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***Dignitatis Humanae* and Synodality**  
**February 9, 2022**

**INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to this evening's presentation.

As you know, our goal is to go a little deeper into some of the Vat II documents and discuss their relationship to Pope Francis' synod.

This evening I plan to examine the Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*.

Before doing that, I need to address two other topics.

I have done a good deal of research for these presentations and I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep respect and gratitude to many of my fellow theologians from whom I have learned so much about Vatican II and the Synod.

I have relied on the most well-respected and trusted theologians, both past and present, in writing these talks. I hope I do them justice in my attempt to share their insights.

**SLIDE ONE Saint John Henry Newman**

The second topic has to do with a concept developed by theologian, Saint John Henry Newman...whose works date back to the 1850s.

I begin with Newman because one of the concepts that is central to this evening's discussion of the Declaration on Religious Liberty finds a home in a theological principle attributed to John Henry Newman.

Newman is one of my theological heroes and, after tonight, I think you will share my respect for him.

Vatican II is sometimes referred to as “the council of John Henry Newman.” And, once, during a papal audience, Pope Paul VI declared that Vatican II could be considered “Newman’s hour.”

There is no doubt that Vatican II upheld a number of controversial positions that Newman held in his own day...often at his own personal cost, because there were many at the time who were furious with some of Newman’s theological ideas. (Ian Ker)

But, at Vatican II, Newman was vindicated.

He began his theological career as a member of the Anglican Church, but in 1845 he converted to Catholicism. Not long after his conversion he formally expressed his wish to become an Oratorian, an order founded by St. Philip Neri.

Newman was committed to many theological issues – among them the dignity of the laity, the inviolability of conscience, and the freedom of theological investigation.

One of Newman’s best-known essays, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* is often acknowledged as an anticipation of Vatican II.

Newman’s thoughts consulting the faithful found a home in the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.

And we can hope that this attention to the laity in matters of doctrine will also be seen in the results of Francis’ synod.

## **SLIDE TWO The Theory of the Development of Doctrine**

But for our purpose tonight, we will focus on Newman’s teaching on the **development of doctrine**.

Before Vatican II, the church had prided herself on its immutability, on the unchanging nature of its teachings. But a major shift occurred at Vatican II, a move from a classicist worldview to a historically conscious worldview.

The traditional view maintained the truth of the past as certain and **unchangeable** for every future time and culture.

Whereas the post-Vatican II view maintains that every expression of a theological truth is a product of the time period in which it is expressed.

This does not mean that basic truths of the faith change. Rather, believers come to deeper insights into these truths and how they are illuminated by contemporary conditions.

Pope John XXIII himself espoused this new world view in his opening speech at the council saying:

“The ancient deposit of the faith is one thing; the way it is articulated in every generation is another.”

Implied here is that each new age presents new data, new questions, new discoveries that theologians must think about when they seek to give reasons for the hope that is in them.

This shift is critical not only for our discussion of religious freedom but also for the synod.

### **SLIDE THREE The Church's Growth**

As I said last week” “Something new is being born.” And our task in birthing this new reality of church will be to preserve the fire and not worship the ashes of the past.

In this regard, Newman believed that a valid test of doctrine was not about immutability but about life and growth.

He believed that the church was an entity in the process of development...that it unfolds through history and that doctrine **does** develop as the Holy Spirit assists the church to grasp the truth that is implicit in the gospel.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this concept of the development of doctrine, so central to Newman's theology, was widely accepted in the Catholic Church.

In the decades preceding the council, there was a group of theologians I like to call “prophet theologians,” who were actually paving the way for the theology that would be born at Vatican II.

These theologians, like Newman, knew that there were some elements of the faith that belonged to the very essence of the faith and would endure always. E.g., the Trinity

They also knew that there were other elements that could change as the church moved through history.

## **SLIDE FOUR Pre and Post Vatican II Models of Church**

One example of such a change is the move from the pre-Vatican II pyramid model of church to the communion model of church after the council...a rediscovery of the first ecclesiology of the church found in the New Testament.

Newman’s position finds a home in *Lumen Gentium*. In the very first article we find a remarkable statement:

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

This statement is truly remarkable given the church’s attitude toward change in the decades before the council.

This “unfolding” is inherent in the Divine plan. We need not fear it.

Theologian Karl Rahner, one of the experts at the council, believed that God as “absolute future” was the key to the church’s future.

