The Human Vocation

Forty Years after *Gaudium et Spes*:
New Insights in Christian and Secular Anthropology

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Revisiting the council’s challenging vision of the dignity and potential of the human person and of the bonds which followers of Christ have with all their fellow human beings, the author points out six new directions which that teaching needs to take if it is to continue to inspire and challenge the church and the world of the twenty-first century to mutually beneficial dialogue, collaboration, and progress.

At the heart of the Second Vatican Council’s articulation of the pastoral mission and social teaching of the church in *Gaudium et Spes* (the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) is the basic sketch of Christian anthropology found in its first two chapters. A number of aspects of that vision of the human person and community were debated at the time of the council and in the decades that followed. Nevertheless, the fundamental pledge of the church to stand in solidarity with the whole human family, especially those who suffer, remains one of the major challenges facing the church of the third millennium. In a document addressed to all of humanity, the council proclaimed,

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The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father’s kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity. That is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history (GS, #1).

While that commitment remains firm, its implications are far from certain today. What constitutes “genuine humanity”? What does “deep solidarity” with the other entail in a world of vast economic disparities, violence, and terrorism and how do we extend that commitment beyond the human race to all of creation? What is the connection between Christian discipleship and a message of salvation that is “for all of humanity”? Further, the constitution remarks that “[i]n every age the church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task” (GS, #4). Four decades after the Council, what are the “signs of the times” that call for new emphases in the Christian view of what it means to be human? Before turning to the challenges facing us today, it may be helpful to review the major outline of the conciliar vision of what it means to be human since Gaudium et Spes remains the most fully developed ecclesial statement of Christian anthropology to date.

**The Vision of the Human at Vatican II**

Critics at the time of the council and since have argued that a truly Christian anthropology should begin with an explicit discussion of Jesus Christ as the “firstborn of many brothers and sisters” (Col 1:18, Rom 8:29) and God’s “new creation.” After extensive debates on that very point, the council chose instead to speak first of the dignity of the human person as created “in the image of God,” highlighting the relational capacities of human beings who are able to “know and love their creator.” Reflecting on the much-discussed passage from the book of Genesis “male and female God created them” (Gen 1:27), the constitution stressed that human persons are social beings—“if they do not enter into relationships with others they can neither live nor develop their gifts” (GS, #12). The document’s brief discussion of what it means to be created in the image of God accents the goodness of humanity and all of creation (Gen 1:31), the partnership of man and woman as constituting “the first form of communion between people,” and the responsibility of human beings in relation to the rest of creation.

Although the constitution has been criticized for its over-optimism and lack of attention to sin, the discussion of the created goodness of humanity is followed
by the explicit recognition that human beings have “abused their freedom at the very start of history,” distorted the right relationship that should exist between God and humanity, and “broken the right order that should exist within themselves as well as between them and other people and all creatures” (GS, #13). In characteristically Catholic language, *Gaudium et Spes* speaks of the bondage of sin (which human beings are powerless to overcome by themselves) as diminishing—but not destroying—human goodness, and describes both individual and social human life as a struggle between good and evil.

The text then turns to a discussion of the human person as a unique unity of the spiritual and material, emphasizing both the goodness of the body and the material world and the unique spiritual and transcendent dimension of the human person. In the language of the document, the “spiritual and immortal soul” cannot be reduced to a product of physical or social causes and it distinguishes human persons as “more than mere particles of nature or nameless units in human society” (GS, #14). Describing the human intellect as a share in the light of the divine mind, the council assessed the achievements of science, technology, and the liberal arts as successful attempts to bring the material universe “under human control.” In contrast to epistemologies that would limit available human knowledge to the empirical world, *Gaudium et Spes* affirms the capacity of the human mind to achieve a level of metaphysical certainty in spite of sin’s dimming of human vision, and emphasizes the need for the kind of wisdom that allows human beings to seek and love what is true and good, a wisdom which is ultimately the Spirit’s gift (GS, #15).

According to the pastoral constitution, basic knowledge of the true and the good is available to all through a law inscribed by God on the human heart, a law that echoes in the depths of people’s conscience—their “most secret core and sanctuary”—so long as they sincerely seek the truth and are not blinded by habitual sin (GS, #16).

Affirming Western modernity’s prizing of human freedom, the council described genuine freedom—unconstrained choice of what is good—as “an exceptional sign of the image of God in humanity” (GS, #17). At the same time the council recognized that in view of sin, it is only with the help of God’s grace that human beings can direct their actions toward their true end—God. Recognizing that death remains an insoluble enigma and radical threat to the human person

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Gaudium et Spes nonetheless rejects the possibilities of utter ruin and total loss of personality and affirms both the Creator God’s call to share divine life and Christ’s victory over the forces of death and evil (GS, #18).

