

## **Dei Verbum and the Roots of Synodality**

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### **Abstract**

This article shows how Pope Francis’s notion of “synodality” brings together central tenets of the comprehensive vision of the Second Vatican Council. The article proposes that the roots of synodality can be found, above all, in Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*.

### **Keywords**

apostolic tradition, *Dei Verbum*, faith, living tradition, Pope Francis, revelation, *sensus fidei*, *sensus fidelium*, synodal church, synodality

Synodality has been called, if not the central theme, then certainly one of the most emphasized of Pope Francis’s pontificate.<sup>1</sup> In the global preparations for the 2023 session of the Synod on Synodality (2021–24), it is overwhelmingly evident from the responses of dioceses throughout the world that the vast majority of Catholics have found the vision of “a synodal church” refreshing and liberating. According to Pope Francis, a synodal church would be in every dimension of its life

1. For a detailed overview of the theme, see the 2018 document of the International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html). An earlier version of this article was presented as part of the *Spirit Alive* webinar series “Re-energizing the Renewal,” celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council and sponsored by the CSJ Institute for Faith Inquiry and Education.

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“a church which listens.”<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, this ecclesial listening means “hearing the Word of God with reverence [*Dei verbum religiose audiens*]” and listening to the enlightenment of God’s Holy Spirit, the one who, Jesus promised, will always guide the church toward the fulness of truth (Jn 16:13 NRSV, used throughout).<sup>3</sup> And, the church is listening to the Holy Spirit if and when it listens to and discerns the Spirit speaking within the hearts of all the baptized—lay and ordained—to whom the Spirit has given what *Lumen Gentium* 12 calls “the supernatural *sensus fidei* of the whole people.”<sup>4</sup>

The notion of synodality has had its harsh critics. Moreover, claims that the pope’s vision has its roots in Vatican II have also been dismissed. For example, Archbishop Charles Chaput, in an interview about the 2023 session of the Synod on Synodality, remarked, “The claim that Vatican II somehow implied the need for synodality as a permanent feature of Church life is simply false. The council never came close to suggesting that.”<sup>5</sup> In this article, I propose—to the contrary—that Pope Francis’s vision on synodality has deep roots in the vision of Vatican II.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, the terms “synodality” and “synodal” (and, I might add, “collegiality”) are not part of the Latin vocabulary used in the documents of Vatican II. The word *synodus* appears 136 times in the texts of Vatican II, and in these instances it is used either as a synonym for *concilium* (council) or in reference to bishops meeting to collaborate more closely, in a spirit of episcopal collegiality, one of the great themes of Vatican II.<sup>7</sup> For Pope Francis, synodality encompasses a much more inclusive vision of the church, into which episcopal collegiality is to be situated, as the whole ecclesial vision of Vatican II envisages it. Many of the themes evoked by the words synodality and synodal—in this broader sense—can indeed be grounded both in the vigorous debates during Vatican II and in

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2. Francis, “Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops” (Rome, October 17, 2015), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.pdf) (hereafter cited as “Address on the 50th Anniversary”).
  3. *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), §1, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html) (hereafter cited as *DV*).
  4. *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1965), §12, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html) (hereafter cited as *LG*). Translation emended.
  5. See “Chaput: ‘Speaking the truth is polarizing,’” *The Pillar*, January 13, 2023, <https://www.pillarcatholic.com/chaput-speaking-the-truth-is-polarizing/>.
  6. On the conciliar vision, see Ormond Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019).
  7. On this restricted episcopal sense of “synods,” see Massimo Faggioli, “Vatican II and the Agenda for Collegiality and Synodality in the Twenty-First Century,” in *A Council for the Global Church: Receiving Vatican II in History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 229–53; Alberto Melloni and Silvia Scatena, eds., *Synod and Synodality: Theology, History, Canon Law and Ecumenism in New Contact. International Colloquium Bruges 2003* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005).

its final sixteen documents. As one bishop has summarized Pope Francis's vision, synodality now refers to "not some of the bishops some of the time but all of the church all of the time."<sup>8</sup>

Synodality is Vatican II in a nutshell. Here are just some of the conciliar themes that, taken together, envisage what Pope Francis is calling "a synodal church": (1) the whole body of the faithful as the recipient of divine revelation; (2) the Magisterium as not above the word of God but its servant; (3) the participation of all the baptized, lay and ordained, in the mission of the church; (4) the participation of all the baptized, not just the hierarchy, in the so-called three offices of Christ: the prophetic office (the *teaching* office of the church); the priestly office (the *sanctifying* office of the church); and the kingly office (the *governing* office of the church); (5) the notion of collaboration between pastors and laity; (6) the notion of the local church as the Catholic Church fully in that place; (7) the notion of communion between all these local churches, and of the Catholic Church as a communion of churches; (8) the call for dialogue, with other Christians, with other religions, and with unbelievers, but also, first and foremost, within the church, and not only within a local church but also among all the local churches that make up the church catholic; and (9) the dignity of the human person, of their *sensus fidei*, of their charisms, and of their conscience. As John O'Malley has commented, many of these elements call for a new understanding not only of the *what* of the church but also of the *how* of the church; they call for a new "style" of being church.<sup>9</sup>

I could expand on each of those points of Vatican II's overall vision—I will certainly touch on some of them again in this article—but I have chosen to focus mainly on *Dei Verbum*, the council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. Beyond those elements of the council's overall vision that I have just mentioned, I hope to show that *Dei Verbum* especially presents teachings that are of fundamental importance for understanding what it means to be "a church which listens," dialogues, and discerns among all the faithful. I have selected just three clusters of teachings in *Dei Verbum*—those on revelation, on faith, and on Scripture and tradition. Along the way, I will refer to other documents of Vatican II that relate to these topics; this procedure follows a principle of interpretation called "intertextuality." Applied to the sixteen

8. Archbishop Mark Coleridge, "From Wandering to Journeying: Thoughts on a Synodal Church," *Australasian Catholic Record* 93, no. 3 (July 2016): 340–50 at 348.

