

**Sr. Maureen Sullivan, OP**  
***Dei Verbum* and Synodality**  
**Feb.16, 2022**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to this evening's presentation.

Tonight we will discuss *Dei Verbum*, Vatican II's Constitution on Divine Revelation, and its relation to synodality.

Before going into our theme for tonight, I want to make a comment about the participants who have been attending the talks.

I have received many emails from you after the first two talks and I cannot tell you how much I have appreciated those comments. Each was important in its own way.

### **SLIDE ONE *Sensus Fidei***

-One woman sent me seventeen suggestions she plans to send on to those overseeing the Synod. Her comments were deeply thought out and I believe they would serve the common good of a synodal church.

-I have received many requests for additional information so that these participants could learn more about Vatican II and the Synod.

-One woman told me she went back to rewatch the four talks I gave on Vatican II last Spring to learn more about the Council.

I mention these emails because I believe they are a superb example of the *sensus fidelium*, a concept we have already talked about.

They are also an indication of the immense interest the people of God have in both Vatican II and synodality. Your comments are a sign of hope for our church...and for the Synod.

This evening's talk will be the final talk which focuses on the synod....since our last talk of the series next Wednesday will be entitled: "The Legacy of Vatican II for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church."

But of course the synod will play a role in that legacy since Pope Francis' theology is deeply rooted in the council.

We know that the final stage of the synod's preparation will occur at the Synod of Bishops in Rome in 2023.

But that will not be the end of the synodal process.

Rather, it will be the beginning of all of us living in the new reality that is being born through these two years of preparation.

To return to our discussion of *Dei Verbum* and Synodality...

A few years ago, Jesuit theologian Fr. Thomas Reese made a very insightful comment...he said: "The church needs a massive Bible education program."

There is no question that Vatican II's impact on Catholicism's understanding of Revelation was simply extraordinary.

One has only to remember how things were before the council.

**SLIDE TWO Catholic Devotions**

The bible was virtually absent from Catholic devotional life. At the time, our prayer life outside of Mass centered on devotions like the Rosary, novenas, Stations of the Cross, Benediction, etc.

This is not to say that these devotions no longer feed the life of Christian spirituality, because they do.

But before *Dei Verbum* claimed that “**Scripture is the soul of theology**,” very few Catholics were aware of the rich biblical foundations for many of the religious devotions of their lives.

Happily, today it would be rare to find a Catholic college that does not offer a course in the study of the bible.

However, many, if not most of us here tonight, fall into the category I refer to as “Cradle Catholics.”

We received our earliest introduction to the teachings of Catholicism before Vatican II. And we can remember how scripture was read at the time.

The most popular view of Revelation was called the “propositional” view.

### **SLIDE THREE Revelation**

In this view, Revelation was understood primarily as a clear deposit of truths, a catalog of facts about God.

As a result, scripture was believed to contain the literal Word of God.

I can recall hearing the story of Jesus telling his disciples to lay down their nets after an unsuccessful night of fishing. We are told they caught 153 fish.

Given my literal understanding at the time, I naturally assumed someone actually counted the fish.

This literal view was not always so innocent (or amusing) as the fish story.

### **SLIDE FOUR "God's Will"**

Think for example about the term "God's will." Because we thought we pretty much understood God at the time...

...when tragic events occurred in our lives that seemed to challenge the good and loving God we had been taught about, we frequently used the expression: "It must be God's will."

I can remember going to the wake of a little two year old boy who was the brother of one of my second grade students.

I overheard one person say to the parents: "God must have wanted your little angel in heaven."

This kind of thinking hit home personally for me when my mother died. Since she was so young, my father and my sisters and I were devastated.

But I think my father's suffering was even deeper because his faith was shaped by a pre-Vatican II understanding of God.

He was a man of faith but his theology reflected a pre-Vatican II understanding of why bad things happen to good people.

I can still remember him saying: "Why did God take her?" I knew God did not "take" my mother...her illness did.

But this was clearly not the time for me to offer my father a theology lesson.

And we all know the scriptural quote calling us to be “perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.” This expectation was very troubling for many Catholics who were serious about their spiritual development.

Is it any wonder that before Vatican II, the lines for confession every Saturday were so long? We thought just about everything we did was a sin.

### **SLIDE FIVE The Historical Critical Method**

In the decades leading up to the council, theologians realized the inadequacy of this approach to the bible and new light was being shed on how to read and interpret scripture.

Our “prophet theologians” developed what is called the historical critical method. Time does not permit me to give a comprehensive explanation of this method.

