

**Sr. Maureen Sullivan, OP**  
**THE LEGACY OF VATICAN II AND SYNODALITY**  
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**INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to the final talk of our series on Vatican II and Synodality.

I am a bit sad this evening as we conclude this series. It has been a great joy for me to have these discussions with you and I am sorry to have them end.

**(PERSONAL COMMENT TO ATTENDEES)**

**SLIDE 1 LEGACY OF VATICAN II**

Tonight we are going to examine the legacy of the Second Vatican Council and demonstrate how Pope Francis' call for the Synod is so closely connected to John XXIII's convening of Vatican II.

By now, you are aware of my passion for Vatican II...

But one of my great concerns is that far too many Catholics are either completely unaware of the council and the impact it had on our church or have a confused understanding of this moment in our history.

Let me offer an example...

Back in 2005, leading up to the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of Vatican II, a leading Catholic journal devoted an entire issue to this anniversary.

I enjoyed reading all the articles until I came to the final article...which was entitled:

**VATICAN II, SCHMATICAN II.**

**SLIDE 2 VATICAN II, SCHMATICAN II**

The title alone gave me shortness of breath!

It was written by a young woman who, in the first paragraph wrote:

“Leading up to the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of Vatican II, this year has been filled with workshops, symposia and conferences dedicated to the discussion of Vatican II but all I can say is: **YAWN.**”

“It has been 40 years since the flame of Vatican II burned bright but to me that is a lifetime and a half ago. I am quite sure that that most younger Catholics are not inspired by cries of “Gaudium et Spes.”

She went on...”The energy of Vatican II reform has not been passed on. I wish I saw in the church a place that I could never consider leaving.

I wish I could say that without a doubt it is the faith community in which I want to raise my children.

But the church has let us down, most severely in recent years with the sex-abuse scandal.”

She concluded the article by saying: “Don’t get me wrong, I fully appreciate the significance of Vatican II in church history, and I am interested in that history in the same way that I am care about world history or my family history. I just don’t buy it as a rallying cry.

If after 40 years the business is still unfinished, isn’t it time for a new agenda?

- I support the aim of groups who want to renew the Catholic community and their goal to attract younger members. My advice to these groups: Cut the Vatican II talk.
- Develop a new enthusiasm. Make me see why it’s worth the trouble.

Fan the flame? I would love to...but let’s get a new fire burning first.”

I felt truly sad after reading this article for a few reasons.

For one thing, she made a point that reminded me of one of my favorite quotes from the Book of Judges in the OT. After the Israelite leader Joshua died, the younger members began to fall away from their relationship with Yahweh.

Disturbed by this, the author lamented: “There arose a generation that did not know the Lord.”

That same quote could be applied to our younger generation today, at least with regard to Vatican II.

It also says something about the older generation.

Was the author of the article right? Have we failed to pass on the energy of Vatican II reform?

Is she right when she says: “Develop a new enthusiasm. Make me see why it’s worth the trouble.”

I think that is why Future Church’s efforts to promote Vatican II are so very important. They are developing a new enthusiasm.

And, in addition to “rebirthing Vatican II” ...they **ARE** offering a new agenda...they are educating the faithful on the importance of Pope Francis’ Synod.

And I believe if we could honestly demonstrate the incredible legacy of John’s council, the younger generation might come to see that the flame is still burning. It is still influencing the contemporary church.

But we must tell them about it. We must live our faith lives as witnesses of the reforms brought about by Vatican II.

We cannot afford to fail in this responsibility.

## **THE LEGACY OF VATICAN II**

### **SLIDE 3 VATICAN II AND FUTURE OF CHURCH**

Our purpose is to examine the legacy of Vatican II for the future of our church and demonstrate its connection to the Synod.

I came across several different interpretations of the council's legacy during my research for this evening.

Here are just a few titles of articles that I read:

- “Vatican II: Distant Memory or Unfolding Reality?”
- “60 Years Later: Vatican II Still Divides”
- “How Pope Francis Is Fulfilling a Legacy of Vatican II”
- “Opposition to Pope Francis is rooted in an opposition to Vatican II”
- “Remembering and Misremembering Vatican II”

I think there is an element of truth in most of these titles but the two that come closest to my understanding are:

- “Vatican II: Distant Memory or Unfolding Reality” ...and
- “How Pope Francis is Fulfilling a Legacy of Vatican II”

### **VATICAN II: DISTANT MEMORY OR UNFOLDING REALITY”**

#### **SLIDE 4 DISTANT MEMORY OR UNFOLDING REALITY?**

Let us look at the first title...*“Distant memory or unfolding reality?”*

On one level, the article that I referenced earlier had a ring of truth to it.... especially as we look at the current status of our church.

