

Sr. Maureen Sullivan, OP
Future Church
Vatican II Series
June 16, 2021

VATICAN II: The Church Looks at Itself

INTRODUCTION

Good evening and welcome to our final talk on Vatican II.

Since Vatican II was a council *of* the church, *about* the church...it is appropriate that we end our series with a look at how Vatican II contributed to the church's own self-understanding.

And *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church will serve as the context for this discussion.

LG has been called the centerpiece of the sixteen documents because it contains so many of the key theological achievements of the council.

And, as with each of the previous talks, we need to offer a brief overview of the pre-Vatican II self-understanding that prevailed in the years leading up to the council.

In order to truly appreciate Vatican II, one must have a sense of Vatican I, which occurred 100 years earlier. Most commentators would agree that it is the debate on and articulation of the teaching on papal infallibility that have become synonymous with Vatican I.

Some seven hundred bishops came together at that council. A minority of these bishops was truly reluctant to define infallibility.

They were concerned about the historical and theological problems it would raise. We know today that they were right to be concerned.

One of those minority bishops, Dominican Cardinal Guidi, suggested a formula that would speak of the pope's doctrinal definitions rather than of the infallibility of the pope...since that phrase gave the impression that the pope enjoyed **personal** infallibility.

Cardinal Guidi's suggestion would include the need for the pope to give serious consideration to tradition, which would have involved consulting with his bishops.

This proposal did not sit well at all with Pope Pius IX, who shouted back:

"Tradizione! La tradizione sono io!"

(The Italian makes it sound much more dramatic.)

Translation: "Tradition! I am the tradition!"

In the end, the minority voice was defeated and Vatican I declared that "definitions of the Roman Pontiffs...were of themselves irreformable."

Pius IX died in 1878 but, clearly, his influence would continue to be felt well into the 20th century. By the middle of the 20th century, the Catholic Church was in what we might call a state of siege mentality.

As theologian Thomas Rausch has noted:

"Deeply suspicious of the modern world, Catholic scholarship had been crippled by the atmosphere of suspicion and distrust that followed the Modernist Crisis. Books by Catholic authors were rarely published without a review by ecclesiastical authorities.

And rather than asking new questions and investigating biblical and historical sources, the theology (of the time) demonstrated traditional positions by citing biblical prooftexts and papal and conciliar teachings.”

We have already discussed the prevailing pyramid model with its implications. In this model, the relationship of the pope to his bishops resembled that of a CEO and his company.

It was a far cry from the NT model of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples.

The notion of collegiality...describing the common responsibility that the whole episcopal body has with regard to the exercise of authority and teaching in the church, was non-existent.

But, as we have seen in our previous talks, there were those prophet theologians in our midst who were calling for and writing about the need for renewal and reform.

CHANGING THE UNCHANGEABLE

One of the most treasured characteristics of the church between Vatican I and Vatican II was the church’s “immutability,” the belief that the church and the faith were timeless, eternal realities that do not change.

During the course of the second millennium, we see the church becoming more legalistic, juridical, and clericalistic.

Karl Rahner wrote about this unfortunate development, singling out three components of this model of church:

- its emphasis on the unchangeable

-the belief that the entire church should look like the church in Rome (same liturgy, same discipline, same language, and so on)

-and the belief that the absolute key to unity in the church was papal primacy.

For Rahner, this model was, quite simply, an aberration.

Despite the calls from theologians for change...the church of 1958, when Angelo Roncalli ascended to the chair of Peter, was defensive and immobile in the face of a rapidly changing world.

But this was about to change and Vatican II would be the voice of this change...and the voice of those theologians who had labored for decades to bring the church into modernity and to restore a model of church found in the NT.

LUMEN GENTIUM: A Charter for Change

It is common knowledge that a number of the documents put together during the preparation period for the council were found to be unacceptable once all the bishops came together at the beginning of the council.

This was especially true about the schema, the document on the church, entitled *De Ecclesia*. As one commentator claimed, this document was simply a compilation of papal teachings of the past 100 years.