9. O'Malley writes, "Vatican II taught many things, but few more important than the style of relationships that was to prevail in the church. Its style of discourse was the medium that conveyed the message. . . . In doing so, it issued an implicit call for a change in style—a style less autocratic and more collaborative, a style willing to seek out and listen to different viewpoints and to take them into account, a style eager to find common ground with 'the other,' a style open and above board, a style less unilateral in its decision-making." John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 307–8.

documents of Vatican II, intertextuality means that each document is to be interpreted in light of the other fifteen.<sup>10</sup>

## Revelation and God’s Offer of a Dialogic Relationship

I begin with what I believe is one of the most important shifts taken at Vatican II. Well, it wasn’t so much a shift as a retrieval of an understanding of revelation from the Bible and the early church—that is, divine revelation understood, primarily, as a personal encounter, in which God invites human beings into a lifelong, covenant-friendship relationship. And, secondarily, from that relationship, through time, there comes a communication of knowledge about God and God’s will for humankind. This is the content God reveals within the divine-human relationship.

Official Catholic theology on the eve of Vatican II saw divine revelation almost exclusively in a very restricted understanding of this second sense. So, to understand how important the council’s retrieval was, it is helpful to examine briefly the so-called neo-Scholastic theology that predominated in the centuries before Vatican II, especially in the early twentieth century and leading up to the council. This theology had a predominantly one-dimensional view of revelation, which could be called verbal-propositional. Here, revelation is seen almost exclusively in a quantitative sense; the content of revelation is a body of doctrines coming from beyond human experience, which is to be understood as God’s eternal thoughts and words, expressed in timeless, ahistorical propositions. René Latourelle speaks of “the extrinsicist, atemporal, and notional approach that prevailed until the 1950s.”<sup>11</sup> For this approach, there are two sources of revelatory content: Scripture and tradition, both understood as containing the truths communicated by God. Further, revelation is seen to be something coming from the past (what was called “the remote rule of faith”). An important corollary of this view is that the contemporary Magisterium alone is the divinely mandated authority that communicates these divine doctrines and has authority over their transmission and interpretation (what was called “the proximate rule of faith”).<sup>12</sup>

10. On the hermeneutical principle of “intertextuality,” see Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 40–48. John O’Malley writes of the need for “a consideration of each document as in some measure an expression of larger orientations and as an integral part of a cohesive corpus, which is a result in large part of the documents’ intertextual character. They implicitly but deliberately cross-reference and play off one another—in the vocabulary they employ, in the great themes to which they recur, in the core values they inculcate, and in certain basic issues that cut across them. They constitute a coherent unit and must be interpreted accordingly.” John O’Malley, “Trajectories and Hermeneutics,” in *After Vatican II: Trajectories and Hermeneutics*, ed. James Heft and John O’Malley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), x–xxii at xiii.

11. René Latourelle, “*Dei Verbum*: II. Commentary,” in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella (Middlegreen, Slough, UK: St. Paul, 1994), 218–24 at 218.

12. For a summary, see James P. Mackey, *The Modern Theology of Tradition* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 1–52.

Earlier I used the term “one-dimensional” to describe this verbal-propositional dimension. It is certainly one key dimension that can be found abundantly attested throughout the Bible, where we see God “speaking,” often through intermediaries, such as the prophets or Jesus. For example, in the opening sentence of the Letter to the Hebrews, we read, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things” (Heb 1:1–2).<sup>13</sup>

However, reacting against a restricted understanding of the *locutio Dei* model, mid-twentieth-century revivals in the various disciplines of theology retrieved other aspects of the biblical witness and of writers from the patristic period. These scholars were particularly critical of developments in scholastic theology during the Baroque period.<sup>14</sup> For example, in 1929 Henri de Lubac (1896–1991) presented his inaugural lecture on fundamental theology to the French Jesuit theological faculty of Fourvière. It was a scathing attack on neo-Scholastic theology, depicting it as “a small-minded theology”<sup>15</sup>—“a shabby theology that is not even traditional. A separated theology, in the wake of a separated philosophy.”<sup>16</sup> De Lubac had been very much influenced by Maurice Blondel’s rejection of the “extrinsicism” of neo-Scholasticism and his proposal of the “method of immanence” for reconceiving the relationship between nature and grace and between faith and history.<sup>17</sup> Drawing on this so-called *ressourcement* scholarship, *Dei Verbum* brings these and other themes to the fore, and presents a much richer view of divine revelation and of the way God relates to human beings along the paths of history.<sup>18</sup> Without in any way rejecting the importance of the verbal-propositional dimension, the first chapter of *Dei Verbum* foregrounds two other dimensions of divine revelation; they could be called the relational-personal dimension and the sacramental-historical dimension.

First, regarding the *relational-personal* dimension, the passage in *Dei Verbum*’s first chapter, with the title “On Revelation Itself,” states:

13. This passage is partly quoted in *DV*, §4.

14. On the “Scholastics after Trent,” especially Francis Suarez and John de Lugo, see René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1966), 181–91.

15. Published as Henri de Lubac, “Apologetics and Theology,” in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 91–104 at 94–95. Joseph Komonchak translates “a small-minded theology” as “a shabby theology.” See Joseph A. Komonchak, “Theology and Culture at Mid-Century: The Example of Henri de Lubac,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 579–602 at 582, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399005100402>.

16. De Lubac, “Apologetics and Theology,” 94–95. The different translation is here taken from Komonchak, “Theology and Culture at Mid-Century,” 582–83.

17. On de Lubac and Blondel, see Antonio Russo, *Henri de Lubac: Teologia e dogma nella storia. L’influsso di Blondel* (Roma: Studium, 1990); Francesca Aran Murphy, “The Influence of Maurice Blondel,” in *T&T Clark Companion to Henri de Lubac*, ed. Jordan Hillebert (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 57–91.

18. For example, see Brian E. Daley, “Knowing God in History and in the Church: *Dei Verbum* and ‘Nouvelle Théologie,’” in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, ed. Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 333–51.

In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see Eph 1:9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, human beings (*homines*) might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see Eph 2:18; 2 Pt 1:4). Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col 1:15; 1 Tm 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to human beings (*homines*) as friends (see Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14–15) and lives among them (see Bar 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself (*ad societatem Secum*).<sup>19</sup>

Here, the event of revelation is, first, God communicating God’s very self. Within this encounter, God’s loving and merciful heart is laid bare. Indeed, the creator God desires to love and be friends with his creatures. Every believer has the possibility of such personal relationship with God; this intimate offer is extended to all, and not just to a select few, such as popes and bishops. Elsewhere in the conciliar documents, Vatican II speaks of this possibility of relationship with God in terms of “communion”: “The root reason for human dignity lies in the human being’s call (*vocatione hominis*) to communion with God (*ad communionem cum Deo*). From the very circumstance of their origin, humankind (*homo*) is already invited to dialogue with God (*ad colloquium cum Deo*).”<sup>20</sup> In other words, through God’s self-revelation, human beings are invited into communion and dialogue with God.

