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# Consulting the Faithful: John Henry Newman's Relevance for a Fully Catholic Synodality



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## INTRODUCTION

THE THOUGHT OF JOHN HENRY NEWMAN (1801–90) has never felt more relevant. Newman's monumental legacy is a key resource for the contemporary church, especially as we Catholics work towards more coherent accounts of doctrinal development and seek to instantiate synodality as an ordinary form of participatory church governance and theological discernment. A strong case can be made that Cardinal Newman, recently canonized a saint (2019), is the greatest English-speaking Catholic theologian of all time. He was also a philosopher, novelist, and beloved pastor and preacher. Possibly destined to become the first English-speaking Doctor of the Church, Newman's most enduring contributions have proved to be ecclesiological: that is, concerning the theology of the nature, mission, and structures of the church. If Pope Francis or one of his successors does name Newman a Doctor of the Church, it will be a papal seal of approval upon Newman's modern ecclesiology, analogous to the Roman coronation of St. Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621) as the doctor *par excellence* of a counter-Reformation early modern ecclesiology.

While Newman never penned a systematic theology of the church, his long career yielded a number of ecclesiological classics. *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), important in its own day, has since become some-

thing of a charter document for modern Catholicism's preoccupation with taking a more historically conscious approach to the reality of change and development in church teaching and practice. Newman's Letter to the Duke of Norfolk (1874), far from a work intended only for the leading Catholic peer (British noble), functioned as a crucial public defense of English Catholic loyalty to Crown and country in light of the increasingly alarming rhetoric of the papacy in that era. It remains a crucial resource for the reception of Vatican I's dogma of papal infallibility. Most significant for the topic of synodality—and Newman's "most controversial work as a Catholic—is *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (1859).<sup>1</sup> *On Consulting* has become a classic text to turn to—perhaps the classic text—when the topic is raised of lay Catholic participation in the theological discernment of the church. John O'Malley recently speculated—I think correctly—that Pope Francis's emphasis on the consultation of the laity as a constitutive element of a healthy ecclesiology is inspired by Newman in general and this work in particular.<sup>2</sup> Understanding the thoroughly traditional Catholic insistence on the role of the laity in theological and ecclesial discernment is "essential background for understanding what synodality is and why the pope is eagerly promoting a more synodal church."<sup>3</sup> Francis's desire for a "synodal" church—a church that is dialogical and participatory at every level—makes Newman at least as relevant today as when his thought was evoked at critical junctures during the Second Vatican Council (1962–65).

Newman's ecclesiological writings were almost always due to "occasional" stimuli. That is, he tended to write about the nature and mission of the church when a specifically challenging or thought-provoking occasion arose. One of these occasions was a rather massive one: the First Vatican Council, which in July 1870 defined the pope's supreme and universal jurisdictional authority and his prerogative to infallibly define a dogma under certain conditions. These is-

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1. C. Michael Shea, "Ecclesiology: The Polycentric Church," *The Oxford Handbook of John Henry Newman* (Eds.: Frederick D. Aquino and Benjamin J. King; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 318–34, at 328.

2. "Pope Francis is also deeply persuaded that the people of God have a profound grasp of the faith and practice of the church—and therefore the people must be listened to. This is not an idea peculiar to Francis, but is a standard part of the Catholic heritage, nicely expressed in the Latin phrase *sensus fidelium*, perhaps best rendered in English as "the faithful's sense of the faith." Pope Francis's insistence on this is possibly influenced by Saint John Henry Newman's influential essay '*On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*.'" See John O'Malley, "The History of Synodality: It's older than You think," *America Magazine*, 22 February 2021, available at <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/02/17/synodality-history-john-omalley-242081>.

3. O'Malley, "The History of Synodality."

sues were revisited at Vatican II, the Council that has so profoundly shaped the contemporary, global church. Intriguingly, Newman’s “occasional” ecclesiology has stood the test of time far more than that of his more systematic contemporaries, most of whom were neo-scholastic in method. Newman’s enduring relevance is probably due to a combination of factors: his unique genius and eclectic style, his patristic and biblical modes of thinking and writing, his cultural standing as a high-profile Anglican convert (and ultimately a Catholic cardinal), and the fact that he wrote in beautiful, if sometimes lofty, Victorian prose—and in a language (English) which so many around the world today are able to read.