The bishop from Belgium criticized its triumphalism, clericalism, and its juridicism.

But a critical shift was about to take place. Cardinal Montini, later to become Pope Paul VI, noted that at Vatican II the church would undergo a transition from a juridical vision to a theological vision.

By November 1964, the original schema on the church would become *Lumen Gentium*, Light to the Nations.

That light of course was Jesus Christ.

When one compares the initial draft on the church with the final version of LG, the development is remarkable.

Rather than opening with a chapter entitled “The Nature of the Church Militant,” as did the first draft...LG begins with a chapter on the “Mystery” of the Church...indicating a fundamental shift in the way we understand the church.

THE CHURCH IS A MYSTERY

Before Vatican II, Roman Catholicism often gave the impression that it had all the answers. It projected a grand certitude about all things related to the faith. This often led those outside the church to accuse Catholicism of “ecclesiastical triumphalism.”

But here, in the very first chapter, the word “mystery” is used.

In his writings, Karl Rahner gives what I think is the best theological definition of the word mystery when he says:

“Mystery is not that which I cannot know. (Rather) mystery is that which I cannot exhaust.”

The council fathers appear to be accepting Rahner’s theory, acknowledging that the church, a mystery filled with the hidden

presence of God, is beyond simple definition...just as God is beyond definition.

At best, we can only use descriptive images when speaking about these realities. Hence, the bible speaks about God like an eagle, like a rock, like a mother who never forgets her child.

In choosing the word “mystery” as an image for the church, the council fathers were making an important point.

They chose to reject the language of the past, neoscholasticism, and to renew the faith with the language of the NT.

The mystery of the church, like the mystery of the Incarnation, joins together the divine and the human. In theological terms, a mystery is a reality that reveals God.

Hence, it can be used interchangeably with the word “sacrament.” Both realities make God present to us.

And Jesus Christ is the ultimate sacrament because, in a completely unique way, Jesus Christ makes God present to the world.

As far back as 1938, Henri de Lubac prophetically extended this concept, claiming:

“If Jesus Christ could be called the sacrament of God, then for us the church is the sacrament of Christ.”

The idea of the church as a sacrament enjoyed a central place in LG, to the point of discussing the church as a universal sacrament of salvation.

Such a designation would play a role in the council's thinking on the possibility of salvation for all persons.

With regard to the importance of this development, church historian John O'Malley SJ claims:

"Of all the changes, few were more profound in their implications than that there was salvation outside the church, even outside Christianity."

To make his point even further, O'Malley offers a quote from Pope Boniface VIII in 1302...who had asserted:

"Furthermore, we declare, state, and define that it is absolutely necessary to salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff."

Few Roman Catholics living in the pre-Vatican II church would have imagined such a change in the church's theology of salvation. It would have been simply unthinkable for them.

Perhaps Karl Rahner would not have been so surprised. He believed it was the Holy Spirit who could move the church in ways that were not part of the church's planning.

For years, theologians had been looking for ways that "salvation for all" might occur. And it would certainly be an ecumenical breakthrough.

Grounded in the labors of those theologians before the council, LG offers a truly profound statement on universal salvation. It is a rather lengthy quotation so I would urge you to read article 16 in LG.

As you read it, try to remember your thoughts from catechism class years ago, upon hearing the claim that only Roman Catholic baptized persons could be saved.

This momentous development is echoed again in GS, article 22.

In this article, the bishops were writing about the wonderful gifts that are bestowed upon Christians due to their identification with the paschal mystery. Toward the conclusion of article 22, we find one of the most profound statements in all of the council documents:

“All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men and women of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way... For since Christ died for all humans, and since the ultimate vocation of every human is in fact one and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man and woman the possibility of being associated with this Paschal Mystery.”

This paragraph is remarkable on so many levels and it amazes me every time I read it.

The bishops were affirming, on the one hand, that grace is necessary for salvation.

On the other hand, they were claiming that...in a manner known only to God...the possibility of salvation is universally available.

