

**Sr. Maureen Sullivan, OP**  
**Future Church**  
**Vatican II Series**  
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***VATICAN II: ACHIEVEMENTS AND A WORK IN PROGRESS***

**INTRODUCTION**

Good evening and welcome to tonight's presentation. It is the first of four talks in *Future Church's* series on Vatican II.

I have entitled it: VATICAN II: ACHIEVEMENTS AND A WORK IN PROGRESS.

I am honored to have the opportunity to speak on a topic that is and has been for a long time, the center of my theological research.

When I was teaching undergraduates, I would always tell them that there are some moments in human history that should never be forgotten.

Some of these moments are horrific. The Holocaust is one such example. Even though it conjures up such painful memories, we must never forget this moment.

At the other end of the spectrum, Vatican II is another moment that deserves to be remembered, specifically in Roman Catholic history.

We must not forget this moment because it was truly a watershed moment for the modern church and for the world.

In this evening's talk on Vatican II, I plan to offer an overview of the Council which I hope will set the stage for the remaining talks in our series.

In those presentations, I plan to focus on three particular themes.

I wrote about these themes in my book, *The Road to Vatican II: Key Changes in Theology*.

We will examine how, as a result of Vatican II, the Church now looks at the world, at the laity, and at itself.

As you know, next year marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council.

And this council has been rightly described as the most important religious event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Over three years, from 1962-1965, some 2800 bishops from 116 countries produced 16 documents that set the Roman Catholic Church's course for the future.

Throughout this series of talks on Vatican II, one thing will be in the back of my mind and I hope in yours as well.

We continue to talk about Vatican II even today because of its significance to the life of the church.

But it will only continue to be significant if we give serious reflection to the challenge of the Council for our time.

In one way or another, each of us has been shaped by the Second Vatican Council

We do right to remember Vatican II because in the remembering and the retelling, we access, once again – I hope – the profound power of that event.

### **LEADING UP TO VATICAN II**

In order to put the council in context, let me begin with a brief overview of the prevailing mindset just prior to the council.

Most Catholics in the United States received their religious instruction from the Baltimore Catechism, first published in 1884 and used extensively from 1910-1963.

In and of itself, the Catechism was a good thing. But there were some problems.

For one thing, it was in question and answer format. And many Catholics came to believe that knowing all the answers made one a good Catholic. Of course, that is not true.

I could study all the teachings of the Mormon Church and memorize the answers. That would not necessarily make me a good Mormon...no, it would make me a person who knows what Mormons believe.

So the Catechism's emphasis on intellectual knowledge of the faith often neglected the need for that knowledge to touch the heart and soul.

Another drawback was that it was marred by an air of defensiveness.

The defensive stance of the catechism reflects something of the theological and pastoral climate in the pre-Vatican II church.

It was a church concerned with maintaining internal unity and external conformity...

...while casting a suspicious and sometimes hostile glance toward those outside the faith.

To disagree with the church was to disagree with God. To leave the church was to abandon God.

As time passes, however, it becomes harder and harder to convey the incredible significance of the impact of Vatican II...

...because the pre-Vatican II Catholic way of life and thinking in many ways no longer exists...

...except perhaps in the minds of those who are old enough to have lived in "both churches."

For post-Vatican II generations, this former view is simply unknown.

On Dec. 17, 1965, just days after the Council ended, *Time* magazine printed an insightful article entitled: "How Vatican II Turned the Church toward the World."

It quoted two men who were very close to the council's activities.

With regard to the church before Vatican II, the English Benedictine Abbot, Dom Christopher Butler, claimed:

"Before Vatican II, the church looked like an immense, immovable colossus, the city set on a hill, the stable bulwark against revolutionary change."

Then commenting on the enormous change brought about by Vatican II, India's Archbishop Eugene D'Souza remarked:

"The church's whole approach to the world is now one of sincere admiration, not of dominating it, but of serving it, not of despising it but of appreciating it, not of condemning it but of strengthening it and saving it."

So, despite a history of mistrust, distain, and often outright condemnation, the church had reconciled with the world.

Such a moment was the result of many factors, some of which will be covered in next week's lecture on the church and the world.

For now, we look at the opening of John's Council.

### **JOHN'S COUNCIL COMES ALIVE**

On October 11, 1962, John's council opened. With 2540 participants at the opening session, it became the largest gathering in any council in church history.