If the synodality that Pope Francis has committed the Catholic Church to is inspired by the ecclesiology and unfinished work of Vatican II, then Newman’s thought will be a key resource for any synodal path worth taking. In this essay, I first explore some of the elements of Newman’s ecclesiology that are relevant to contemporary synodality, particularly the issues he wrestled with in his brief but rich work *On Consulting the Faithful*. Second, I examine the ways in which Vatican II took up Newmanian emphases, and in some cases formally taught them. Finally, I argue that Newman’s balanced, historically conscious, and pastoral ecclesiology is essential grounding for a synodality that is fully Catholic, especially Newman’s thought relating to the necessity of clergy consulting the laity and the infallibility of the whole church.

## I. NEWMAN ON CONSULTING THE FAITHFUL

Newman’s classic *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* was first published in July of 1859 as an article in an English Catholic periodical, *The Rambler*.<sup>4</sup> The immediate impetus for this work was a dispute between a body of English laity and their clergy on some matters touching Catholic education. The details of the dispute, and the subsequent controversy over Newman’s involvement with *The Rambler*, are fascinating and important, but they cannot detain us here.<sup>5</sup> Suffice it to say, Newman’s sympathies were with an active laity, liberally educated, and he looked askance at the unfortunate and unseemly attitude some of his clerical confreres took toward laymen who they perceived to in any way challenge or disagree with them. Monsignor George Talbot (1816–86) epitomized this haughty intransigence in his (in)famous comments: “What is the

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4. I am using *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* [1859] (edited and introduced by John Coulson; New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961).

5. See, inter alia, the very thorough introduction by Coulson in *On Consulting the Faithful*, 1–49.

province of the laity? To hunt, to shoot, to entertain. These matters they understand, but to meddle with ecclesiastical matters they have no right at all.”<sup>6</sup> In this letter to the future cardinal Henry Edward Manning, Talbot deemed that the matters under contention were, of course, “purely ecclesiastical” (as opposed to firing rifles or roasting a Sunday lamb). “They [the laity] are beginning to show the cloven hoof,” Talbot wrote. “They are only putting into practice the doctrine taught by Dr. Newman in his article in *The Rambler*.”<sup>7</sup> Newman’s advocacy of consulting the faithful in doctrinal matters, in the view of this leading English ecclesiastic, made him “the most dangerous man in England.”<sup>8</sup> The problem, then, was ultimately the unsound ecclesiology of Fr. Newman, a fifth column within the church who incited the laity to go beyond their remit, and even to rebel with cloven hoof!

What were these dangerous ideas, and how had Newman expressed them? The essay *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* was Newman’s response to the pushback that he had received for a comment he made regarding the role of the laity in the definition of Mary’s Immaculate Conception in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. “In the preparation of a dogmatic definition,” Newman had written the previous May, “the faithful are consulted, as lately in the instance of the Immaculate Conception.”<sup>9</sup> From the beginning of Newman’s essay, the integral connection between infallibility in teaching, the normal governance of the church, and the historical and theological problem of doctrinal development comes into view.

After a rather technical discussion of the term “consult,” Newman turns to the heart of the ecclesiological matter. He argues for a more diffuse conception of infallibility and the teaching authority of the church (*ecclesia docens*), in a mode that both hearkens back to patristic conceptions of the church and forward to the emphases of Vatican II. In the apt characterization of C. Michael Shea, Newman’s ecclesiology, while certainly hierarchical, was also “polycentric” and

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6. *On Consulting the Faithful*, 41.

7. *On Consulting the Faithful*, 41.

8. *On Consulting the Faithful*, 42.

9. Newman quotes this statement at the beginning of *On Consulting*. See page 53. It is somewhat ironic that this comment set off Newman’s opponents, since Newman’s own theory of development and his basic ecclesiological approach was perceptible in the definition of the Immaculate Conception itself. For example, Yves Congar asserted, in my view correctly, that the “*conspiratio pastorum et fidelium*”—“a conspiracy of pastors and faithful”—mentioned in proclamations of Mary’s Immaculate Conception (and the Assumption of 1950) was an “expression borrowed indirectly from Newman.” See Congar, *My Journal of the Council* (trans. Mary John Ronayne OP and Mary Cecily Boulding OP; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 266–67, note 2.