Because the church is a mystery, it is always possible to acquire new and deeper insights into its nature.

Vatican II's teaching on the possibility of salvation for all of humanity is surely one of those insights.

THE CHURCH IS A COMMUNION

Another deep insight to come out of the council was the description of the church as a “communion.”

This image of church is not new. In fact, communion ecclesiology was the very first ecclesiology, as revealed in the NT. Rather than a focus on the church as institution, it emphasizes the sacramental and historical dimension of the church.

This study of the NT image of church uncovered many important insights that would find a home in LG.

For one thing, it revealed that current structures in the church need not be taken as absolute. A careful study of the early Christian communities uncovers a multiplicity of voices in those communities...and NOT a precise hierarchy of offices to be viewed as a permanent form for the future of the church. We find a variety of leadership models that developed according to the needs of the early church communities.

The NT also yielded another critical factor, that being that one cannot understand the founding of the church apart from the activity of the Holy Spirit.

Over the years, Roman Catholic ecclesiology had traditionally emphasized the Christological dimension. Such an emphasis favors the institutional aspect of the church and the significance of those who hold office in the church. In so doing, the legitimate role of the members is neglected.

The concept of the church as communion yields a truly rich ecclesiology.

It sees the Holy Spirit as the source of life in the church and...promotes a renewed appreciation for the role of the charisms given to all the members.

Another implication is the relationship between the local church and the universal church. Local church can refer to something as geographically small as one's local parish or a much larger reality...e.g., the American Church, the Italian Church.

Here in the United States we have the USCCB...the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The church in America has different circumstances than the church in Italy or China.

Following what we have already discussed about the early Christian communities...the different needs of each local community may warrant different structures.

Based on the communion model of church, the monarchical pre-Vatican II CEO model of the pope and his bishops would no longer suffice. Vatican II continued to affirm the concept of papal primacy, which is the authority possessed by the pope by virtue of his office, but it dismantled the CEO model and advanced the concept of collegiality, which is the sharing of authority between the pope and his brother bishops.

No longer would every church in the world "look" like Rome.

LG stresses the role of the bishop as the leader of a given diocese. Hence, the bishop is not the vicar of the pope.

He is the vicar of Christ in the local church.

THE CONCEPT OF RECEPTION

One additional dimension of communion ecclesiology is the concept of **reception**.

Reception is a theological term that refers to the process by which official teachings and decisions are accepted, assimilated, and interpreted by the whole church.

This is not simply a matter of obedience by the faithful. Correctly understood, it involves a degree of assent on the part of the faithful as well as the possibility of judgment.

This idea did not enjoy a major role in pre-Vatican II ecclesiology.

For the most part, teachings were accepted primarily because of the authority of those making them.

In a communion ecclesiology, respectful of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the community, members have a responsibility in the ongoing search for truth.

In fact, in the mind of Cardinal Suenens, a leading figure at Vatican II, “co-responsibility was a central theme of the council.”

THE CHURCH IS A REALITY IN THE MAKING

We look now to one final dimension of Vatican II’s understanding of the church...that it is a pilgrim people of God on a journey through history, moving toward its final destiny: God.

The period between Vatican I and Vatican II was a time of significant growth and development in the field of ecclesiology.

And the notion of “change” proved very disturbing to those who subscribed to the classicist worldview.

For them, change implied mistake.

If you are of the mind that your church can be identified with the one true church of Christ, the kingdom of God on earth...and that your church possesses absolute certitude about all matters of faith, then such an attitude can be understandable.

This of course was not the view taken by our prophet theologians.

They knew that there were some elements of the faith that belonged to the very essence of the faith and would endure always. They also knew that there were others that could change - in fact, must change.

The foundation for their confidence on this point was the theory of the development of doctrine...a concept that was formally introduced by Cardinal John Henry Newman in his famous work entitled *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, written in 1845.

Newman was convinced that the church was capable of infinite growth. And his position found a home in LG.