Many Catholics lack a sufficient knowledge of the council, in fact of theology in general.

We have a diminished number of practicing Catholics and a serious lack of trust in the church due to the abuse scandal.

Religious education needs to improve. After Vatican II, in an attempt to move away from the pre-Vatican II catechism mentality, religious education focused on making religion classes fun, enjoyable.

But as a result, I had undergraduate students in my theology courses who did not even know the basic prayers of the Catholic faith.

And we have a serious problem with polarization in the church between those following a pre-Vatican II mindset and those with a post-Vatican II mindset.

This polarization has become so intense that Pope Francis has become the target of attacks made in public by his own brother bishops which can have a truly deleterious effect on the people of God.

We know from our study of history that ecumenical councils are followed by a lengthy period of adaptation.

Those who participated at Vatican II believed it would take at least 50 years for the council's teachings to find acceptance by the faithful.

The adaptation process is supposed to integrate the documents and approaches of Vatican II into the everyday life of the church.

The process has not always gone smoothly and has involved serious disagreement about how the council should be interpreted.

When John XXIII opened the council, he claimed that "the greatest concern of Vatican II is that the Sacred Deposit of Christian doctrine should be more effectively defended and presented."

But he also noted that the church must also look at the present times which have introduced new conditions, new forms of life, and have opened new avenues for the Catholic apostolate." ("What was Vatican II, anyway?" *The Pillar*)

And it is in this regard that the idea of Vatican II as an "**unfolding reality**" comes into play.

As we discussed in previous presentations, the period between Vatican I and Vatican II was a time of significant theological growth.

In the pre-Vatican II church, the notion of change or development proved very disturbing to those who subscribed to a worldview where the notion of change implied mistake.

This of course was not the view of those prophet theologians who were working in the decades just prior to Vatican II.

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 other elements that **could** change – in fact – **must** change...as the church moved through history.

We have talked about John Henry Newman and his theory of the Development of Doctrine.

## SLIDE 5 JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

His examination of the history of Christianity demonstrated that all things do develop and change over time, even the church.

Newman's position found a home in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. 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.” LG, 1

This unfolding is inherent in the divine plan. We need not fear it. Karl Rahner believed that God, as “Absolute Future” was the key to the church's future.

He noted that the church would continue to exist in history and remain subject to the conditions of history.

Church historian John O'Malley contends that with their acceptance of historical consciousness, the worldview that recognizes that all expressions of theological truth are conditioned by their moment in history...

...the council Fathers came to agree that changes would be required to meet the needs of the times.

Clearly, what we find in *Lumen Gentium* is a dynamic understanding of church.

Because the church is an "eschatological" reality (moving toward the endtime), the faithful are referred to as the "pilgrim people of God."

They are on their way to the kingdom, to the fullness of truth, who is God.

This idea of the people of God on a journey through history supports those theologians who for years had been calling for structural changes in the church.

#### **SLIDE 6 YVES CONGAR, OP**

Theologian Yves Congar, who served as a theological expert at the council, 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. (cf. footnote p. 111)

Congar knew that those who accepted this approach were better prepared for what would occur at the council.

He also knew that there would be others who would be greatly disturbed because they possessed a monarchical view of the church, a mindset that viewed any change as a mistake.

## **IMPACT OF SYSTEMS OF THOUGHT**

In anticipation of those who would have great difficulty accepting a new way of thinking and an unfolding of the church's inner nature, theologian Henri deLubac wrote:

“Whenever it abandons a system of thought, humanity imagines it has lost God.” (cf. footnote)

### **SLIDE 7 WORLD VIEWS**

At Vatican II, the Council Fathers did abandon a system of thought: the pre-Vatican II classicist mindset that cherished the unchangeable nature of the church was replaced by the historically conscious mindset.

Led by the insights of those theologians who for years had been calling for a new language to speak about the faith, the Council Fathers rediscovered in the New Testament a language that gives life.

In their retrieval of the ecclesial concepts and images from the early church, they brought about a major change in the way the church looked at itself and the way it articulated its teachings.