Clearly, what we find in *Lumen Gentium* is a dynamic understanding of church. Thus, it is characteristic of Catholic doctrine to also unfold itself ever more fully as we move through history.

## **SLIDE FIVE Revelation**

The truths of revelation do not change...but what does change is the way that humans understand and express these truths in a given time period.

They undergo growth and development.

In a sense, before Vatican II, Catholic theology became locked in a system of timeless truths. But more and more theologians were becoming dissatisfied with this perception.

Like John Henry Newman, they were becoming convinced that Catholicism must be defended by reason, not by force.

There is one additional element of Newman's theology that warrants our attention before moving on to our discussion of the Declaration on Religious Liberty.

Last week we laid the groundwork for the role of the laity in the synod. We talked about the "sensus fidelium."

Newman's position, though very controversial in his day, would finally be accepted at Vatican II.

During his lifetime, he was troubled with the failure of church leaders who did not appreciate the genuine role of the layperson in the church.

In Newman's day, it was not common for laypersons to become professional theologians, but he did maintain that all believers should receive a solid religious education.

"I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech...but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand...who know their creed so well, that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it."

I think contemporary religious educators would heartily endorse these words of Newman.

## **SLIDE SIX *Dignitatis Humanae, Declaration on Religious Liberty***

### **DIGNITATIS HUMANAЕ**

As we move into our examination of the Declaration on Religious Liberty, I hope you will soon recognize the significance of the theology of John Henry Newman as a foundation – not only for this document – but also for the synod.

Theologian Edward Hahnenberg has written an excellent book on Vatican II: *A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II*. (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007.)

In it he goes through each of the sixteen documents and highlights in a truly concise manner the key points we need to know about each of the documents.

His treatment of DH is particularly helpful.

He claims that DH was the most bitterly contested document of Vatican II because it raised a question that ran beneath all of the council's discussions: how much was the church willing to change?

When I was teaching my course on Vatican II to undergraduates, they were totally surprised that there would be any controversy over the topic of religious freedom.

In their minds, so many years after the council, of course everyone has the right to worship as they choose.

But for some of the council bishops, it posed a very serious problem...

... because for much of its history, the Catholic Church had condemned the right to religious freedom.

After the Enlightenment period, with its praise of human reason as the ultimate source of truth, the church became extremely defensive.

All of the church's official teachings were in keeping with a theology that maintained there was "no salvation outside the Catholic Church."

## **SLIDE SEVEN Syllabus of Errors**

This defensive mentality is clearly expressed in Pope Pius IX's 1864 document the "Syllabus of Errors," in which he condemned 80 positions he believed represented modern errors.

Among the so-called errors condemned by Pius IX was freedom of religion, separation of church and state, and the claim that the pope should come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization.

He also affirmed his predecessor's (Pope Gregory XVI in *Mirari Vos*) condemnation of liberty of conscience.

Right up until Vatican II, the church's position was this: since Catholics possess the truth, only they have the right to proclaim the faith.

Other Christian churches and other religions are excluded because they are false.

This position led to the mantra: "Error has no rights."

I have mentioned the "prophet theologians" before, those who were working in the decades prior to the council, paving the way for Vatican II.

## **SLIDE EIGHT John Courtney Murray, S.J.**

An American Jesuit, John Courtney Murray was one of these theologians.

And like the others working during his time, Murray too had been disciplined and silenced by the official church.

But at the council, Murray's position on religious liberty gradually took hold. He claimed: "Of course error has no rights. Then again, neither does truth since both of these are abstract concepts."

Hence, "Only human beings have rights."

And by shifting the debate to the nature of the dignity of the human person, Murray made possible a new approach to religious liberty.

Many of the bishops at Vatican II wanted to support the idea of religious freedom but the issue of doctrinal development troubled them.

How could they endorse this principle of religious liberty when it had been condemned by past popes?

Their concern was clearly articulated by the French archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, when he stated: "If what is being taught is true, then what the church **has** taught is false."

A number of bishops were not ready or sufficiently theologically informed to admit that church teaching could change.

We could choose many issues to demonstrate how Vatican II brought about clear and profound change in the church. The teaching contained in DH would be high on the list of ways that change occurred.

The document begins by affirming the basic dignity of human beings and the importance of human freedom.

