreographed public ceremonies, while its debates generated front-page news on a near-weekly basis. By virtually any assessment, it was the most important religious event of the twentieth century, with repercussions that reached far beyond the Catholic church. Remarkably enough, this is the first book, solidly based on official documentation, to give a brief, readable account of the council from the moment Pope John XXIII announced it on January 25, 1959, until its conclusion on December 8, 1965; and to locate the issues that emerge in this narrative in their contexts, large and small, historical and theological, thereby providing keys for grasping what the council hoped to accomplish.

What Happened at Vatican II captures the drama of the council, depicting the colorful characters involved and their clashes with one another. The book also offers a new set of interpretive categories for understanding the council’s dynamics—categories that move beyond the tired “progressive” and “conservative” labels. As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the calling of the council, this work reveals in a new way the spirit of Vatican II. A reliable, even-handed introduction to the council, the book is a critical resource for understanding the Catholic church today, including the pontificate of Benedict XVI.

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My Personal Review:
If you are looking for the one book you will read on the meaning of the Second Vatican Council, search no further for you have found it in What Happened at Vatican II. Fr., O'Malley is both a church historian and an historian of culture, recognized as the best in his field. These two areas of
his expertise combine marvelously in this ground-breaking study of Vatican II. Whereas other historians of the Council catalogue its proceedings, Fr. O'Malley cogently and convincingly explains what the impact of those proceedings were for the history of the Roman Catholic Church. He deftly demonstrates how Vatican II diverged from previous councils in style as much as substance. By abandoning the language of the Roman Senate that had characterized previous Roman Catholic Church councils, Vatican II spoke to the People of God without condemnation and anathema. In this sense, the wishes of Pope John XXIII for a pastoral rather than a doctrinal council were realized.

Fr. O'Malley's engaging writing style brings all of the major players of the Council to life. He eschews simplistic explanations and gets to the heart of the matter in each of the four periods that the Council met between 1962-1965.

At a time when some in the Roman Catholic Church actually repudiate Vatican II and attempt to claim that nothing of import really happened at the Council, Fr. O'Malley presents a vibrant and vital portrayal of the reform that the Council intended for the Roman Catholic Church. One of his most poignant insights is that those who would downplay the significance of Vatican II for the history of the Roman Catholic Church actually do the Council a great disservice by denying it the greatness that it had hoped for in its reform of the Catholic Church. Fr. O'Malley's assessment of the Council puts the lie to their denial.

You will not be disappointed by this book. Not only is it a pleasure to read, but it is also a repository of full and substantive factual information on what happened at Vatican II.

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