

The Pastoral Constitution: GAUDIUM ET SPES

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Vatican II: general aspects

Not few in the curia thought the idea of a new council, as announced by Pope John XXIII only a few months after his election, absolutely shocking. This shock is to be understood in the light of the dogma of papal infallibility which was decreed in 1870 in the course of the first Vatican Council. According to this dogma, it was the Pope himself, and him alone, who had to take care of all questions of importance in and for the Church.

Pope John XXIII, however, had contrary ideas and felt that to call a second Vatican Council was an inspiration of the Holy Spirit in continuation with God's will to sustain his Church throughout the ages until the coming of the Lord. 'It is the Lord Himself,' he said, 'who guides His Church into complete truth.'

The way the Second Vatican Council took place, between 11 October 1962 and 8 December 1965, became a 'milestone in the two thousand year history of the Church', as Pope John Paul II said much later. The 2800 fathers of the council produced sixteen documents.

John XXIII in his opening paper reminded the fathers that 'the substance of the old doctrine as *depositum fidei* is one thing, the phrasing and language of its new appearance another.'

The reform was, as the fathers of the council understood, a radicalisation of faith in a changing world, not plain simplification and adaptation, and not what Ratzinger called 'a watering down of faith.' He further said:

With the fathers of the council, a strong will had ripened to risk something new, to leave the scholastic model and to risk a new freedom.

In fifty years, those documents the Second Vatican Council presented us with have not lost their relevance; they do, however, need a new, profound and concrete interpretation, as well as application.

Much has been said and written about the Council, much has been produced by it. The best I have read so far was spoken (without manuscript) during an address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI at a meeting with the parish priests and clergy of Rome on Thursday, 14 February 2013 in the Paul VI audience hall.

So off we went to the Council not just with joy but with enthusiasm. There was an incredible sense of expectation. We were hoping that all would be renewed.

And we knew that the relationship between the Church and the modern period, right from the outset, had been slightly fraught, beginning with the Church's error in the case of Galileo Galilei; we were looking to correct this mistaken start and to rediscover the union between the Church and the best forces of the world, so as to open up humanity's future, to open up true progress.'

(*Sacrosanctum concilium*, and the documents on revelation and on ecumenism are the main products of the first part).

The second part of the Council was much more extensive. There appeared with great urgency the issue of today's world, the modern age, and the Church; (...) the ethical responsibility of Christians and where we look for guidance; and then religious freedom, progress, and relations with other religions.

The great document *Gaudium et spes* analyzed very well the issue of Christian eschatology and worldly progress, and that of responsibility for the society of the future and the responsibility of Christians before eternity, and in this way it also renewed a Christian ethics, the foundations of ethics.

With this last sentence we have a comprehensive description of the content of this pastoral constitution.

The context of GAUDIUM ET SPES – its main impetus

‘When looking at the situation of the Church today all you actually need is the Gospel and *Gaudium et spes*’. This is what a German Jesuit once said. Joseph Ratzinger was reported to have added to this assumption that *Gaudium et spes* should always be read in the light of the *Imitation of Christ*.

Gaudium et spes has the subtitle *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, and it starts with the words:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation, which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds (1).

Thus, the document addresses the relationship between God, man and this world.

Gaudium et spes says nothing new; it addresses issues that are as old as mankind, issues that have been around since people first developed a social conscience.

We see this clearly if we look at Holy Scripture. Already, in the very beginning, envy caused hate and hurt between Cain and Abel, and through all books of the Old Testament this thread can be followed.

Here are just a few examples from the epic of Job (24:2, 3, 7, 8, 10b, 13b, 15, 25)

Job talking about those who do not want to know God:

Some remove the landmarks; they seize and devour flocks.

They drive away the donkeys of the orphans; they take the widow's ox for a pledge.

The result for the poor is that

They spend the night naked, without clothing, and have no covering against the cold. They are wet with the mountain rains and hug the rock for want of a shelter.

The wicked, the unjust, the oppressors

take away the sheaves from the hungry.

(They) rebel against the light; they do not want to know its ways nor abide in its paths.

The eye of the adulterer waits for the twilight, saying, ‘No eye will see me.’ And he disguises his face.

Finally, Job says:

Now, if it is not so, who can prove me a liar, and make my speech worthless?

