

The changing Church
101 Questions and Answers on Vatican II
Maureen Sullivan
Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press
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Sr Maureen Sullivan's book on the Second Vatican Council comes across as more a lively conversation with her college students – warm, candid, enthusiastic, and extremely well-informed – than a lesson in history.

Some contemporaries have argued that the council, if not an outright mistake, is now a dead letter. Sullivan contends, on the contrary, that the council is “a piece of history that still lives and inspires the most serious Christians on the planet” – and makes her thesis stick by taking readers through the four full years it lasted. Hard to imagine anyone could bring this off in a simple, readable Q-and-A format; but she does it with panache.

Her confidence comes from her background. She entered her order, the Dominican Sisters of Hope, in New York, just as the council began, led by French Dominican theologians who, she says, “wrote a charter for the Church of the twenty-first century”. She won a doctorate in theology under the Jesuits at Fordham University, and then a faculty position at St Anselm's, a college run by the Benedictines in New Hampshire. For more than a decade, she has been teaching courses there on Vatican II – to students who have demanded through the years to know “what the council meant”.

Now she shares her analysis with a wider audience. It is more than a fast-paced, chronological account of who did what to bring about what John XXIII called his “aggiornamento” (updating). It tells us what happened after the council, as well, in theology, in the liturgy, in Catholic morals, and she has some stories of lesser import to tell about the council's fallout in convents all over the world. If there are fewer nuns, she says, they are better nuns, for they dare to serve in important, new and often risky ways and places that would have been forbidden not many years before.

Sullivan is at her best when she compares pre-conciliar and post-conciliar Catholicism. “All of a sudden”, she explains, “average Catholics had a new, more radical take on sin. Sin wasn't about eating meat on Friday. Sin was putting God out of our lives completely. Many Catholics stopped going to confession at all, but the surprising, delightful thing was that at communion time, practically everyone was marching up to the altar rail.”

She gives a short history of the birth control commission which met during the council but apart from it, and ended up advising Paul VI that couples had to make their own conscientious decisions on the number of their children, and that their motives were more important than their methods. But the Pope confirmed the Church's traditional ban on birth control with his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* – a position that John Paul II has reaffirmed and repeated.

Even so, as Sr Maureen notes, the vast majority of Catholic couples have made a conscientious decision in this regard and dissented. Such disagreement, she says, “provides us with a good example of a papal teaching that has not been ‘received’ by the people of God. In which case, some commentators say, this is not a ‘teaching’ at all, since few are persuaded by it. As a result, the Church at large has a position at variance with the official position taken by the Pope and those that follow him.”

How can they do that – and remain good Catholics? Read Sullivan and find out.

Robert Kaiser