“dynamic.”<sup>10</sup> The church, according to Newman, “manifests itself variously at various times,” and while the Magisterium alone can “promulgate” or “enforce” a doctrine, Newman himself lays “great stress on the *consensus fidelium*” (the “consensus” or “consent” of all the baptized faithful).<sup>11</sup> Anticipating anti-democratic and clericalist objections to such a concept—and himself clearly holding to an orthodox conception of Holy Orders and the teaching role of the hierarchy—Newman asked why one ought to consider a consensus that includes so many who have no formal juridical or teaching authority in the church? The answer to that question, wrote Newman, “is plain. Because the body of the faithful is one of the witnesses to the fact of the tradition of revealed doctrine, and because their consensus through Christendom is the voice of the infallible church.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, Newman not only included the laity in the process through which truths were taught infallibly by the church, he also positioned “the body of the faithful” as a locus of infallible teaching alongside the pope and the bishops gathered in an ecumenical council.

Newman’s interest in the role of the laity served immediate, concrete goals related to the English Catholic community. However, as he outlines in *On Consulting the Faithful*, this interest arose also from his need to justify his conversion and subsequent Catholic faith with a historically and theologically coherent understanding of doctrinal development. “It had long been to me a difficulty,” he wrote, “that I could not find portions of the defined doctrine of the church in [ancient] ecclesiastical writers.”<sup>13</sup> By this, Newman meant that certain Catholic dogmas—ranging from aspects of Trinitarian and Christological teaching to Mary’s Immaculate Conception—were to different degrees not verbally or materially present in early written accounts of Christian belief. These facts could lead to two positions that Newman did not wish to hold, for reasons that are both principled (he thought they were wrong) and practical (he wished to be remain a Catholic author in good standing).

The first was a Gallican or even Jansenist “primitivism” that simply denied any doctrine or development (sometimes even any church *discipline*) not found in Scripture or the earliest or most privileged sources (e.g., Augustine) as *ipso*

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10. Shea, “Ecclesiology,” in *Oxford Handbook of Newman*, 318–19.

11. *On Consulting the Faithful*, 63.

12. *On Consulting the Faithful*, 63.

13. *On Consulting the Faithful*, 63–64.

*facto* not Catholic doctrine.<sup>14</sup> At most, these innovations or developments could be pious opinions, perhaps with their own hallowed liturgical commemorations. This is how some with a primitivist method viewed Mary's Immaculate Conception. For Newman, this "fixist" position was both impractical (the Immaculate Conception was defined as a dogma in 1854; opposition to papal infallibility was increasingly censured) and it was not in keeping with his own theological or historical inclinations anyway. It would be very difficult, if not downright impossible, to remain in communion with the Roman Catholic Church of 1859 (not to mention 1870) while holding such a view. The second position Newman did not wish to take was a kind of ultramontanist (papalist) presentism that was either ignorant of history or deliberately, sometimes even triumphalistically, dispensed from it. This hyper-papalism felt it was above the rigorous challenge of historical inquiry, since God's will and truth were immediately accessible through the contemporary teaching of the church in general and the pope in particular. Manning's troubling statement that Vatican I's proclamation of papal infallibility represented "the triumph of history over dogma" encapsulates this hyper-papalist position, a position that causes far more theological and intellectual problems than it solves.<sup>15</sup>

Newman's attempt to forge a middle way between these two shoals was difficult and at times isolating, but it bore great fruit. In a climate in which the church felt, in many places, besieged by hostile governments and cultures, Newman refused to jettison the patristic and biblical heritage that he knew, and he loved to embrace a combative and ahistorical papal positivism. That patristic-biblical heritage which Newman treasured taught that infallibility was, first and foremost, a gift to the entire believing community. Far from leading Newman to deny the infallibility of the pope or of the bishops gathered in ecu-

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14. There are numerous variations of such a position, but one that is particularly relevant to Newman is given by Owen Chadwick in *From Bossuet to Newman* (2nd Edition; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For a more full history of the problem, one may consult the magisterial account of Bruno Neveu, *L'erreur et son juge. Remarques sur les censures doctrinales à l'époque moderne* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1993). The more explicit nineteenth century theories of development were anticipated in the eighteenth century by figures like the Italian Scotist Ignazio Como, who appealed to an inchoate theory of development in his debate with Lodovico Muratori on the Immaculate Conception in the 1740s. See Pietro Stella, *Il giansenismo in Italia, vol. 2: Il movimento giansenista e la produzione libraria* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2006), 294.

15. Henry Manning, *Religio Viatoris* (4th ed.; London: Burns and Oates, n.d.) 79. See the commentary of Kenneth L. Parker in "Historical Consciousness and the First Vatican Council: Manning, Döllinger, Newman, and Acton's Uses of History in the Papal Infallibility Debates," *The Rise of Historical Consciousness Among the Christian Churches* (eds.: Parker and Erick H. Moser; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2013), 89–122, at 109–110.

menical councils, this conviction let Newman to confidently attempt to account for how all these various loci work together. Such an integrative approach is crucial for synodality today.