Second, regarding the *sacramental-historical* dimension of revelation, the passage that follows directly on from the one before (also in *Dei Verbum* 2) states:

This plan (*oeconomia*) of revelation is realized by deeds and words (*gestis verbisque*) having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of humankind (*de hominis salute*) shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation.<sup>21</sup>

The focus here, deliberately, is not just on God’s words but also on God’s actions and how God relates to human beings within history. Later, *Dei Verbum*’s fourth chapter, devoted to the Old Testament, states, “To this people which He had acquired for Himself, He so manifested Himself *through words and deeds* as the one true and living God (*se tamquam unicum Deum verum et vivum verbis ac gestis revelavit*) that Israel came to know by experience (*experiretur*) the ways of God with human beings

19. *DV*, §2. Translation emended. The same word, *societas*, is used in the opening sentence of *DV*, §1—“*ut et vos societatem habeatis nobiscum, et societas nostra sit cum Patre et cum Filio eius Iesu Christo*”—quoting 1 Jn 1:2–3: “so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

20. *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), §19, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) (hereafter cited as *GS*). Translation emended. On the language of “dialogue” in the original Latin texts of the Vatican II documents, see Ann Michele Nolan, *A Privileged Moment: Dialogue in the Language of the Second Vatican Council, 1962–1965* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

21. *DV*, §2. Translation emended, emphasis added.



(*hominibus*).<sup>22</sup> As Brian Daley observes, “*Dei Verbum* treats revelation as a verbal noun, an activity of the ever-mysterious and ever-present God in human history, rather than as a body of information to be studied.”<sup>23</sup> Christoph Theobald calls this a “sacramental conception of revelation”; Gerald O’Collins similarly speaks of “the sacramental character of divine self-revelation.”<sup>24</sup> Jesus Christ is presented, above all, as manifesting God in this “sacramental” way—through words and deeds—within history: “To see Jesus is to see His Father (Jn 14:9). For this reason Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making Himself present and manifesting Himself: through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, but especially through His death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth.”<sup>25</sup> As a corollary of this sacramental-historical dimension, revelation and salvation throughout *Dei Verbum* are seen as synonyms.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, through these relational-personal and sacramental-historical dimensions, divine revelation is presented as an ongoing present encounter, and not *just* as something that happened in the past, when Jesus was born, went about his ministry, was killed, rose from the dead, appeared, and sent the Holy Spirit. The event of God’s self-revealing (always in Christ, through the Holy Spirit) and God’s offer of relationship continues to be a living reality here and now. That doesn’t mean there can be some new revelation, beyond the Christ event. But the same God, in the same Jesus Christ, through the enlightenment and empowerment of the same Holy Spirit, is forever engaging with and dialoguing with human beings in the ever-new here and now of history that relentlessly moves humanity into new perceptions, new questions, and new insights, in diverse cultures and places, especially in his church, as it courses into an unknown future until the eschaton. Therefore, in temporal terms, divine revelation has three interrelated aspects: past, present, and future.<sup>27</sup>

22. *DV* §14. Translation emended, emphasis added.

23. Daley, “Knowing God in History and in the Church,” 347.

24. Christoph Theobald, “The Church under the Word of God,” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 5, *The Council and the Transition: The Fourth Period and the End of the Council, September 1965–December 1965*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 275–362 at 345; see the chapter title “The Sacramental Character of Divine Revelation,” in Gerald O’Collins, *Revelation: Towards a Christian Interpretation of God’s Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 39–55 at 39.

25. *DV*, §4.

26. Gerald O’Collins notes, “Right from its prologue *Dei Verbum* indicates how God’s revelation and offer of salvation coincided. . . . Repeatedly without hesitation the document passes from the language of revelation to that of salvation and then back to revelation (see, for example, *DV* 3, 4, 6, 7, 14–15, 17, 21), thereby recognizing that we are dealing with two inseparable, if distinguishable realities. . . . The sacramental language of *Dei Verbum* applies equally to the ‘economy of revelation’ and ‘the history of salvation.’” Gerald O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology: The Three Styles of Contemporary Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 54.

27. Gerald O’Collins distinguishes “between (1) revelation inasmuch as it reached an unsurpassable, once for all fullness with Christ, his apostles, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, (2) inasmuch as it continues today and calls people to faith in a living encounter

Vatican II, accordingly, urged the church to be ever attentive to the movements of the revealing and saving God present and active in the flow of history, by attending to “the signs of the times.”<sup>28</sup> Discernment of the signs of the times in the present seeks both to determine what God is urging us to see in new times but also to be attentive to the traps, where we could be being drawn into ways of thinking that are not “of God.” These traps could lie in being anchored exclusively in the past or exclusively in the present, or in not being open to the future fullness of divine truth to which the Holy Spirit is leading the church. Discerning the difference between opportunities and traps is the task of all the faithful—laity, pastors, theologians, everyone, as *Gaudium et Spes* teaches: “With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage.”<sup>29</sup>

These relational-personal and sacramental-historical dimensions of revelation require a reconfiguration of the ever-important verbal-propositional dimension, the aspect of revelation as “a body of information to be studied,” to use Brian Daley’s phrase. This verbal-propositional model relates to the church’s necessary articulation of the content of revelation. It has already been noted how *Dei Verbum 2* speaks of God not only revealing God’s very self but also making known the mystery of God’s will: “God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (*seipsum revelare et notum facere sacramentum voluntatis suae*).”<sup>30</sup> *Dei Verbum 6* likewise brings together the two notions of God’s personal self-communication and the communication of content: “Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself and the eternal decisions of His will regarding the salvation of humankind (*hominum*). That is to say, He chose to share with them those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind.”<sup>31</sup> In the next two sections, we will explore further the need to interrelate these two aspects.

For now, how is all this relevant to synodality? Certainly, synodality will not be understood if one still sees revelation in an exclusively “quantitative” way, where Scripture and tradition are two “sources” of revelation from the past. *Dei Verbum* moves beyond this approach. If, as Brian Daly summarizes it, revelation is the “activity of the ever-mysterious and ever-present God in human history,” then revelation is not only something that happened in the past and was articulated by the church in the past but is also God’s continuing dialogue with humanity *in the present*, making known

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with God, and (3) inasmuch as it will be gloriously and definitively consummated in the life to come. In one sense revelation is past (as ‘foundational’), in another sense it is present (as ‘dependent’), and in a further sense it is a reality to come (as ‘future,’ ‘final,’ or ‘eschatological’).” O’Collins, *Revelation*, 103.