But a brief statement would be that it is a scientific method used for understanding the written biblical texts in their original setting and it sought to do two things:

1. Look at questions of authorship of a given book in the bible, e.g., did St. Paul actually write all the letters attributed to him? Or did Moses really write the first five books of the bible?
2. Try to uncover the theological viewpoint of the biblical author, clearly seen in the Gospels. Each gospel tells the Jesus story from a particular theological viewpoint.

For example, biblical scholars came to believe that Matthew was writing for a predominantly Jewish audience because he often includes passages connecting Jesus to the Jewish scriptures.

They also came to believe that Mark's audience was suffering persecution. In the original copy of Mark's gospel, there are no resurrection appearances.

His was the first Gospel written...surely he knew about these appearances.

The destruction of the Jewish Temple by the Romans shaped how Mark portrayed the Jesus story for his audience.

In the original text, after some disciples saw the empty tomb, we read: "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Mark 16:8

Years later, what is called the "Longer Ending," was added to Mark's Gospel. It contained a reference to the resurrection appearances.

This method would have a tremendous impact on theology as a whole, not just the field of biblical studies.

Many of these theologians served as advisors to the bishops at the council and *Dei Verbum* was one of the most important documents to come out of Vatican II.

It led to a profound shift in our understanding of the term Revelation...

...a shift from viewing Revelation as simply facts about God to seeing Revelation as God's personal self-disclosure.

God was actually giving us (revealing to us) a deeply personal self-communication.

### **SLIDE SIX Head/Heart Knowledge**

The study of Scripture must involve more than head knowledge. It now intended to address the human heart.

Our response, our act of faith, would require more than knowing all the answers to catechism questions.

Our act of faith now required a profoundly personal **YES** to God's invitation to be in a covenant relationship.

This shift would have a major influence on the spiritual life of the faithful.

A new era in biblical scholarship had arrived and *Dei Verbum* was the herald of that era.

I am assuming that most of you are aware that among the bishops present at Vatican II, there were two predominant groups.

They have been referred to as the conservatives and the progressives.

In general, I try not to use labels like this because they do not tell the whole story but...

...in the interest of time, I will rely on these terms.

After John XXIII's January 1959 announcement that he was convening an ecumenical council, about two and a half years of preparation followed.

During this period, a number of preparatory documents were written, primarily by members of the Curia, most possessing a conservative mindset.

### **SLIDE SEVEN Cardinal Ottavani and His Episcopal Motto**

The head of this group was Cardinal Alfredo Ottavani whose episcopal motto was: *Semper Idem*, meaning “always the same.”

This group was basically horrified that John was calling a council. And they had no intention of letting the council last more than one session.

But, once the council opened and the world’s bishops had a chance to review the documents prepared by this overly conservative group...

... the documents were basically rejected for being too juridical, rigid, tied to past theology, and defensive.

This was the case with *Dei Verbum*. It was criticized for its defensive spirit, its theological jargon, its anti-ecumenical tone, and its suspicious attitude toward biblical scholars. (Hahnenberg)

As one of the more progressive bishops commented:

Vatican II was meant to be a pastoral council.

It was meant to reach out to other Christians and the whole world.

It was meant to revitalize the church.

But the initial draft of *Dei Verbum* did none of these things.



Divisions hardened between the minority group opposed to reform and a majority in favor of reform and renewal.

And it became unclear how the council could proceed on this document.

A vote was taken which only made things worse because there was a misunderstanding of the voting process.

The very next day, John XXIII intervened.

He ordered that the draft be withdrawn and he decided that the document would be revised by a new joint commission, with Cardinal Ottaviani and Cardinal Bea as joint presidents.

Cardinal Bea was a progressive.

John's intervention breathed a new spirit of hope into the proceedings.  
(Hahnenberg)

When DV was formally approved and promulgated on November 18, 1965, its story had become one with the council itself.

The final vote was 2544 in favor to 6 opposed. Today it enjoys the full support of the official church.

“The final text reflects the council's transformation from a dogmatic defense of ‘the Tradition’ ...

...to a positive, pastoral embrace of God's self-revelation to the world.” (Hahnenberg)

## **SLIDE EIGHT Dynamic vs Static Reading of Bible**

In our last talk we discussed John Henry Newman's theory of development of doctrine.

This theory would play a very important role in *Dei Verbum*.

The Council Fathers rejected the pre-Vatican II idea of viewing Revelation as a once and for all finished deposit of faith...

...as eternal realities passed down to each generation with the same understanding and interpretation held by previous generations.