As in the work of Newman's neo-ultramontane Roman colleague Giovanni Perrone (1794–1876), who is cited several times in *On Consulting the Faithful*, these insights were not capitulations to the so-called “levelling spirit” of modernity, but rather recoveries of ancient Christian truths.<sup>16</sup> *On Consulting the Faithful* is very careful to not imply a kind of “majority rules” democracy. And yet, it would be difficult—then or now—to disagree with Newman when he writes that one “consults” a barometer to learn the weather.<sup>17</sup> Analogically, the *ecclesia docens*, the teaching church, which has teaching authority from Christ, in fact has a duty to listen to the *ecclesia discens*, the learning church. Like the weatherman who consults the barometer, they could learn something they did not previously know.

*On Consulting the Faithful* is really a long essay, not a book. But in classic Newmanian fashion, it is sweeping in scope. Newman addresses his clerical contemporaries (Perrone, Pius IX, his own bishop of Birmingham, etc.), he has lay English Catholics in view, and he also takes deep dives into the history of the church, especially the early church. Newman's more intellectual and abstract concern to make better sense of the messy twists-and-turns in church history were tightly connected to his own theory of doctrinal development. This is why in *On Consulting the Faithful* he devotes a lengthy section to chronicling the grave failures of many bishops during the Arian crisis (ca. fourth and fifth centuries C.E.) contrasted with the heroism of many laity. Newman's drive for a coherent theory of development, while academic, was also deeply personal. It was, in a very real sense, the justification for his own conversion to Catholicism—a conversion that turned his life upside down. For Newman, it was the faith of the laity that preserved true doctrine during a time of widespread episcopal error (the Arian crisis), a time when it could even be said that the *ecclesia docens* had, for all intents and purposes, failed.<sup>18</sup> This was an implication of Newman's work

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16. Newman's thought in fact had numerous points of compatibility with Perrone. See C. Michael Shea, *Newman's Early Roman Catholic Legacy, 1845–1854* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

17. Newman is fond of organic images and images that arise from nature. He writes of a body expelling foreign substances, straw tossed into the air to gauge the blowing of the wind, and a flowing riverbed (also an image he uses when discussing doctrinal development). See *On Consulting*, 72–75.

18. *On Consulting*, 86.



that, needless to say, his enemies within the clerical ranks did not appreciate.

Newman never used the word “synodality,” though he wrote a lot about Synods and Councils (the two words are technically synonyms, the former Greek in derivation and the latter Latin). He was not even a conciliarist—that is, a Catholic who believed supreme authority in the church was vested in ecumenical Councils rather than the papacy. Ultramontanists like Manning and Talbot had more and more successfully stigmatized the conciliarist position as heretical, though in 1859 a number of leading Catholics in England, France, and elsewhere still held to this ancient tradition. While Newman could be critical of ultramontanism, he also knew the limits of Councils, calling them “with a few exceptions, a dreary, unlovely phenomenon in the church.”<sup>19</sup> So, while Newman highly valued what we would today call episcopal collegiality and the inclusion of lay people in ecclesial deliberation and discernment, he did not glamorize Councils or Synods as a cure-all. How could he have? He knew the history of the early church too well. This history included some happy moments of consensus and clarity, but it was also fraught with strife. At times, the traumatic rifts apparent in the ancient Councils and early doctrinal disputes, far from evidencing a “golden age,” were just as sobering as any of the intrigues and politicking that the anti-Infallibilist party complained about at Vatican I.

Thus, it was not as if Newman was attempting to move the church away from an ultramontane model and toward a conciliarist one *per se*. What Newman was advocating was actually less about the structures of the church as such and more about an operative style of being the church and of theological discernment. This made his position, ironically, both more radical and ultimately more able to be assimilated into magisterial teaching. It is certainly compatible with what William Portier rightly calls a “liberal ultramontanism” that has arisen in the aftermath of Vatican II and is regnant today.<sup>20</sup> This is, no doubt, one reason why Newman (who some past popes found befuddling) is a figure the contemporary popes are increasingly appealing to, especially Benedict XVI and Francis.