28. *GS*, §4. See also *GS*, §11.

29. *GS*, §44.

30. *DV*, §2.

31. *DV*, §6. Translation emended.



the mystery of God's will *for the present*—in Christ through the Holy Spirit.<sup>32</sup> Synodality emphatically brings to the fore the need for the whole church to engage in this dialogue, especially by emphasizing the role of the Spirit in facilitating the divine-human encounter of revelation in the present. But, let me pause on that one for the moment. We must first address other themes in *Dei Verbum*, such as faith and its necessary location in time—that is, in history.

## Faith and Participatory Knowledge of God

From *Dei Verbum*'s teaching on divine revelation comes a corresponding teaching regarding the human response to that divine outreach—faith. Revelation and faith are inextricably linked, as Joseph Ratzinger notes: “revelation always and only becomes a reality where there is faith . . . revelation to some degree includes its recipient, without whom it does not exist.”<sup>33</sup> Just as revelation is presented in *Dei Verbum*, in the first instance, as God seeking a loving, friendship-relationship with human beings, so too faith is presented, in the first instance, as a human response that seeks, in return, a loving, friendship-relationship with God. Revelation is thus dialogic, not monologic; participatory, not one-sided. This is faith as “believing”; it is more a verb than a noun. And, just as divine revelation includes a communication of truths, so too there is a second sense of faith that emerges out of the first sense—that is, faith as an assent to the content of the truths God communicates. Throughout its history the church has needed to articulate such beliefs more precisely, either for the sake of clarification regarding questions put to the tradition, or to articulate the content of revelation in a way that better communicates “the faith” in a particular time and place.<sup>34</sup>

We see in these two aspects of faith the classic Augustinian distinction between *fides qua creditur* (faith as a personal response) and *fides quae creditur* (faith as an assent to certain beliefs).<sup>35</sup> *Dei Verbum* 5 notes these two dimensions when it

32. As Gerald O'Collins observes, “If one persists in holding that revelation entails *primarily* the communication of revealed truths about God (rather than the personal self-disclosure of God), it becomes easier to relegate revelation to the past. As soon as the whole set of revealed doctrines was complete, revelation ended or was ‘closed.’ For this way of thinking, later believers cannot immediately and directly experience revelation. All they can do is remember, interpret and apply truths disclosed long ago to the apostolic church.” O'Collins, *Revelation*, 114 (emphasis in original).
33. Joseph Ratzinger, “Revelation and Tradition,” in *Revelation and Tradition*, ed. Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 26–49 at 36.
34. Such formulations of beliefs are at times collated in collections such as Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann et al., 43rd, rev. and enl. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2012).
35. St. Augustine states in *De Trinitate* 13.2.5, “But that which is believed is a different thing from the faith by which it is believed (*sed aliud sunt ea quae creduntur, aliud fides qua creduntur*—lit. ‘one thing are those things which are believed; another thing is the faith by which they are believed’).” Author's translation. On this classic distinction, see Juan Alfaro, “The Dual Aspect of Faith: Entrusting Oneself to God and Acceptance of the Christian Message,” *Concilium* 21 (1967): 27–33.

states: “‘The obedience of faith’ (Rom. 16:26; see [Rom.] 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5–6) is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which a human being (*homo*) commits his or her whole self freely to God, offering ‘the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals,’ and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him.”<sup>36</sup> These two aspects are to be held together. Nevertheless, the Vatican II peritus George Tavard observes that, in *Dei Verbum*, primacy is given to the personal dimension:

The God who manifests himself does not speak as a professor or a scholar, but as a person. He evokes not only intellectual acceptance of what he says, but personal commitment to himself; he does not want only students and disciples, but friends attached to him through a personal relationship.<sup>37</sup>

There is, throughout the history of the church, a circular relationship between the two dimensions of *fides qua* and *fides quae*.

Moreover, just as there is a past, present, and future aspect to divine revelation, so too there is a past, present, and future aspect to faith, both as *fides qua* and *fides quae*. These past, present, and future aspects come to the fore especially in Vatican II’s emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in faith’s reception of revelation, both in the individual believer and in the whole faith community. The Holy Spirit both opens the hearts of believers to God’s loving outreach and helps them to understand, interpret, and apply in their lives their friendship-relationship with God, as well as to understand the implications of the content of revelation:

To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving “joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it.” To bring about an ever deeper understanding of revelation the same Holy Spirit constantly brings faith to completion by His gifts.<sup>38</sup>

Later, in *Dei Verbum* 8, there is an allusion to the Holy Spirit granting to believers (*credentes*) not only the gift of faith but also the capacity for “a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience.”<sup>39</sup> This capacity enables

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36. Translation emended. This passage is quoting from Vatican Council I, *Dei Filius*, chapter 3: Denzinger, 1789 (3008). See Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations*, 603.

37. George H. Tavard, *De Divina Revelatione: The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican Council II. Commentary and Translation* (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press, 1966), 24–25.

38. The council is quoting here the classic text from the Second Council of Orange (529) regarding the belief that faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. See Council of Orange II, canon 7 (Denz. 180 [377]) and its citation in Vatican I, *Dei Filius*, chapter 3 (Denz. 1791 [3010]). See Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations*, 136, 603.

39. *DV*, §8.

believers to discern what God would want of them in the nitty-gritty of their daily life and relationships. This article will later address further this “penetrating understanding” in terms of a “sense for the faith” (or *sensus fidei*), as well as the significance for envisioning a listening, synodal church of the belief that all the baptized have this capacity. But, at this stage, it will be helpful to explore further the personal-relational model of faith.