In the very first article, we find a remarkable statement:

“The church desires now to *unfold more fully* to the faithful and to the whole world its own inner nature.”

According to Karl Rahner, this “unfolding” is inherent in the divine plan and we need not fear...because God as “absolute future” was the key to the church’s future.

Because of the shift from the classicist worldview to the historically conscious worldview...which we discussed in a previous presentation... the council fathers came to agree that changes would be required to meet the needs of the times.

The church is affected by history and it moves toward a final destination.

Eschatology is that branch of theology that deals with issues related to the “end time.”

It points to the fact that our present existence is future oriented. As such, it expresses an openness to a world in the making.

The eschatological dimension of the church carries profound implications for the church’s self-understanding.

For one thing, the church can no longer identify itself with the kingdom of God, an idea that prevailed before the council. Rather, it is a sign pointing to the future kingdom promised us by God.

The church is not an end in itself. Instead, its task is to be an instrument of the Spirit of Christ. As such, it is always a human, and therefore sin-burdened instrument.

And because it is sin-burdened, it can never divinize itself or any of its institutional structures.

Since the church is an eschatological reality, the faithful are referred to as a “pilgrim people” of God. Their holiness is an imperfect holiness and can be considered something of a mandate for ongoing reform and renewal.

As we saw in a previous talk, Yves Congar maintained that genuine reform would require an openness to adapt the structures of church life to new situations...to refuse to let any stage in the life of the church be considered definitive.

He knew this thinking would disturb those who possessed a monolithic, monarchic, and divinized view of the church, a position Congar saw as a fallacy.

And, in the mind of Karl Rahner, to suggest that the customs and disciplines of the church at any given time could be considered definitive, was a heresy.

His thinking was based on the central role of the Holy Spirit, who Rahner maintained, was responsible for the development and unfolding of the original treasure of faith.

When a central role is given to the Holy Spirit, the church is never a finished product...it is always an eschatological reality, a people-to-be on its pilgrim way to God.

CONCLUSION

Some closing thoughts...

In 1959, when Yves Congar heard of John XXIII's decision to convene an ecumenical council, he remarked:

“This could only make sense in faith. If it has been without reflection...then what a catastrophe! Or, it is the work of the Holy Spirit, in which case everything is possible.”

In our discussions of the various theologians who paved the way for Vatican II, one thing becomes clear: they were convinced that the Holy Spirit was the soul of the church.

They took seriously the words from John's gospel: "When the Spirit comes, he will guide you into all the truth...and will declare to you the things that are to come."

Their confidence was grounded in a profound theological concept known as "indefectibility."

Based on the promise of the Risen Christ to be with us until the end of the age, indefectibility maintains that sin will never so dominate the church that it could be totally unfaithful to God's truth...a truth that unfolds ever more fully through history.

No human weakness, no failure, no human system of thought can fully obscure God's grace.

The promise of the Risen Christ assures us that, despite our sinfulness, despite our imperfect attempts to articulate revelation in human words and systems of thought, error will not have the final word.

Vatican II gave support to this concept in GS:

"It does not escape the church how great a distance lies between the message she offers and the human failings of those to whom the Gospel is entrusted...Led by the Holy Spirit, the church unceasingly exhorts her sons and daughters to purify and renew themselves so that the sign of Christ can shine more brightly." (GS, 43)

Systems of thought, theological articulations of the faith, and worldviews are simply the vehicles through which we attempt to bring God to birth again in each new generation.

But these vehicles are historical realities. They can change, grow and develop.

There is, however, one constant: the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This is what our prophet theologians came to understand and this is what sustained them during the darker moments of their personal theological journeys.

This is what can sustain us during our given moment in the church.

When we look back on the bumpy road of theology between Vatican I and Vatican II, the presence of the Holy Spirit cannot be denied.

And that journey has proved the wisdom of these words from the great Cardinal Suenens:

“The history of Christianity is for us a school of humility. This same history is also a school of hope.” (Suenens, *A New Pentecost?*)