Vatican II offered another way of being church: the communion model, where one's holiness is determined by one's response to the graces given by God.

It is not by accident that the motto for the Synod is entitled *Communion, Participation, Mission*.

At Vatican II, we abandoned a juridical vision of church and opted for a theological vision.

### **SLIDE 8 LUMEN GENTIUM**

*Lumen Gentium* was the voice for this new vision.



The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church was overwhelmingly approved with a vote of 2151 to 5, making it the Magna Carta for any subsequent reflection on the church in the Roman Catholic tradition. (p. 114 footnote)

The pre-Vatican II ecclesiology had lost touch with its roots in the New Testament.

It was highly authoritarian, legalistic, and clericalistic.

Fortunately, a sufficient number of Council Fathers managed to bring about an incredible change.

Only those who had lived through this remarkable transition from a hierarchical church to an ecclesiology of communion can remember and perhaps appreciate the challenges this change would offer the church.

As Henri deLubac's earlier quote anticipated...there were those who thought we had lost God.

The changes proposed by *Lumen Gentium* alone would be difficult for most of the faithful to comprehend. After all, their church had not changed for close to 400 years.

Nor did these members have a sufficient theological education to prepare them for an event of this magnitude in the life of the church.

They had been taught that the unchangeable cannot change...but it did. And *Lumen Gentium* was the messenger of this fact.

But we did not lose God!

For those theologians who paved the way for Vatican II, one thing is very clear: they were convinced that the Holy Spirit was alive and well and active in the church.

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

Their confidence was rooted in an extremely important theological principle which we may have discussed in a previous talk. The principle is known as “indefectibility.”

### SLIDE 9 “REMEMBER I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS...”

It is grounded in the words of Christ:” Remember, I am with you until the end of the age.”

This is an assurance from the Risen Christ 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.

Because of the human component, the church is not perfect, nor will it ever be. But 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. (*Gaudium et Spes*)

Systems of thought, theological articulations of the faith, and world views 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.

And when a central role is given to the Holy Spirit, “the church is never a *fait accompli*” ...it is always an eschatological reality, a people-to-be, constituted in communion...on its pilgrim way to the triune God.

## **WE HAVE NOT LOST GOD**

So...we have not lost God. The God who is our origin, our sustenance and our destiny is very much with us in our struggle to be the pilgrim people of God.

The words of Blaise Pascal come to mind: "It is a happy time for the church when she is sustained by nothing other than God."

Vatican II was a transformative moment in the church's history which brought about an unimaginable transition.

Many books and articles have been written about the legacy of the council.

An entire graduate course could be devoted to this topic.

So I am left to offer what is my own interpretation of the legacy of Vatican II.

For me, the legacy of Vatican II is that it was and continues to be an "Unfolding Reality" ...and we are still unpacking its treasures.

## **POPE FRANCIS AND THE LEGACY OF VATICAN II**

And fortunately, we have an ally in our unpacking: Pope Francis.

There is no doubt in my mind that he believes it is his calling to bring about a rebirth of Vatican II...

...which brings us to the second article important for tonight's discussion: "*How Pope Francis in Fulfilling the Legacy of Vatican II.*"

During his papacy, the reflection on synodality has unfolded as an exercise of deepening the vision of Vatican II.

## **SLIDE 10 POPE FRANCIS: A NEW ERA**

Francis' two predecessors, Benedict XVI and John Paul II, to put it kindly, demonstrated an ambivalence about the council. Bu that is a topic for another time.

We observed Francis' affinity for John XXIII on the evening he was elected to the papacy.

We can all recall the utter simplicity of Francis as he stepped out onto the balcony...

...no special wardrobe, still wearing the pectoral cross he wore in Argentina, humbly asking the crowd in St. Peter's Square to take a moment to pray for him.

John surprised the church by convening a council. Francis surprised the church by calling a special Synod...one that would be built on the theological concepts embraced at Vatican II.

And sadly, Francis is facing the same kind of resistance to his Synod as John faced with his council.

We are living in a time of unprecedented polarization in the country and in the U.S. church...

...and it is depressing to see how some bishops are engaging in the kind of tactics that not only impede productive collegiality but traffic in nastiness of a kind never before seen on public display. (NCR, June 17, Michael Sean Winters)

In a recent interview, Pope Francis spoke about a significant number of US Catholics who want to "gag" Vatican II reforms.