People cannot be forced to practice a particular religion. Truth has its own power of gentle persuasion. (DH, #10)

DH acknowledges that in taking this position it is "developing" the doctrine and it emphasizes the continuity with scripture.

After all, Jesus did not use coercion. He issued an invitation but left his listeners free to make their own choice. (DH,#11)



This shift was significant not only for the issue of religious freedom but also for affirming that church teaching can indeed grow and change.

The acknowledgement that people must follow their consciences in religious matters represents a profound growth with many possibilities for further development....including our interest in the synod.

I am reminded of the Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot who claimed that coercion of faith does not work because it will make a strong person a martyr and a weak person a liar.

### **THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS**

It should be noted that Vatican II's affirmation of religious freedom does not imply that all religions are the same.

DH does teach that the teachings of the Catholic Church are true...but it recognizes that truth cannot be forced.

The text also makes clear that this document is developing the teaching of recent popes and that, on this issue, the teaching has changed.

Anyone familiar with pre-Vatican II theology understands how truly remarkable this is.

Another concern shared by a number of bishops at the council, and a valid one, is that freedom might be understood as license.

But a careful reading of the document reflects that it does not encourage license but rather responsibility.

Article 8 of DH encourages the responsible use of freedom: it sees true freedom in people who are oriented toward what is true and just.

DH **did** formally acknowledge development in the church's teaching on religious liberty, but it never explained **how** doctrinal development is to be understood.

Hahnenberg offers what I believe is a profound explanation.

## **SLIDE NINE Encountering God**

If revelation itself is not primarily words about God, but a living encounter with God, then we can admit that our limited human words often fail to capture this mystery.

In such a view, doctrinal development can be viewed as our becoming more and more conscious of all that is revealed in scripture.

What is present **implicitly** from the beginning gradually becomes **explicit** in the church as we grow in our relationship with God. (Hahnenberg)  
(Comment about my Vat II course)

## **SLIDE TEN Relationship between DH and Synodality**

### **DIGNITATIS HUMANAЕ TODAY**

In our discussion thus far, you may have noticed that in DH, the topic of religious freedom was examined primarily in light of its relationship to the state and other religions.

The document did not address religious liberty “within” the church and yet, many of the debates that have emerged since Vatican II revolve around this very question.

Edward Hahnenberg addresses this point and it is this discussion that holds the most interest for our role in the synod. For example:

How free are Catholics to voice their questions to the hierarchy?

What forums are available for this kind of questioning?

How can we live out our convictions as Catholics when those convictions may conform to church teaching?

Are Catholics sufficiently aware of the fact that church teaching can grow and develop?

There are those who would say that our internal freedom within the church has expanded since Vatican II.

But others would argue that our freedom has been restricted, for example, the censoring of theologians over the years since the council.

In an article by Massimo Faggioli, entitled: "A Postscript to Dignitatis Humanae," (Commonweal, May 9, 2019)...

... Faggioli writes about a document recently issued by the International Theological Commission which addresses a problem that Vatican II did not anticipate.

"It is no longer a question of applying religious freedom only in respect to the religion of others but also to the criticism of one's own religion."

Needless to say, this is extremely important for our discussion of the synod.

## **SLIDE ELEVEN    The Pope Wants to Hear from You**

Vatican II formally sanctioned the validity of the development of doctrine and this was a development of great importance for theological thought in many areas.

This represents a profound growth with many possibilities for further development...specifically the issue of religious freedom within one's **own** faith.

This is just one of the many reasons Francis' synod is so important for the church today.

I am so grateful to Future Church for providing these sessions on Vatican II and Synodality because in so many articles I have read, the authors focus on Vatican II as the starting point to understand synodality.

Last week, I quoted Massimo Faggioli:

Francis is appealing to Vatican II to open the way for a synodal Church that was not quite born at Vatican II, but was theologically conceived there. (Commonweal, "From Collegiality to Synodality," Nov. 23, 2018)

In this same vein, theologian Hoffsman Ospino has said that to understand synodality we must return to the texts and the spirit of Vatican II.

Ospino then raises a genuine concern, saying:

"It is my observation that in many seminaries and faculties of theology (today), the documents of Vatican II receive little attention. How can pastoral leaders and theologians then understand synodality? ("A closer look at synodality," NCR, Aug. 23, 2021)

I use these quotes not to depress you but to commend Future Church for understanding the intimate relationship between Vatican II and synodality.