In *Dei Verbum* 2, we read that, through believing and their faith-relationship with God, believers “come to share in the divine nature (see Eph 2:18; 2 Pt 1:4).” Through this relationship, we are told, God seeks to “invite and take them into fellowship with Himself.” In referencing 2 Peter 1:4, *Dei Verbum* is alluding to the notion of “participation” in the very life of God and what Greek patristic theologians called “*theosis*,” or the process of “divinization,” becoming one with God.<sup>40</sup> All believers are called to this participation. *Lumen Gentium*’s fifth chapter addresses this universal call to holiness:

The followers of Christ are called by God, not because of their works, but according to His own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the baptism of faith they truly become sons and daughters of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are really made holy.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, through this relationship, believers can not only participate in the divine life but also, through that participation, have access to a particular kind of participatory knowledge of God and insight into the mystery of God’s will. Thomas Aquinas referred to it in terms of “connatural knowledge” of God.<sup>42</sup>

Later, in its second chapter on the transmission of revelation and faith, *Dei Verbum* 8 goes on to speak of this experiential aspect of faith when it names one way in which the apostolic tradition develops throughout history—through means of believers’ living out their faith: “This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down.” The text then lists three ways through which the Holy Spirit leads the church in the development of the apostolic tradition and to growth in understanding of the realities and words being handed down: (1) theological scholarship; (2) the experiential faith of believers; and (3) the oversight of the Magisterium. The second means is: “a penetrating understanding of

40. The literature on this topic is extensive. For an overview, see Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

41. *LG*, §40. Translation emended.

42. Avery Dulles sums up Thomas Aquinas’s theology of faith on this matter: “His distinctive achievement is to have shown how grace gives rise to a supernatural instinct and to a connaturality with the divine, bestowing firmness and ease on the assent of faith.” Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 39.

the spiritual realities which [believers] experience.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, all believers have the capacity for this “penetrating understanding” of divine revelation, not just bishops and popes. While the phrase *sensus fidei* is not specifically used, commentators see here a direct reference to believers’ *sensus fidei* (“sense of the faith”) to which *Lumen Gentium* 12 gives such high doctrinal significance. It states:

The holy people of God shares also in Christ’s prophetic office. . . . The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of believing (*in credendo falli nequit*). They manifest this special property by means of the whole people’s supernatural *sensus fidei* (*mediante supernaturali sensu fidei totius populi*) when “from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful” they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That *sensus fidei* is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accepts that which is not just the word of human beings (*hominum*) but truly the word of God. Through it, the people of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints, penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life.<sup>44</sup>

This intimate sense of God, and of God’s will, is not necessarily some perfect and finely articulated sense—that is, one formulated in the sophisticated categories of theology. Rather, it is more “a sixth sense,” an intuition that expresses knowledge more akin to the knowing between lovers or between friends. This intuitive but real nature of “*sensus fidei*” is neatly captured in the perspective of the Jewish writer Abraham Heschel, when he writes of the Jewish prophets’ sense of God:

The prophets had no theory or “idea” of God. What they had was an *understanding*. Their God understanding was not the result of a theoretical inquiry, of a groping in the midst of

43. *DV*, §8. Andrew Meszaros believes that Yves Congar, who was involved in the drafting of this paragraph on progress of the apostolic tradition, may have been drawing on a distinction he had written about twenty years earlier, between *supernatural contemplation* and *theological contemplation*, a distinction made in the above passage from *Dei Verbum* 8 regarding two of the ways the apostolic tradition makes progress in the church with the help of the Holy Spirit. See Andrew Meszaros, “‘*Haec Traditio proficit*’: Congar’s Reception of Newman in *Dei Verbum*, Section 8,” *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1038 (March 2011): 247–54 at 251–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01414.x>. He quotes from Congar: “This effort of perceiving the revealed Object can be done in two different ways, which are also the two ways of dogmatic progress. It can be done on the way of supernatural contemplation, based on an affective union with God. Or it can be done by way of theological contemplation, based on activity of knowledge of the rational and discursive type.” Meszaros, “‘*Haec Traditio proficit*,’” 251–52 (original emphasis). Meszaros is referring to Yves Congar, *A History of Theology* (Hindmarsh, South Australia: ATF Press Publishing, 2019), 223. Congar goes on to speak of “supernatural contemplation” as coming “by way of experience” and “in the order of vital connaturality.” Congar, *A History of Theology*, 223.

44. *LG*, §12. Translation emended.

alternatives about the being and attributes of God. To the prophets, God was overwhelmingly real and shatteringly present. They never spoke of Him as from a distance. They lived as witnesses. . . . They disclosed attitudes of God, rather than ideas about God.<sup>45</sup>

You will recall that *Lumen Gentium* 12's teaching on "the supernatural sense of the faith of the whole People" comes within its discussion of the participation by all the faithful (*universitas fidelium*) in the "prophetic office of Christ"—that is, in the teaching office of the church.<sup>46</sup>

A striking Vatican II text, which echoes the council's discussion of *sensus fidei*, comes from *Gaudium et Spes*. It describes "the voice of conscience":

In the depths of their conscience, human beings (*homo*) detect a law which they do not impose upon themselves, but which holds them to obedience. Always summoning them to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to their heart: do this, shun that. For human beings (*homo*) have in their heart a law written by God; to obey it is their very dignity; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a human being (*hominis*). There they are alone with God, Whose voice echoes in their depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of humankind (*hominibus*) in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships.<sup>47</sup>

If, in revelation, "God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will,"<sup>48</sup> then conscience is that place in the human heart where the believer, in encountering the revealing and saving God, seeks to discern the mystery of God's will in the presence of God.

How is all this relevant to synodality? A synodal church seeks to tap into this experiential knowledge that the Holy Spirit elicits in all baptized believers as they encounter God and seek to apply the Gospel in their lives in the present. As Pope Francis teaches, echoing the above passage from *Lumen Gentium* 12:

In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization. The people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*. This means that it does not err in faith, even though it may not find

45. Abraham J. Heschel, "The Theology of Pathos," in *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row Colophon Books, 1975), 2:1–11 at 1 (original emphasis).

46. For a more detailed treatment of these themes, see Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009). See also the 2014 document of the International Theological Commission, "*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church," [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html).

47. *GS*, §16. Translation emended. On the council's teaching on conscience, see Linda Hogan, "Conscience in the Documents of Vatican II," in *Conscience*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Readings in Moral Theology, vol. 14 (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 82–88.