And, in his remarkable opening address that day, John XXIII offered to the world what he hoped his council would achieve:

"The Christian and Catholic spirit throughout the world is expecting a leap forward toward a doctrinal penetration and a forming of consciences in accordance with authentic doctrine.

This examination of doctrine should be studied and explained following the methods of research and presentation used by modern thought because the substance of the deposit of faith is one thing and the way it is presented in every age is another." (Emphasis mine)

An entire lecture could be devoted to unpacking this quote from John's opening address.

He was sending out an important signal to those theologians who had been working so hard in the decades leading up to the council. Theologians, who in many cases had been disciplined harshly by the Vatican for their modern ideas.

And here was John XXIII basically acknowledging the legitimacy of their approach to theology.

He even invited many of them to serve as *periti*, theological experts, at the council!

The last sentence in that opening remark is one of the most often quoted lines of John XXIII: "The ancient deposit of the faith is one thing and the way it is presented in every age is another."

We will revisit this concept again in our series of talks.

John wanted his council to be pastoral meaning this: a pastoral approach is not without doctrine.

It is doctrinal but in a way that is not satisfied with merely the passing on of concepts and definitions.

It intends to present the truths of salvation in a way which is close to contemporary men and women and which accepts their questions and difficulties and tries to address those concerns.

And this is precisely what Vatican II achieved.

That is why we must never forget the gift that John XXIII was to the church or the gift he gave to the church...the Second Vatican Council.

### **HAAAVE WE LOST THE MOMENTUM?**

However, looking back over the years, I find myself asking: "Have we lost the momentum?"

I fear that many in the church have either forgotten this remarkable moment in our history, or worse, simply do not know about it.

How could this be? So much has been written about Vatican II.

It has been called the most decisive event in modern church history.

It was a moment of grace in the life of the church for so many reasons.

In my February talk about the women at Vatican II, I listed some of those reasons...and I will share some of them again this evening because I believe they contribute to our overall look at the council.

1...Instead of continuing a hostile and suspicious attitude toward the world, Vatican II acknowledged the inherent goodness in the world, as the creation of God.

2...Instead of regarding itself as spotless and all holy, the church acknowledged its errors, failings and sins and expressed the need for the church to continually reform itself.

3...Instead of viewing the church primarily as a pyramid (with the pope at the top, followed by bishops, clergy, religious and finally, the laity)...

... the church reclaimed the New Testament vision of church – a communion vision - with no one better than any other simply by virtue of one's vocation. (e.g., the Catechism page on "Marriage is good, but the vowed life is better.)

The council spoke of one universal vocation: the call to holiness by virtue of our baptism.

And it embraced the New Testament's understanding of the diversity of gifts, of charisms, in the Body of Christ.

4...Instead of focusing our attention on the "next world", Vatican II drew our attention to the need to transform "this world."

5...Instead of viewing other churches with hostility and other religions as false and harmful, the council called us to respect our sisters and brothers.

And perhaps, in one of its greatest achievements (at least in my opinion), the council acknowledged that salvation is a gift that can be offered to all of humanity...not just Roman Catholics. (G&S, article 22)

Despite these remarkable theological developments and invitations to grow, here we are almost 60 years later with so much yet to be implemented.

Why is that?

In fairness, some of this is to be expected. As the great Cardinal John Henry Newman, who attended the First Vatican Council, once wrote: "It is rare for a council not to be followed by great confusion."

And it should be noted that Vatican II was followed by extensive and radical socio-cultural change.

For those of us old enough to remember the 60s, we recall a time of overall protest and disenchantment with authority at all levels. The church would not be immune to this disenchantment.

Still, we need to ask some questions:

1...Have we lost the momentum? Have we forgotten what it was like to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in such an incredible way?

2...How could it be that developments I alluded to earlier – which are clearly found in the council's documents, and therefore official church teaching – have failed to be sufficiently implemented?

As we know, in some circles, these changes are vehemently resisted.

3...What do we do now...how do we genuinely REMEMBER that moment of grace in our church and bring it to fruition?

4...How do we not give into frustration? How do we stay faithful and not walk away from the tradition into which we were born, the tradition that gives us life, that sustains us through the gift of the Holy Spirit?

For one thing, we give thanks for organizations such as *Future Church* that is sponsoring this series of talks on Vatican II.

We also give thanks for those of you who chose to participate in this series. You give me Hope.

We also remember that the Christian God is a God of Promise.

This past weekend I gave a presentation to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondolet and I realized that there was some overlap with what I planned to say to you this evening.