## **SLIDE TWELVE Synod Watch**

When Ospino was asked for his recommendation for ways to understand and appreciate conversations on synodality, he said:

"First of all, humility and openness to listen. We need to overcome the fears and prejudices."

He continues: "Read more, starting with a more in-depth study of the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

The synod, the experience of walking together is rooted in the spirit of Vatican II. Pope Francis has called upon us to embrace this approach."

The document we examined this evening opens the door for each of us to recognize the incredible freedom we do have first and foremost through the inherent dignity we have as human persons and also by virtue of our call as baptized persons.

As stated last week, synodality retrieves a more dynamic and inclusive model of being and acting ecclesially.

In the first millennium of the Christian tradition, there were many practices from which we can learn much theologically, liturgically and pastorally.

St. Cyprian, a bishop in the early church (second century) is a perfect example. He told his community: “Do nothing without the consensus of the people.”

Consensus presupposes a process of consultation, listening, dialogue and discernment.

Unfortunately, during the second millennium, after the Council of Trent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the attention shifted to uniformity and institutionalization.

As it unfolds, the synodal model today seeks to achieve some “sensus ecclesiae” (to feel with the entire church.)

### **SLIDE THIRTEEN Being the Church**

And Francis continues to emphasize that the changes must come from the grassroots, from the local churches. (Comment about “local” church)

The first level in the exercise of synodal discernment is listening to the local churches and how the faith is expressed in different cultures and contexts. (Bring up question about having different surveys for different localities)

Another point made by Ospino is that the synodal way challenges monoculturalism.

Before Vatican II, we believed that uniformity equaled unity. But that is not true and it is definitely not what Francis is calling for.

He wants us to know that each local church must foster an incarnated experience of church.

This is why it is possible to have ministries that respond to the local needs of a culture or territory like the Amazon region that are not necessarily ministries needed in North America.

This is what theologian Karl Rahner meant when he said that at Vatican II, we had finally become a “world church.”

By that he did not mean that we had Catholic churches all over the world, we already had that.

But the church existed as a kind of export firm, exporting European Christianity to the rest of the world.

Vatican II opened the door to a truly world church, one that does not export a finished product, a Eurocentric theology of church, but one that engages other peoples, cultures and mentalities.

I do not have to explain the incredible value of religious freedom for this to occur.

This is precisely how Francis understands the synod and why it must begin at the local level...with the people of God, with their concerns, their questions, and their cultures.

The local church expresses the church’s **universality** in terms of what it believes...

...but it affirms its **diversity** in terms of how that faith is inculturated through different ecclesial forms and practices.

Francis does not want Rome to impose a homogenous church model.

The church is a church of churches. This is the conviction that drives the process of the synod.

The synod starts with the local churches until the final synodal assembly will be celebrated in Rome in 2023.

That meeting will be the convergence of all local churches and expression of unity with the bishop of Rome, Francis.

On this point...Jesuit father George Wilson wrote an article entitled: "Stage One of the Synod: Listening to the Faithful," (La Croix, June 16, 2021

## **SLIDE FOURTEEN Listening Photo**

He repeats a line we have all heard: a good leader's task is not to teach but to listen.

He says that in church language, that is called "consulting the faithful." (Somewhere John Henry Newman must be smiling!)

Wilson offers his definition of a synod: "A wisdom seeking effort undertaken by the people of God under the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus at a particular era in its engagement with surrounding society."

A synod is an assembly of the church that embraces persons from differing states of life...but they are all there by virtue of their baptism...in solidarity.

Baptism is the only ticket of admission!

The goal of a synod is wisdom...it is to discover the way the Lord is calling the church to act.

And the participants 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 the ability to foretell the future but to **name reality**.

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

Hopefully our discussion of DH has demonstrated that anyone of us has the freedom to name realities our church needs to hear...

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

To hold a synod for a community composed of a great variety of cultures, facing different perils and aspiring to unimaginably diverse outcomes, is to undertake an enormous task.

## **SLIDE FIFTEEN The Holy Spirit**

It is only the Holy Spirit that can make it happen.

When theologian Yves Congar, who served as an expert at the council, first heard of John XXIII's decision to convene a church council, he remarked,

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

Francis believes that same Spirit is with us on our synod journey.

We conclude with a quote another leading voice at Vatican II, Cardinal Leo Suenens:

“The history of Christianity is for us a school of humility. This same history is also a school of hope.”

Thank you.

Q&A