48. *DV*, §2.

words to explain that faith. The Spirit guides it in truth and leads it to salvation. As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith—*sensus fidei*—which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression.<sup>49</sup>

All believers—all those who respond in faith to their Creator God reaching out to them in love and friendship—have an access to God and a participatory knowledge of God that has a significant ecclesial authority when it comes to knowing the mystery of God’s will—for today. Therefore, as Pope Francis urges, “Let us trust in our People, in their memory and in their ‘sense of smell,’ let us trust that the Holy Spirit acts in and with our People and that this Spirit is not merely the ‘property’ of the ecclesial hierarchy.”<sup>50</sup>

Elsewhere, commenting on that passage from *Lumen Gentium* 12, on “the supernatural *sensus fidei* of the whole people,” the pope states, “The *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an ‘*ecclesia docens*’ [a teaching church] and an ‘*ecclesia discens*’ [a learning church], since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, through listening to the *sensus fidei* of the People of God (that is, the *sensus fidelium*), the church is seeking to listen to the Spirit of God, since the Spirit’s instrument of communication is the *sensus fidei* given, along with *fides*, to all the baptized. “A synodal Church is a Church which listens. . . . The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit.”<sup>52</sup>

## **Living Tradition, Scripture, and the Church’s Dialogue with God throughout History**

We now come to Vatican II’s teaching on Scripture and tradition. How both these ecclesial realities are understood depends how “revelation” and “faith” are understood. The topic of tradition, and its relation to Scripture, was by far the most contentious issue in the debates and drafting of *Dei Verbum* throughout all four of the council’s sessions. In his commentary on those debates, Joseph Ratzinger says that there were basically two differing approaches to tradition, characterizing, respectively, the minority and the majority among the bishops. He calls them a “static”

49. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), §119, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

50. Francis, “Letter of Pope Francis to Cardinal Ouellet” (March 19, 2016), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160319\\_pont-comm-america-latina.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160319_pont-comm-america-latina.html).

51. Francis, “Address on the 50th Anniversary” (emphasis added).

52. Francis, “Address on the 50th Anniversary.”



understanding of tradition and a “dynamic” understanding.<sup>53</sup> The former is legalistic and propositional; the latter is personalist and sacramental. The former tends to focus on the past, the latter on seeing the past realized in the present and yet being open to a future yet to be revealed.

One of the great achievements of Vatican II is its teaching on episcopal collegiality: the bishops, like the early apostles, constitute a “college,” a body that, through its original commission by Christ’s apostles, has authoritative oversight of the community’s fidelity to the Gospel. Using the category of “apostolic succession” (without using that exact phrase), Vatican II reiterates the church’s belief that the bishops are the successors of the apostles and their coworkers in the apostolic age. As we read in *Lumen Gentium* 20, those

appointed to the episcopate, by a succession running from the beginning, are passers-on of the apostolic seed. Thus, as St. Irenaeus testifies, through those who were appointed bishops by the apostles, and through their successors down in our own time, the apostolic tradition (*traditio apostolica*) is manifested and preserved.<sup>54</sup>

But it is not only *Lumen Gentium* that speaks of the apostolic tradition and the authority of the bishops in their preaching/teaching role. The second chapter of *Dei Verbum* on the transmission of revelation also affirms this Catholic belief. For example, *Dei Verbum* 10 is worth examining in detail, particularly its reference to the interrelationship between bishops and the whole church. It begins:

Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, *committed to the Church*. Holding fast to this deposit *the entire holy people united with their shepherds* remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers, so that holding to, practising and professing the heritage of the faith, *it becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a single common effort (singularis fiat Antistitum et fidelium conspiratio)*.<sup>55</sup>

The constitution then goes on to teach, “But the task of authoritatively [*authentice*] interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office [*vivo magisterio*] of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.”<sup>56</sup> However, this is qualified with the following statement:

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53. See throughout Joseph Ratzinger, “Chapter II: The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder, 1969), 181–98.

54. *LG*, §20. The reference to Irenaeus is *Adv Haer.* III, 3, 1.

55. *DV*, §10 (emphasis added).

56. *DV*, §10. Translation emended. On best translating the adverb *authentice* here as “authoritatively,” see Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 26–28.

This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only *what has been handed on*, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief (*credenda*) as divinely revealed.<sup>57</sup>

Earlier, in *Dei Verbum* 8, the notion of “what has been handed on” was clarified as being a reality, beyond just words and doctrinal teaching:

What was handed on by the Apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the peoples of God; and so the Church, in her *teaching, life and worship*, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes.<sup>58</sup>

Joseph Ratzinger, in his commentary on these passages in *Dei Verbum* 10, makes the following observation (one that is highly relevant for our reflections on the bishops exercising their apostolic authority in a synodal way). He says:

[*Dei Verbum* 10] first makes the point that the *preservation* and *active realization* of the word [of God] is *the business of the whole people of God*, not merely of the hierarchy. The ecclesial nature of the word, on which this idea is based, is therefore not simply a question which concerns the teaching office, but embraces the whole community of the faithful. If one compares the text with the corresponding section of the encyclical *Humani Generis* (DS 3886), the progress that has been made is clear. . . . This idea of *solo magisterio* [the Magisterium alone] is taken up here in the next paragraph, but the context makes it clear that the function of authentic interpretation which is restricted to the teaching office is a specific service that does not embrace *the whole of the way in which the word is present*, and in which it performs an irreplaceable function precisely for *the whole Church, the bishops and laity together*.<sup>59</sup>

Let me repeat the first sentence in this quote from Joseph Ratzinger: “the preservation and active realization of the word [of God] is the business of the whole people of God, not merely of the hierarchy.” He highlights two aspects in the ongoing reception of God’s living word of self-revelation, and therefore of “the apostolic tradition”: *preservation* and *active realization*. Maintaining fidelity to the treasure given in the past means actively realizing and constantly rejuvenating that treasure in the present. By means of this interaction between the whole People of God and the hierarchy within it, God is—as it were—dialoguing with the church down through history, to help it adjust to the ever-changing contexts of time and place in which the church finds itself.

According to *Dei Verbum*, the New Testament itself is understood to be encapsulating a dynamic tradition process that was at work in the early church post-resurrection and post-Pentecost. Even within the first generations of the apostolic age, the apostles

57. *DV*, §10 (emphasis added).

58. *DV*, §8 (emphasis added).