After Vatican I, it was inevitable that doctrinal development would be tightly tied to the papacy, whether through *ex cathedra* pronouncements or through the

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19. Newman to Alfred Plummer, 17 June 1872, *Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman. Volume XXVI: Aftermaths (January 1872 to December 1873)* (Eds.: Thomas Gornall and Charles Stephen Dessain; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 120.

20. William L. Portier, “Unintended Ultramontanism,” *Theological Studies* 83 (2022), 54–69. In response to the unanswered question at the end of John O’Malley’s recent overview of Vatican I, Portier answers that “Catholic Church is indeed still ultramontane today, but ours is a liberal ultramontanism,” (54).

so-called “creeping infallibility” some attribute to modern papal encyclicals and even lower forms of teaching. Though Newman bemoaned some of these trends, he himself had a strong hand in the expansion and clarification of concepts like papal infallibility and of doctrinal development in general.<sup>21</sup> While there certainly were plenty of unhealthy clericalist models in the decades between the Vatican Councils, especially prevalent during periods of intense anti-modernist reaction, there was also a growing sense of the role of the laity not only in political and social matters (e.g., Catholic Action) but in devotional, liturgical, and even theological development and discernment. The events surrounding Newman’s *On Consulting the Faithful* and the legacy of the text itself were significant factors in this growing sense.

## 2. NEWMAN AND VATICAN II REFORM

The Second Vatican Council was the most important event in the life of the Catholic Church since the Council of Trent (1545–63). It spanned 1962 to 1965 and directly involved thousands of people. This number included around 2,500 of the world’s Catholic bishops; these men hailed from Los Angeles to Japan, from South Africa to Scandinavia.<sup>22</sup> But Vatican II was also notable for the breadth of participation—female “auditors” were included for the first time, and Protestant and Eastern Orthodox observers were given pride of place. John O’Malley called it “quite possibly the biggest meeting in the history of the world.”<sup>23</sup> This was one important reason it captured the attention of huge amounts of people around the globe, including many non-Catholics. In light of the event’s magnitude, no one thinker or leader can be credited with a kind of unique influence over the proceedings or even the final documents in the direct manner that we associate the Council of Nicea with Athanasius or Chalcedon

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21. See Shea, “The Role of Newman’s Theory of Development and the Definition of Papal Infallibility at the First Vatican Council,” *Authority, Dogma, and History: The Role of Oxford Movement Converts in the Infallibility Debates of the Nineteenth Century, 1835–1875* (eds.: Kenneth L. Parker and Michael J. G. Pahls; Palo Alto, CA: Academica Press, 2009) 77–94. “Now at the end of twenty years,’ Newman wrote to his friend after the close of the Vatican Council, ‘I am told from Rome that I am guilty of the late Definition by my work on Development, so orthodox has it been found in principle” (77). See also C. Michael Shea and Kenneth L. Parker, “The Roman Catholic Reception of the Essay on Development,” in *Receptions of Newman* (Eds.: Frederick D. Aquino and Benjamin J. King; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 30–49.

22. See Shaun Blanchard and Stephen Bullivant, *Vatican II: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2022).

23. John O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

with Pope Leo the Great and his “Tome.” Nevertheless, those who call Vatican II “Newman’s Council” are still onto something—even if Vatican II was Newman’s Council much less directly than it was “Pope John’s Council” or “[Yves] Congar’s Council.”<sup>24</sup>

Today, Newman is constantly evoked in discussions of contemporary ecclesiology and the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), and for good reason. Newman’s acceptance of Vatican I’s dogmatic definition of papal infallibility came only after great concern that the extreme ultramontanes (who he called “the violent party”<sup>25</sup>) were eclipsing constituent parts of a healthy Catholic view of the church. Many of the emphases of Newman’s ecclesiology were also concerns of leading thinkers who animated the Council majority at Vatican II: the infallibility of the entire believing community, the “sense of the faithful” (*sensus fidelium*), the God-given right of bishops to share co-responsibility for the church with the pope, freedom for intellectual inquiry, the rights of conscience, and the importance of lay and clerical cooperation and concord (“*con-spiratio*”). In certain key cases, which we will note below, Newman’s work actually inspired the Council fathers and their expert advisers (*periti*).<sup>26</sup>

The points of contact between the ecclesiology arising from Vatican II’s final documents and the thought of Newman are too numerous to adequately address