And Psalm 104 ends with the exclamation (v.35):

May sinners vanish from the earth, and the wicked exist no more! Bless the LORD, my soul
(*Jerusalem Bible*)

Let sinners be consumed from the earth and let the wicked be no more. Bless the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD! (*New American Bible*).

The relationship between regard for God and social wellbeing is obvious.

Of course, Jesus himself tells us time and again of the importance of love of God and its relationship to social justice (Mt 25:31-46; Mk 7:10-16).

The contents and structure of *Gaudium et spes*

In the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* the issues named above are addressed in detail. In addition, the document also frequently turns to Christ, spelling out that God provides a full answer to human questions in Christ.

In the Introduction and Part I we have an analysis of the situation of the modern world and a philosophical and theological account of human dignity.

The comprehensive Introduction is followed by two main parts, the first focuses on the relationship between 'The Church and Man's Calling', while the second looks at 'Some Problems of Special Urgency'.

These are:

- marriage and family
- culture
- socio-economic life
- peace, and the community of nations.

The Introduction of *Gaudium et spes* starts with a description of men in the modern world and shows up the relationship between God, world, and humanity/man. It addresses positive developments as well as corruption.

To quote some basic statements:

Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world's citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty (...). Although the world of today has a very vivid awareness of its unity and of how one man depends on another in needful solidarity, it is most grievously torn into opposing camps by conflicting forces (4).

The seminal problems of economy, social structures, and science are addressed. Very pointedly, the devastating effects of positivist thinking for human development, which tends to exclude any transcendental elements, are articulated:

... intellectual formation is ever increasingly based on the mathematical and natural sciences (5).

Technology, urbanisation, the media, and new social realities are changing our environment, our thinking, and our perception of values:

...many look forward to a genuine and total emancipation of humanity wrought solely by human effort; they are convinced that the future rule of man over the earth will satisfy every desire of his heart (10).

Still, man's basic questions remain:

...what is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress? What purpose have these victories purchased at so high a cost? What can man offer to society, what can he expect from it? What follows this earthly life? (10).

And the document shows a clear perspective for answers, stating:

The Church firmly believes that Christ, who died and was raised up for all can through His Spirit offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme destiny (10).

The council fathers spoke for an engagement with the world, opening up to new developments in order to strive for pragmatic solutions for imminent problems, while knowing at the same time that man's destiny cannot be reached without God's saving answer:

... the council wishes to speak to all men in order to shed light on the mystery of man and to cooperate in finding the solution to the outstanding problems of our time (10).

In Part I of *Gaudium et spes* a foundation of moral theology and theological anthropology is outlined, focusing on the dignity of the human person as a given through the fact that man is created by a loving God. In this part, the relationship between man and God is expounded. Sin and salvation, freedom and man's ultimate destiny are put into relation to each other.

The Church's social teaching, political ethics, human rights, feminism are addressed, as well as favourite topics of Cardinal Ratzinger: faith and science and how man is to make use of science and technology.

Part II, 'Some Problems of Urgency', focuses on the relationship between man and world. Chapter I is devoted to marriage and the family. Here, we find the foundations of the Church's teachings on sexual morality beautifully and clearly expounded.

The next chapter, on culture and cultural development, addresses all areas of cultural life in the modern world and reflects deeply on the relationship between peace, social conditions, poverty, and the development of cultural achievements. Just one quotation will suffice to show the scope of this chapter:

May the faithful, therefore, live in very close union with the other men of their time and may they strive to understand perfectly their way of thinking and judging, as expressed in their culture. Let them blend new sciences, theories, and the understanding of the most recent discoveries with Christian morality and the teaching of Christian doctrine, so that their religious culture and morality may keep pace with scientific knowledge and with the constantly progressing technology. Thus they will be able to interpret and evaluate all things in a truly Christian spirit (62).

(Pope John Paul II always emphasised that it is only and always through the encounter with specific cultures that evangelisation can come into effect.)

Chapter III, 'Economic and Social Life', seems to me to be the most important one. It looks at the relationship between the well-being of individuals and politics, and spells out some of the untenable economic situations in which a large number of people in our modern world have to live their life. Here, the traditional social teaching of the Church is quoted extensively.

The last two chapters look at political questions in relation to poverty and war and peace. Solutions at institutional, national and global levels are offered.