He uses the term "restorationism" for this movement, saying:

"Restorationism has come to gag the council...the number of 'restorers' in the US are many."

Francis has repeatedly stressed that the aim of his pontificate is the implementation of the council.

He has told reporters that one of the most serious problems facing the church today is the non-acceptance of Vatican II.

And Francis has little time for opponents of the council...

...saying: "It is difficult to see spiritual renewal using old-fashioned criteria."

He went on: "To doubt the council is, in the final analysis, to doubt the Holy Spirit who guides the church."

Those who promote restorationism refer to themselves as "Traditionalists."

They believe that they have the truth and that **they** are remaining faithful to the Catholic faith.

The position of many so-called traditionalists rests on a literal reading of scripture and they lack an understanding of the concept of history.

I often wonder how they explain the two very different Creation accounts in the Old Testament.

And for them, any level of official church teaching is sacrosanct. They do not understand the distinction between Dogma, Doctrine, and Discipline.

For them, if something is taught by a pope it is true once and for all.

And yet, when this pope says something they do not like...such as his restrictions on the celebration of the Latin Mass...they reject the teaching!

In last week's presentation, I pointed out how several official teachings have indeed changed over the years.

This is one of the reasons Pope Francis insists that "it is necessary to make more explicit the key concepts of Vatican II, the foundations of its arguments, its theological and pastoral horizon, and the arguments and method used."

Speaking to a group of catechists connected to the Italian bishops' conference on January 30, Francis told them to consider the teachings of Vatican II as sacrosanct, saying that to be a Catholic ~ one must adhere to the reforms brought about by that landmark event.

He went on to say: “You can be with the church and therefore follow the council, or you cannot follow the council or interpret it in your own way, as you want, and you are not with the church.”

“The council is the magisterium of the church. On this point we must be demanding, severe. The council cannot be negotiated.”

So, as the church continues to ***unfold more fully*** its inner nature and as we continue to unpack the treasures contained in the council documents...

...there is no doubt that we have an ally in Pope Francis.

In this regard, church historian and theologian Massimo Faggioli has made a significant observation:

“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.”

Those of you who have attended some of my other presentations know there is another quote which I often refer to.

In an address to the Curia a while back, Francis said:

### **SLIDE 11 TRADITION IS NOT THE WORSHIP OF ASHES...**

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

And just last month, in an address at a conference, he told the group:

“The past should be a source of inspiration, not the destination.”

He continued: “Without roots, we cannot progress...”

...to go in reverse is to go back in order to have a safety measure that saves us from the risk of going forward, the Christian risk of journeying with Christ.”

## **STILL FANNING THE FLAME**

In the article I quoted at the beginning this evening, *Vatican II, Schmatican II*, the author told us to develop a new enthusiasm, make her see why it's worth the trouble.

She went on to say: "Fan the flame? I would love to but let's get a new fire burning first."

Isn't this precisely what Francis is doing with the Synod?

Vatican II began 60 years ago and gave us a charter for the church of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

And as mentioned earlier, the council gave us a Magna Carta which must be considered for any subsequent reflection on the church in the Roman Catholic tradition.

The council is clearly Francis' starting point.

## **SLIDE 12 SYNODALITY AND VATICAN II**

Francis has used the theme of journey frequently during his papacy.

And it has been at the center of his reflections on the Synod.

The Synod is the most ambitious project for church renewal since Vatican II.

Francis is convinced that synodality is what God expects of the church of the third millennium.

And each of us is called to be midwives in the birthing of a synodal church.  
(GSR Panel)

Something new is being born and it will require new behaviors from all participants.

But we are not alone on this journey.

## **SLIDE 13 THE HOLY SPIRIT**

The Risen Christ has promised to send an Advocate to be with us on our journey to risk change and create space for the new to emerge.

### **A CLOSING QUOTE**

I would like to end this evening's presentation with a quote from Sr. Nancy Sylvester:

"No one was ready for what we have been experiencing these past years in so many areas of our life.

But living through it with an awareness and a commitment to go forward has readied us for what is emerging and unfolding.

We are at a threshold walking through the door, the portal, and the future is not where we came from.

It will be new and...we will be shaping it."

Before moving on to the Q&A portion, I would like to make a brief personal comment.

### **PERSONAL COMMENT**

#### **Q&A**