Instead, Vatican II emphasized a dynamic understanding of God's Word.

The Catholic Church maintains that formal revelation is complete in Jesus and we can expect no further public revelation. (DV, article 4)

But *Dei Verbum* maintains that we continue to meet God in and through our experience of the world.

Writer Paula D'Arcy puts it beautifully when she says: "God comes to us disguised as life."

The Word of God does not change...but our grasp of those truths can undergo development. (E.g., Paul's teaching on virginity in Corinthians)

DV makes this very clear in article 8:

*The tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the church, with the help of the Holy Spirit.*

*There is **a growth in insight** into the realities and words that are passed down to us...*

*...as the centuries go by, the church is always advancing toward a plentitude of divine truth.*

This journey toward the fullness of truth is echoed by Pope Francis as well and will serve us well in our thoughts on synodality.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*, Francis wrote:

*God's wisdom is so deep and so broad that the soul, however much it has come to know of Revelation, can always penetrate deeper within it.*

*By Christ's coming, he brought with him all the newness with which he is always able to renew our lives and amaze us with **divine creativity**.*  
EG, 11

*Whenever we make the effort to recover the original freshness of the Gospel...new avenues, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent words with new meaning for **today's world**."*

This attempt to recover the original freshness of the Gospel is precisely what Vatican II sought to do.

It is also what Francis is asking us to do with the synod...

...and, in so doing, discover new paths, new avenues with different forms of expression for **today's** world.

Francis claims that we must be bold and rethink structures and methods of evangelization...

...that the church's language, structures and ways of doing things need to be rechanneled for evangelization in today's world.

The Gospel does not change...we do.

Our God continues to be revealed and discovered.

The Incarnation did not happen once and for all 2000 years ago. No, divinity entering humanity continues.

### **SLIDE NINE Divinity Entering Humanity**

As a result, the church is always being called to a new way of being present to the world...

...and each and every change requires a new incarnation of the divine in our midst.

*Dei Verbum* attests to this fact:

*God, who creates and conserves all things by his Word, provides men and women with constant evidence of the Divine in created realities.*

Again, Francis echoes *Dei Verbum* when he writes:

*Evangelization would bit be incomplete if it did not take into account the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of the community's concrete life. EG, 181*

Francis has a unique term for this ongoing presence of God in creation. It is "Seeds of the Word."

By this he means whatever is true and holy in the realities in which we live. He calls these realities “spaces for grace.”

The theological meaning of the synod can only be appreciated when we locate it in the comprehensive vision of Vatican II regarding faith and revelation.

It is this conciliar vision which is clearly the basis for Francis’ call for a listening church, a synodal church, at all levels of church life.  
(Ormond Rush)

Francis believes the Holy Spirit must be given breathing room to bring forth such a church.

And the Spirit’s instrument for interpreting divine revelation is the *sensus fidelium*, a “sense of the faith,” or better – a sense **for** the faith.

We will be trying to listen to God, by listening to one another.

And ultimately, all participants will be able to say, just as the participants of the earliest church Council in Jerusalem were able to say:

“It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” (Acts 15:28)

### **SLIDE TEN Scripture and Tradition**

Within the process of what *Dei Verbum* (article 12) calls “the living tradition” ...

...we find important but **time-conditioned** doctrinal formulations of the church to various issues.

The phrase **time-conditioned** is extremely important. In a previous lecture, I talked about historical consciousness...

...the fact that every expression of a theological truth is conditioned by its moment in history.

And when new data becomes available that sheds light on those expressions...

...they must be taken into account...which may change the teaching.

Think of the church's position on the death penalty.

Or the teachings of Pope Pius IX on the separation of church and state and his denial of religious freedom as an objective right.

These teachings have all changed in light of new data, new questions, etc.

Through the Holy Spirit, Christ dialogues with humanity in **forever new contexts** throughout history. (Ormond Rush)

In this regard, Pope Francis has said: "Tradition is a living reality. The Word of God cannot be mothballed like some old blanket..."

...No, the Word of God is a dynamic and living reality that develops and grows because it is aimed at something that none can halt."

To recall a quote of Francis from a previous talk:

**"Tradition is not the worship of ashes, it is the preservation of the fire."**

Divine revelation did not just happen 2000 years ago.

Revelation is a reality here and now.

The same God, in the same Jesus Christ, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, is forever engaging with human beings in the ever-new here and now of history that moves humanity into new perceptions...

...new questions and new insights, in diverse cultures and places, especially in the church...as it courses through history into unknown territory.