If an authentic economic order is to be established on a world-wide basis, an end will have to be put to profiteering, to national ambitions, to the appetite for political supremacy, to militaristic calculations, and to machinations for the sake of spreading and imposing ideologies (85).

Here, norms are set for international cooperation, referring back to and being instigated by authentic Christian motives:

This is all the more pressing since the greater part of the world is still suffering from so much poverty that it is as if Christ Himself were crying out in these poor to beg the charity of the disciples. Do not let men, then, be scandalized because some countries with a majority of citizens who are counted as Christians have an abundance of wealth, whereas others are deprived of the necessities of life and are tormented with hunger, disease, and every kind of misery. The spirit of poverty and charity are the glory and witness of the Church of Christ (88).

There is an abundance of thoughts, stipulations, and arguments in this pastoral constitution. If everything written in this document was put into practice, God, man, and world would be in perfect balance!

Concluding remarks

The question remains: *Gaudium et Spes* - so what?

Some years back, in Rome, a Cistercian monk from Hungary, during a discussion on tradition and modernity, emphatically rejected the use of computers and the internet: 'I belong to a medieval order – I want to live like St. Bernhard lived – medievally'. Someone asked him how he got to Rome

On another note, Pope Benedict, when visiting Germany in 2011, in his address, 'Catholics engaged in the life of the Church and Society', said the following:

... it is time once again to discover the right form of detachment from the world, to move resolutely away from the Church's worldliness. This does not, of course, mean withdrawing from the world: quite the contrary. A Church relieved of the burden of worldliness is in a position, not least through her charitable activities, to mediate the life-giving strength of the Christian faith to those in need, to sufferers and to their carers. 'For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being' (*Deus caritas est*, 25). At the same time, though, the Church's charitable activity also needs to be constantly exposed to the demands of due detachment from worldliness, if it is not to wither away at the roots in the face of increasing erosion of its ecclesial character.

This caused great controversy, which is far from over.

We may learn to understand *Gaudium et spes* in a new way if we listen to what Pope Francis has to say and if we look carefully at how he acts. In his address to the Diplomatic Corps on 22 March he said:

How many poor people there still are in the world! And what great suffering they have to endure! After the example of Francis of Assisi, the Church in every corner of the globe has always tried to care for and look after those who suffer from want, and I think that in many of your countries you can attest to the generous activity of Christians who dedicate themselves to helping the sick, orphans, the homeless and all the marginalized, thus striving to make society more humane and more just.

And he said further:

There cannot be true peace if everyone is his own criterion, if everyone can always claim exclusively his own rights, without at the same time caring for the good of others.

Referring to his own role, he said:

One of the titles of the Bishop of Rome is 'Pontiff', that is, a builder of bridges, with God and between people. It is not possible to build bridges between people while forgetting God. But the converse is also true: it is not possible to establish true links with God, while ignoring other people.

In his first homily, on the feast day of St Joseph, Pope Francis spoke of the human need for caring and being cared for, of the world's need for protectors, as Joseph was:

Be protectors of God's gifts! . . . To protect creation, to protect every man and every woman, to look upon them with tenderness and love, is to open up a horizon of hope ... for us Christians ... the hope that we bring is set against the horizon of God that has opened up before us in Christ.

These words give us a new incentive for action.

But what are we to make of the fact that the 36, 685 words of *Gaudium et spes* have not really been acted upon, even 50 years after they were written. What are we to make of the fact that today we bemoan a lack of values, that indifference to binding moral stipulations prevails, that there seems to be a plurality of truths?

We need to remember that words, even ordinary ones, have a performative power – if you shout 'hey' at least some people will turn round. Nor should we forget that as Christians we believe our reality is spoken into existence. So we should not lose heart but should rather have faith that these Council words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, are having an effect in God's time.

Perhaps an answer is given by the final paragraph of the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. It ends with a quotation from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

Now to Him who is able to accomplish all things in a measure far beyond what we ask or conceive, in keeping with the power that is at work in us—to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, down through all the ages of time without end. Amen (Eph. 3:20-21).

Of course, as human beings we are not able to set the world right, but at least we can strive to get the balance right between God, man, and world in our own little worlds - and that no doubt, will have its repercussions in the world at large.