59. Ratzinger, “Chapter II: The Transmission of Divine Revelation,” 196 (emphasis added).

and their companions remembered differently the words of Jesus and adapted “the living voice of the Gospel” to the context of their communities.<sup>60</sup> As *Dei Verbum* 19 expresses it:

The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explaining some things *in view of the situation of their churches (statui ecclesiarum attendendo)* and preserving the form of proclamation but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus.<sup>61</sup>

In examining the dynamism underlying such notions, René Latourelle observes within the New Testament a recurring vocabulary, especially in the letters of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles, that reveals what he calls “the mentality at work in the early church.”<sup>62</sup> These words include: receive (*paralambanein*), hand on (*paradidonai*), witness (*martyrs*), apostle (*apostolos*), service (*diakonia*), teach (*didaskein*), proclaim (*kēryssein*), evangelize (*euangelizesthai*), and gospel (*euangelion*).<sup>63</sup> Latourelle concludes:

The soul of the primitive church was fashioned and permeated, as it were, by these basic words. . . . The important thing here is that this basic vocabulary in its original usage has only one object and displays a single intention: *Jesus and fidelity to Jesus*. We are thus justified in claiming that in the primitive church there is not only a continuity of tradition between Jesus and the church . . . but also a concern and will to keep the church *constantly faithful* to Jesus.<sup>64</sup>

In these ways, throughout *Dei Verbum*, the “apostolic tradition” is depicted as a “living tradition.”<sup>65</sup> *Dei Verbum* 12 uses this latter phrase when it speaks of how the

60. The quoted passage comes from *DV*, §8.

61. *DV*, §19 (emphasis added). In the middle of work on a third draft of *De Divina Revelazione*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC), on April 21, 1964, published its work on the historicity of the Gospels and the consequent need for a historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation, notwithstanding the ecclesial context within which such interpretation takes place. The PBC document was signed by Pope Paul VI and titled “Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels.” See [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19640421\\_verita-vangeli\\_It.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19640421_verita-vangeli_It.html). The above phrase “*statui ecclesiarum attendendo*” closely follows this document’s reference to “*quaedam ad statum ecclesiarum attendendo explanantes*.” For an English translation, see PBC, “Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*,” in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchar (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 227–35 at 230.

62. René Latourelle, “Gospel,” in Latourelle and Fisichella, *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, 367–97 at 384.

63. On New Testament usage of these words, see Latourelle, “Gospel,” 384–88.

64. Latourelle, “Gospel,” 388 (original emphasis).

65. On the origins of the term “living tradition,” see, for example, Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay* (London: Burns & Oates, 1966), 189–221.

interpretation of the Scriptures today, inspired by the Holy Spirit, must be read according to the promptings of the same inspiring Holy Spirit: “Since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred Spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out. The *living tradition of the whole Church* must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith.”<sup>66</sup> While the precise phrase “living tradition” is not used earlier, in *Dei Verbum* 8 (as quoted above),<sup>67</sup> the whole of that article describes tradition not as something static but rather as a dynamic process that passes on the church’s whole life: “what was handed on by the Apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the peoples of God; and so the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes.”<sup>68</sup>

Then, in the next paragraph of *Dei Verbum* §8, the Constitution speaks of those three factors through which the Holy Spirit guides the church and assists in the development of the apostolic tradition in new contexts throughout history:

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Lk 2:19, 51), through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.<sup>69</sup>

Here, the text lists the three ways through which the Holy Spirit helps the apostolic tradition “develop” in the church: theological scholarship, the applied faith of believers, and the oversight of the Magisterium. In other words, the apostolic tradition develops in the church throughout history through a dialogue among these three factors: theological scholarship, the *sensus fidelium*, and the Magisterium. Joseph Ratzinger’s commentary on this passage is telling:

It is important that the progress of the word [of God] in the time of the Church is not seen simply as a function of the hierarchy, but is anchored in the whole life of the church; through it, we hear in what is said that which is unsaid. The whole spiritual experience of the Church,

66. *DV*, §12. Translation emended, emphasis added. On this passage, see Ignace de la Potterie, “Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Spirit in Which It Was Written (*Dei Verbum* 12c),” in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives. Twenty-Five Years After (1962–1987)*, vol. 1, ed. René Latourelle (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 220–66.

67. *DV*, §8 does, however, use the expression “the life-giving presence of this tradition” (*huius traditionis vivificam praesentiam*), which the Vatican website translation incorrectly translates as “the presence of the living tradition.”

68. *DV*, §8.

69. *DV*, §8.

its believing, praying and loving intercourse with the Lord and his word, causes our understanding of the original truth to grow and in the today of faith extracts anew from the yesterday of its historical origin what was meant for all time *and yet can be understood only in the changing ages and in the particular way of each*. In this process of understanding, which is the concrete ways in which tradition proceeds in the Church, the work of the teaching office is one component (and, because of its nature, a critical one, not a productive one), *but it is not the whole*.<sup>70</sup>

To emphasize the historical and doctrinal importance of the involvement of the whole people in maintaining the faith with fidelity throughout the centuries, Joseph Ratzinger might well have quoted now-saint John Henry Newman, when writing about the failure of many of the bishops after the Council of Nicaea to receive the universal church's judgement regarding the belief in the full divinity of Christ, as proclaimed in the Nicene Creed. In the 1871 third edition of his book, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, Newman added an appendix that, in effect, summarizes the conclusion of his whole historical study of the Arian crisis. Entitled, "The Orthodoxy of the Body of the Faithful during the Supremacy of Arianism," the appendix begins:

The episcopate, whose action was so prompt and concordant at Nicaea on the rise of Arianism, did not, as a class or order of men, play a good part in the troubles consequent upon the Council, *and the laity did*. The Catholic people, in the length and breadth of Christendom, were the obstinate champions of Catholic truth, and the bishops were not.<sup>71</sup>

In other words, safeguarding "the apostolic tradition" is the concern of the whole church. As the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed professes, "apostolicity" is a mark of the whole church. The living, apostolic tradition, by which the whole church continues its work of preserving and actualizing the Gospel in every age, constitutes a divine-human dialogue mediated by the Holy Spirit. At the end of *Dei Verbum* 8 (which had earlier declared that "this tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit"), we read the following statement—a statement that begs the question of how the church today might maintain this faithful dialogue between God and the whole church:

For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her. . . . Thus God, who spoke of old, uninterruptedly dialogues [*colloquitur*] with the bride of His beloved Son; and the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church, and through her, in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them (see Col 3:16).<sup>72</sup>

70. Ratzinger, "Chapter II: The Transmission of Divine Revelation," 186 (emphasis added).

71. John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, 3rd (1871) ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 445 (emphasis added). This passage is also reproduced in John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, ed. John Coulson (London: Collins Liturgical, 1986), 109.

72. *DV*, §8. Translation emended.