That talk was based on a quote from the Book of Esther in the Old Testament.

Esther's people were about to be victims of genocide and she is persuaded by her uncle to make a courageous move to save them, telling her:

"Remember who you are. Perhaps it was for this very moment that you were created." 4:14

So, if we are discouraged that we have not sufficiently implemented the teachings of Vatican II, maybe this quote can serve us well.

The fact that our God is revealed as a God of Promise is central to biblical hope. We have been given something to hope for.

And biblical hope is grounded in this fact: God always keeps God's promises.

Ps. 89: "I will not violate my covenant, the promise of my lips I will not alter."



Isaiah 46:4 “Even to your old age and gray hairs, I am your God. I have made you. I will carry you. I will sustain you. And I will rescue you.”

Proverbs 3:5-6 “Trust in the Lord and lean not on your own understanding.”

We know that, as a result of Vatican II’s document on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, we no longer read the bible literally - but these words must mean something.

Perhaps this is the moment for which we were created...to advance the rebirth of the church in the new millennium in the spirit and teachings of Vatican II.

### **AFTERMATH OF THE COUNCIL**

As we reflect on the meaning of Vatican II for our time, I think it important to keep in mind the immediate aftermath of the Council in 1965, especially as we try to understand why it has not been sufficiently implemented, even today 60 years later.

One observer at the council, theologian Gregory Baum, has suggested that we should frequently read the opening speech of John XXIII because in that speech John proclaimed that the church, though over almost 2000 years old at the time, was ever new, ever young, ever capable in the Holy Spirit of being reborn and renewed.

John disagreed with the prophets of doom – some of them in his own curia – who, inspired by fear, resisted his call for renewal and reform.

Sadly this resistance continues even today.

But John refused to give in to that resistance.

His opening speech contained the following message as well:

“In the present order of things, Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which by humanity’s own efforts and even beyond its expectations, are directed toward the fulfillment of God’s superior and inscrutable designs.”

Some years after the council ended, Cardinal Walter Kasper said: "I myself have no doubt that the council's finest hour is still to come, that its seed will spring up and bear fruit."

For John XXIII, the outside world was not a wilderness of falsehood, fraught with dangers.

Rather, it was the theater on which God was unfolding the great drama of salvation.

I say to you this evening, it is currently our time to take center stage in this drama.

It is our time to re-tell this story.  
It is our time to rekindle the fire.

## **CONCLUSION**

Let me offer some closing thoughts...

One of the observers at Vatican II was asked: "Who do you think was the most significant figure at Vatican II?"

He responded: "I know that most people would probably say Pope John XXIII or Pope Paul VI. For me, however, it was the Holy Spirit, whose presence was almost palpable."

We need to feel that presence of the Spirit.

We have yet to implement the charter written at Vatican II that restored the church as the people of God.

That charter was intended to make the church more humble, more at the service of the world, more decentralized.

And, almost as to assure us, at the last conclave the Holy Spirit gave us a pope who is a champion of the kind of church Vatican II envisioned.

One of the theologians who assisted the bishops at Vatican II, Dominican Father Yves Congar, OP, was truly a man of vision.

He maintained that “genuine reform would be recognized by 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, claiming that along the journey, the ecclesiastical apparatus must never be permitted to obscure God’s grace.” (Emphasis mine)

He could be describing Pope Francis in this statement, who, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, told us:

*“We seek to abandon the complacent attitude that says: “We have always done it that way. I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of re-thinking the structures, styles and methods of evangelization in their respective communities.” EG 33*

This is precisely what Congar was calling for, maintaining that this is how we would recognize genuine reform in the church, when we refuse to let any stage in the life of the church be considered definitive.

And, like John XXIII, resisting the prophets of doom at the Council, Pope Francis concurs.

In an address given not too long ago to the Curia, well known for their resistance to change, Francis quoted 19<sup>th</sup> century composer Gustav Mahler, saying:

**“Tradition is not the worship of ashes...it is the preservation of the fire.”**

Those theologians working in the decades before Vatican II, who were paving the way for the council’s extraordinary developments, would have loved this quote.

So you see...the Council is not over.  
It isn’t a then, it is a now!

We must remember that we are a church which has always found a way to reform.

Vatican II showed us the way.

One of my favorite quotes from the council documents is this:

“The future of humanity is in the hands of those who are strong enough to give future generations reasons for living and for hoping.”

We are the people of God. We have a voice.

Do we dare not tell this story to a new generation?