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24. On Vatican II as Newman’s Council see Ian Kerr, *Newman on Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Cardinal Avery Dulles called Vatican II “Congar’s Council.” See Gabriel Flynn, “*Ressourcement*, Ecumenism, and Pneumatology: The Contribution of Yves Congar to Nouvelle Théologie,” in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (eds.: Gabriel Flynn and Paul Murray; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 219–35, at 219. On Pope John XXIII and the Council see the following material, all with relevance for conceptions of synodality: Jared Wicks, “Tridentine Motivations of Pope John XXIII Before and During Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 75/4 (2014), 847–62; Alberto Melloni, “History, Pastorate, and Theology: The Impact of Carlo Borromeo upon A. G. Roncalli/Pope John XXIII,” in *San Carlo Borromeo: Catholic Reform and Ecclesiastical Politics in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century* (eds.: John M. Headley and John B. Tomaro; Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988), 277–99; Max Vodola, “John XXIII, Vatican II, and the Genesis of *Aggiornamento*: A Contextual Analysis of Angelo Roncalli’s Works on San Carlo Borromeo in Relation to Late Twentieth Century Church Reform” (Ph.D. dissertation, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, 2010).

25. For one example, see Newman’s words in his *Apologia*: “And all those who take the part of that ruling authority will be considered as time-servers, or indifferent to the cause of uprightness and truth; while, on the other hand, the said authority may be accidentally supported by a violent ultra party, which exalts opinions into dogmas, and has it principally at heart to destroy every school of thought but its own.” *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (ed.: Wilfred Ward; Oxford University Press, 1913 [1864]).

26. Newman’s work was known and appreciated by many of the Council fathers, especially the English speakers. For example, Cardinal Heenan of Westminster (London), in defense of the Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis humanae*, quoted Newman’s famous statement that he would toast to “conscience first, then the pope.” Acta IV/1, 295–96. See the entry on September 17, 1965 in *Yves Congar, My Journal of the Council*, 778.

in any detail in this short article.<sup>27</sup> For our purposes, let us examine the deepest and most important connection between Newman's thought and Vatican II. This is the teaching of the Council that Newman most clearly had a hand in inspiring: the development of doctrine. It is important not to separate Newman's account of development and the role of the *ecclesia docens* from his theology of the laity and his diffuse understanding of infallibility and consensus.

The essence of Vatican II reform, especially the new orientations it gave to ecclesiology, can be best understood as combinations of *aggiornamento*, *ressourcement*, and the development of doctrine.<sup>28</sup> The Italian word *aggiornamento* ("updating") was popularized by Pope John XXIII, and his statements to the effect of "opening windows to let in fresh air" encapsulated this concept. While more directly associated with the latter two terms, Newman's life and work evidenced a concern for pastoral approaches, educational endeavors, ecclesio-political strategies, and intellectual engagements that were in constructive and critical dialogue with the age in which he lived. In many ways, Newman was innately conservative (socially, politically, and theologically) but his conservatism was dynamic, and he was keenly aware of contemporary realities. As such, he evidenced a remarkable suppleness in thought and action.

Though the term was not used at the time, Newman's method of doing theology was a form of *ressourcement*, or going back to the sources. Newman was especially concerned with retrieving and applying patristic thought. To discover the essence of the Christian faith, Newman wanted to go directly to the church fathers. He used them as his spiritual and intellectual conversation partners, while also remaining rooted, daily, in Scripture and liturgical life. For Newman, this *ressourcement* method arose out of his days as an Anglican "Tractarian," a leader of the Oxford Movement that sought to restore Catholic theology, liturgy, and practice to the Church of England. This theological method in some ways had affinities with the approach of the Gallican school—the remnants of which Newman in some ways needed to be careful to distance himself from. His *ressourcement* method certainly set him apart from the neo-scholastic orthodoxy of the day, so much so that Newman sometimes claimed, unconvincingly, to not be a theologian (in the technical sense).

Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei verbum*, was

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27. This has been done in detail elsewhere. See, for example, Kerr, *Newman on Vatican II*.

28. I go into the nature of Vatican II reform in detail in Blanchard, *The Synod of Pistoia and Vatican II: Jansenism and the Struggle for Catholic Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

the triumph of the *ressourcement* method championed in the lead up to the Council by theologians like Joseph Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI), Yves Congar, OP, Henri de Lubac, SJ, and Romano Guardini. The decisive moment of the Council's first session was the rejection of the neo-scholastic *schema* (draft text) on Divine Revelation. *Dei verbum*, the text eventually promulgated as a substitute, contained Newman's most important contribution to the ecclesiology of Vatican II. In the eighth article we read an account of the development of doctrine that is clearly Newmanian in inspiration:

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops [*proficit*] in the church with the help of the Holy Spirit.<sup>29</sup> 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 Luke 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.