Vatican II urged the church to be attentive to the movements of God present in the flow of history, by attending to the “signs of the times” (Gaudium et Spes, 4 and 11)

### **SLIDE ELEVEN Prophecy and the “Signs of the Times”**

What are the signs of the times in 2022 that reveal God’s will for humanity? I believe those signs led Francis to call for this synod.

Vatican II highlighted in an unprecedented degree the way the Holy Spirit guides the church in troubling times.

*Lumen Gentium 12* is a key passage and is one of Francis’ favorite quotes from Vatican II. It refers to the “supernatural sense” of the faith of the whole people of God.”

In one article I read, the author, Pat Marrin, speaks about the “outsiders” in a community.

He said that these outsiders can analyze attitudes and assumptions and predict changing patterns.

Outsiders are often innovators and prophets and they are not chained to traditions.

They are forward and future looking.

The author sees Jesus as the ultimate outsider.

When I read this article, I thought of something we discussed in our last lecture.

You may recall that I said that the goal of the synod is wisdom...to discover the way the Lord is calling the church to act.

And the members must have the freedom to express their thoughts, concerns, questions, and criticisms.

An essential component in the search for wisdom is to be open to prophecy...not to foretell the future, but to **name reality**.

A single individual or small group may sense powerful currents that are at work far below the mainstream.

Our previous discussion of *Dignitatis Humanae* demonstrated that anyone of us has the ability and the freedom to name realities our church needs to hear...

...and provides us with the courage to perhaps be the prophetic voice in our community...

...or the courage to be the “outsider” ...the innovator or prophet.

## **SLIDE TWELVE A Synodal Church**

It is here that we find Francis’ understanding of a “synodal church.”



In an address he gave a few years ago in which he spoke about the pre-Vatican II pyramid model of church...

...he acknowledged that Vatican II rediscovered the New Testament's communion model of church.

In that address, Francis said:

*Synodality is a constitutive element of the church. In this church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base.*

*A synodal church is one that listens, which realizes that listening is **more** than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn.*

*The faithful people, the college of bishops, the bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, in order to know what the Spirit says to the churches.*

A new theology of synodality needs to be more fully developed...

...a theology grounded in a principle that was dear to the church of the first millennium:

**“What affects everyone must be deliberated by everyone.”**

The *sensus fidelium* must be listened to because it is a place where the revealing God is speaking to the church today.

Pope Francis has urged: “It is not enough to find a new language in which to express our perennial faith.

It is also urgent to do this, in the light of the new challenges facing humanity today.”

He went on to say:

*This is the treasury of things old and new of which Jesus spoke when he invited his disciples to teach the newness that he had brought, without forsaking the old. (Mt 13:52)*

It should be noted that the focus on a future reality of being church in no way diminishes our past. That past produced many saints, scholars and prophets. It produced most of us here tonight.

At the heart of Francis’ synodal, listening church is the special gift which the Holy Spirit bestows on **all** of the faithful...

...the means through which the Spirit whispers guidance to the church. (Ormond Rush)

## **CONCLUSION**

Let me offer some closing thoughts...

In a previous talk, I used the quote: “Were it not for hope our hearts would break.”

I went on to say that our hearts are well cared for because we are Christians, a resurrection people...

...and the central story of our faith leads from a brutal crucifixion to a wondrous, previously unimaginable new life.. (GSR)

And that story can continue to live in our midst as we attempt to participate in the birth of a new reality of church.

## SLIDE THIRTEEN A God of Promise

That story can continue because our God is a God of promise.

Scripture offers us countless quotes to support hope for our future.

We know that as a result of Vatican II, we no longer read the bible literally...but the words must mean something...as in...

Is. 46:4 “Even to your old age and gray hairs, I am your God.”

Jer. 29:11 “For I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Jer. 29:12 “You will call on me and I will listen to you.”

Philippians 4:6 “Do not be anxious about anything.”

And the Book of Revelation 22:1 “These words are trustworthy and true.”

Biblical hope is the deliberate confidence in the character of God whose ways we may not always understand.

But like so many biblical figures, we live **our** moment in history fully convinced that God will do what God has promised.

Author Isaac Singer once wrote: “Life is God’s novel.”

We have the power to say that this is not how the novel of our church ends.

There comes a time when we are called to choose between turning the page or closing the book...

...and by virtue of your presence here tonight, I believe you are convinced that God is still writing our story.

**SLIDE FOURTEEN Perhaps You Were Born for a Moment Such as This**

We are allowing our hopes, not our fears, shape our future church...a synodal church in which the voice of each member is precious.

Thank you.