Here, the council is calling for a much more dynamic understanding of bishops' "apostolic succession" and the whole church's "apostolicity" through time. In an essay entitled "The Spirit Keeps the Church Apostolic," Yves Congar—evoking the three temporal aspects of past, present, and future—has observed:

"Apostolic" means "relating to the apostles" or "in conformity with the apostles." The word therefore indicates a reference to or a conformity with the origins of Christianity. This idea is quite correct, but it needs to be amplified, *since it is only half the truth*. The other half is a reference to *eschatology*. Christ is Alpha and Omega. . . . Apostolicity is the mark that for the Church is *both a gift of grace and a task*. It makes the Church fill the space between the Alpha and the Omega by ensuring that there is a continuity between the two and a substantial identity between the end and the beginning. It can therefore be conceived by reference to the end as well as by reference to the beginning.<sup>73</sup>

## Dei Verbum and Synodality

How is all this relevant to synodality? First, with his notion of synodality, Pope Francis is attempting to bring a fully trinitarian balance to our Catholic understanding of how the church maintains fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. During Vatican II, the Eastern Orthodox and Protestant observers and guests, along with the Eastern Catholic bishops, would often remark on the lack of emphasis on the Holy Spirit in earlier drafts of documents, hinting that the accusation of "Christomonism" perhaps had some validity.<sup>74</sup> *Dei Verbum* went a long way in presenting a more pneumatological accent. Accordingly, synodality reminds us that the mission of the Word in salvation history requires the mission of the Spirit if it is to be effective in the ever-changing contexts of history. The church through time can only ever be "*Christ-centered*" if it is "*Spirit-led*." Only the Spirit can help the church interpret *with fidelity* the meaning of Christ's Gospel for today. Pope Francis loves to quote the injunction found seven times in the last book of the New Testament: "Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). And what is the Spirit's instrument of communication? The *sensus fidei*, as *Lumen Gentium* 12 and *Dei Verbum* 8 teach. As Pope Francis has stated in an address to the International Theological Commission, "Synodality is an ecclesial journey that has a soul that is the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit there

73. Yves Congar, "The Spirit Keeps the Church 'Apostolic,'" in *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 2, *Lord and Giver of Life* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 39–51 at 39 (emphasis added).

74. Yves Congar has written, "I would agree that the criticism of 'Christomonism' in Western Catholicism is to some extent right, but [I think] that this is being corrected." Yves Congar, "The Spirit, the Spirit of Christ: Christomonism and the *Filioque*," in *The Word and the Spirit* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986), 101–21 at 117. On this "forgetfulness of the Spirit," see throughout Jos Moons, "The Holy Spirit as the Protagonist of the Synod: Pope Francis's Creative Reception of the Second Vatican Council," *Theological Studies* 84 (2023): 61–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639221151167>.



is no synodality.”<sup>75</sup> One could add: without synodality, the inspiration and enlightenment *in the present* of the Third Person of the Trinity is being suppressed.

Second, a synodal church is attentive to the three temporal aspects of divine revelation with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. From the past, it listens to the written Word of God (Scripture), as well as to the church’s articulation of the content of tradition in the centuries past. In the present, attentive to the signs of the times, it listens to the Holy Spirit by listening to the faithful’s sense of the faith in the here and now. A synodal church, because it is ever-attentive to the role of the Holy Spirit, who leads the church to the fulness of truth, is also open to the unknown future in eschatological hope.

Third, the notion of “living tradition” is therefore key to understanding the notion of a synodal church. A synodal church seeks to emulate the dynamism of the apostolic tradition; just as the evangelists in the apostolic age proclaimed the Gospel “in view of the situation of their churches [*statui ecclesiarum attendendo*],”<sup>76</sup> so too a synodal church seeks to listen to the perspectives of local churches. Critics of synodality put great emphasis on fidelity to “the apostolic tradition.” It would seem that they are here appealing to what Joseph Ratzinger criticized as a “static” understanding of the apostolic tradition, which presumes an exclusively “quantitative,” legalistic, and propositional notion of the “what” God is communicating within divine revelation. Pope Francis, in commemorating the 25th anniversary of the promulgation of the *Catechism* as a collection of the doctrines of the church, summarized all the points of *Dei Verbum* we have noted regarding tradition when he said (alluding to a “static” understanding):

Tradition is a living reality and only a partial vision regards the “deposit of faith” as something static. The word of God cannot be moth-balled like some old blanket in an attempt to keep insects at bay! No. The word of God is a dynamic and living reality that develops and grows because it is aimed at a fulfilment that none can halt. . . . Doctrine cannot be preserved without allowing it to develop, nor can it be tied to an interpretation that is rigid and immutable without demeaning the working of the Holy Spirit.<sup>77</sup>

Fourth, the development of the apostolic tradition throughout history is not just the concern of the hierarchy; it is the responsibility of the whole church. As the pope says, “A synodal Church is . . . the faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit.”<sup>78</sup>

75. Francis, “Udienza ai Membri della Commissione Teologica Internazionale” (November 29, 2019), <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2019/11/29/0938/01934.html>.

76. *DV*, §19.

77. Francis, “Address to Participants in the Meeting Promoted by the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization” (Rome, October 11, 2017), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20171011\\_convegno-nuova-evangelizzazione.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/papa-francesco_20171011_convegno-nuova-evangelizzazione.html).

78. Francis, “Address for the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary.”

Fifth, we are currently in the process of the two Rome sessions of the 2021–24 Synod on Synodality. From the perspective of *Dei Verbum*, it could be said that the synod process is an opportunity to maintain the vibrancy of the apostolic tradition for the twenty-first century. It will achieve that if it reengages the dynamic of the very first generations of the early church—of adapting the Gospel to (what the Scripture scholar Raymond Brown called) “the churches the apostles left behind.”<sup>79</sup> Here we see, captured in the New Testament, “the apostolic tradition” in process. Accordingly, the 2021–24 Synod on Synodality will be just one more point in the ongoing, living, apostolic tradition of the church, seeking to apply the Gospel of Jesus Christ, with fidelity, for believers in the reality of their lives *in the twenty-first century*.

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Ormond Rush (PhD, Gregorian University) lectures in theology at Australian Catholic University, Brisbane Campus, and is a member of the theological commission for the Secretariat for the Synod. His book publications include *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church’s Reception of Revelation* (Catholic University of America Press), as well as *The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles* (Liturgical Press Academic).

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79. Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).