This passage was principally authored by Yves Congar, himself deeply influenced by Newman's theory of doctrinal development, as Andrew Meszaros has convincingly demonstrated.<sup>30</sup> The American Jesuit John Courtney Murray, one of the key figures behind Vatican II's massive shift in teaching on religious liberty and Church-state relations, rightly pointed to development of doctrine as *the* "issue under the issues" at Vatican II.<sup>31</sup> John O'Malley summarizes the nature of this debate at Vatican II as one over "the circumstances under which change in the church is appropriate and the arguments with which it can be justified."<sup>32</sup>

Newman's ecclesiology is thus tightly connected to the reformist orientation given to the church at Vatican II. In recognizing the reality of doctrinal

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29. There is a footnote (number 5) in the text here: "cf. First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Chap. 4, "On Faith and Reason:" Denzinger 1800 (3020)." The Vatican website ([vatican.va](http://vatican.va)) has all of the Vatican II documents in English translation.

30. Meszaros, "Haec Traditio proficit': Congar's Reception of Newman in *Dei Verbum*, Section 8," *New Blackfriars* 92 (March 2011) 247-54.

31. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 8.

32. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 8.

development, the Council was taking a step towards historical consciousness, towards dealing responsibly with the hard facts of history. Reflecting Newman's reading of church history and the importance of consulting the faithful, *Dei Verbum's* account of doctrinal development also featured a contemplative role in development attributed to all praying believers (the seminal Marian passages, Luke 2:19, 51 are cited here). The teaching charism of the episcopacy is also a constituent ingredient of doctrinal development but, as we know from Newman, this includes a listening to the *ecclesia discens* if the *ecclesia docens* is to teach properly. This formal acceptance at Vatican II of the idea that doctrine can develop and the church can grow in an understanding of revelation was essential grounding for the Council's reformist program. Examples abound: ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*), salvation outside the church (*Lumen gentium* 16–17), religious liberty (*Dignitatus humanae*), episcopal collegiality and the role of the laity (*Lumen gentium* chaps. 2–5) and the reform of the liturgy (*Sacrosanctum concilium*) all stand out. A new view of Scripture and Tradition in *Dei verbum* grounds all of this innovation, retrieval, and growth. When tradition is seen as a living hermeneutic that norms ecclesial life, and a growing understanding of the gospel and the Christian life, the church can more effectively justify a reformist and dialogical posture than when tradition is seen mainly as discrete doctrinal data.

### 3. CONSULTING THE FAITHFUL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: POPE FRANCIS AND SYNODALITY

Vatican II stimulated tremendous theological discussion concerning episcopal collegiality, the role of the laity, and the rights and responsibilities of local churches. This discussion has recently crystalized into calls for “synodality” and advocacy of a “synodal path” for the Catholic Church. The concept of synodality unites various contemporary Catholic commitments: to ecumenism, local church governance, evangelization, inculturation, further inclusion of women in leadership and deliberation, and to a more comprehensive measure of the *sensus fidelium*. Though the use of the term “synodality” is recent, the roots of the concept are deep and richly theological. In the words of the 2018 International Theological Commission Report (§3):

“Synod” is an ancient and venerable word in the Tradition of the church, whose meaning draws on the deepest themes of Revelation. Composed of

a [Greek] preposition *συν* (with) and the noun *ὁδός* (path), it indicates the path along which the People of God walk together. Equally, it refers to the Lord Jesus, who presents Himself as “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14,6), and to the fact that Christians, His followers, were originally called “followers of the Way.”<sup>33</sup>

Because of this rich heritage and the Christocentric grounding of the concept, Pope Francis is right to call synodality “an essential dimension of the church,” and to argue that “what the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word ‘synod.’”<sup>34</sup> It is significant that Francis made this statement at the fiftieth anniversary of Pope Paul VI’s institution of the Synod of Bishops, the post-Vatican II project that attempted to give institutional form to episcopal collegiality outside of an ecumenical council (a project that one would be hard pressed to deem a success). Francis’s language supports current calls for a “synodal way”—that is, a deliberate, intentional path of theological and pastoral discernment in dialogue with culture that takes clear institutional shape. This “synodal way” is lauded by some Catholics as the *sine qua non* for a healthy global church. Yet other Catholic commentators see synodality, at least as it is commonly being advocated, as a kind of Trojan Horse. These figures—including many prominent conservative clergy and theologians—believe advocates for synodality are seeking to smuggle in false or imprudent theological or even political ideas, often pointing to the German synodal way as the prime example.

As at Vatican II, the issue-under-the-issues animating some of the most acrimonious debates over synodality is the development of doctrine. The historical fact of past development raises the possibility of change, whether at the doctrinal and theoretical level or at the disciplinary, practical, and pastoral levels. It is no secret that matters connected with sexuality or gender—e.g., mandatory clerical celibacy at the 2019 Amazon Synod—are topics that many of the proponents of synodality are interested in revisiting and many of the opponents of synodality are not.

On most divisive issues (women priests, contraception, homosexuality, etc.), Francis has shown no interest in revision at the level of doctrine. Indeed, he has

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33. The document “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church” is available online at [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).

34. Pope Francis, “Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,” 17 October 2015, AAS 107 (2015), 1139.

repeatedly made clear his opposition to such calls. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that a climate of open discussion and questioning at the highest levels is more possible under Francis than under his predecessor (or, for that matter, for most of John Paul II's lengthy pontificate). Francis has explicitly evoked doctrinal development (appropriately citing Newman and St. Vincent of Lérins) to justify the most controversial teachings and actions of his pontificate.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Francis's entire pontificate is inexplicable without taking into account his understanding of doctrinal development. There is an integral connection between his *Motu Proprio Traditionis custodes* (severely restricting the celebration of the "Traditional Latin Mass") and a number of other acts of Francis's pontificate, including *Amoris laetitia* and the amendment to the *Catechism* regarding the death penalty. Appeals to doctrinal development, with citations of Newman in support, are now being employed explicitly by the papacy not only in retroactive defense of Vatican II but as a vanguard in justification of doctrinal or pastoral reforms.<sup>36</sup>

The concept that Newman's name has become nearly synonymous with, doctrinal development, is at the center of ecclesial conversation and debate in contemporary Catholicism, and central to the papacy's self-understanding both as supreme pastor and teacher and as guardians of the legacy of Vatican II. Nevertheless, Newman's rich thought *on consulting the faithful* is at least as important of a concept to revisit.

Newman's context is, no doubt, very different from ours. Whatever our current issues we have with clericalism, the outlandish question "who are the laity?" to which Newman responded something to the effect of: "the church would look rather foolish without them"—would be unthinkable today.<sup>37</sup> The value of Newman's thought—regarding "*con-spiratio*" is not limited to his cultural and historical context (though that cannot be ignored); rather, Newman bequeathed Catholics a broadly applicable set of insights regarding of the nature of infallibility and teaching authority in the church.

Far from denying papal infallibility, Newman in fact believed in it, though he balked at the hamfisted attempts to define it as dogma. He clearly also held

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35. See, for example, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Meeting Promoted by the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization." Available at: [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).

36. See Shaun Blanchard, "Traditionis Custodes Was Never Merely About the Liturgy," *Church Life Journal* (Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame), 2 August 2021.

37. Coulson's introduction to *On Consulting*, 18–19.



to the much older belief that bishops gathered in an ecumenical Council could teach dogmatic truths infallibly. What was so radical about Newman's ecclesiology was not the denial of anything that his contemporaries affirmed. In this, he avoided the pitfalls that sunk Gallicans and Jansenists on one hand and ultramontanists on the other. His radicality—and his supreme relevance for the advocates of synodality today—is in what he also affirmed. He somehow united so much of what was good and true in all these warring systems and schools, adding his own idiosyncratic and brilliant twist.

The rub, for Newman, was that infallibility was first and foremost a gift by the Holy Spirit to the entire believing community. It was not given to a Supreme Pontiff who, like Moses, comes down from on high to inform the people of the will of the Lord. Vatican II agreed. "The holy people of God," that is, all of the baptized, share in "Christ's prophetic office."<sup>38</sup> Because of their anointing by "the Holy One," we can be confident that "the entire body of the faithful [...] cannot err in matters of belief"<sup>39</sup> Of course, this affirmation is not a magic pill that can fix all epistemological debate or doctrinal deadlock in the church. Nor is it a simple injection of democracy into a monarchical or aristocratic system. Rather, it is an invitation: a call for the "whole people" to walk in the way of "supernatural discernment."<sup>40</sup>

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38. *Lumen gentium*, 12.

39. *Lumen gentium*, 12.

40. *Lumen gentium*, 12.