The ultimate basis for human dignity, according to the council, is humanity’s call to communion with God, an invitation “addressed to men and women as soon as they are born” (GS, #19). Arguing that it is not possible to live fully in the truth without recognizing its divine source, the conciliar authors viewed the growth of atheism (a predominantly European concern at that time) as one of the most serious problems of modernity. In an extended discussion of atheism and its causes, Gaudium et Spes insisted that human dignity is grounded and fulfilled, rather than diminished by, faith in God. Likewise Christian hope beyond death affirms and undergirds life in this world, a conviction that the council called Christian believers to witness to more fully.

Chapter 1’s discussion of the dignity of the human person culminates in a discussion of Jesus Christ who as the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15) is the source and embodiment of humanity’s vocation to image God. Interrelating the doctrines of incarnation and redemption, the text speaks of human nature being raised to a dignity beyond compare in the incarnation and in the reconciliation of humankind and God in the blood of Christ. It further asserts that the grace of Christ is active in the hearts not only of Christians, but of “all people of good will” (GS, #22).

Chapter 2 of the pastoral constitution develops the earlier claim that human persons are created as social and relational beings who share a common destiny and who can fully discover their true selves “only in sincere self-giving” (GS, #24). The document points out that persons and societies are interdependent, that socialization holds the potential either to improve human life and protect human rights or to impact and shape human life negatively, and that human welfare and the common good should be the goal of all human societies. Extending the notion of the common good to include “the entire human race,” Gaudium et Spes argues that “every group must take into account the needs and legitimate aspirations of every other group and even those of the human family as a whole” (GS, #26). At the same time the document insists on the dignity of human persons and the universality and inviolability of human rights to “all that is necessary for living a genuinely human life.” Thus the social order must be subordinated to the good of persons, rather than vice-versa.
Chapter 2 goes on to specify further what it means to be neighbor to the other, to highlight the web of life issues that are involved in respect for human life, to call for respect and love for enemies, to root the call for social justice in the human person’s creation and destiny as image of God, and to deplore all forms of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights as incompatible with God’s design (GS, #27–29). The constitution criticizes in particular the lack of respect for women’s full human rights, the scandal of economic and social disparities in the one human race, ongoing social and political slavery, and political systems that fail to protect human rights. Calling for the need to transcend an individualistic morality, Gaudium et Spes underlines the human responsibility to contribute to the common good and to promote social justice (GS, #30). The constitution recognizes that implementing this vision of human life will require the transformation of cultures as well as individual persons and calls attention to how both poverty and overconsumption can destroy genuine human freedom and work against participation in the common good (GS, #31).

This vision of human solidarity, like the vision of the human person in chapter 1, concludes with the explicitly religious roots in which it is grounded. The constitution recalls that from the beginning of the history of salvation, God made a covenant with people as members of a community, not as individuals. Jesus, the Word made flesh, likewise took his place in human society, sanctified basic human ties, called his followers to treat each other as sisters and brothers, gave his life for the sake of the whole human family, and sent his Spirit to establish a new communion of love and to empower ecclesial unity and human solidarity.

**New Challenges to Understanding the Human**

One of the remarkable aspects of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World noted widely in the mid-1960s was the church’s stance of listening to—and entering into dialogue with—the modern world, a marked contrast from the church’s stance toward modernity at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the same time Gaudium et Spes has been criticized (even by some of those who worked on the document) for its failure to adequately critique the limitations, failures, and biases of modern Western culture. Forty years after the council, the term “post-modern” is used by a variety of authors and movements whose views diverge widely, but who find basic agreement in their critique of modernity’s turn to the knowing subject, confidence in reason, myth of historical progress, and construction of any grand narratives, especially that of evolutionary history culminating in Western civilization and the Enlightenment. Post-modernity focuses on the interruption of that myth of progressive history by
such radical events of evil as the Shoah, two world wars, ongoing genocide, and terrorist attacks.

If the church were to adopt a listening stance once again and enter into a dialogue with the post-modern world that involved both learning and critique, key insights from Gaudium et Spes would remain part of the church’s prophetic witness, notably its emphasis on the dignity and rights of human persons as well as its claims about human life as essentially social and the call to solidarity in service of the common good. At the same time, analysis of the “signs of the times” in the contemporary (post-modern) world calls for new attention to a number of realities including the six issues described briefly in the second part of this article: (1) ecological devastation and the created world as the broadest arena of God’s saving grace; (2) critical dialogue with those engaged in the natural, social, and human sciences, (3) greater awareness of the historical and cultural conditionedness of all theories of human nature and the human person, (4) a fuller development of what it means to say that human persons are constitutively relational and social that takes account of the irreducible differences among persons and communities based on their social location, (5) attention to violence perpetrated in the name of religion, and (6) the meaning of solidarity with the poor and the marginalized in a world dominated by a globalized market economy.

The Turn to Creation

From the perspective of the third millennium, one limitation of the vision of Gaudium et Spes is the anthropocentric bias that reinforces an instrumental view of the rest of creation as under human control and designed for humanity’s use. The text cites the creation narrative in Genesis 1 as evidence that human beings whose capacity for knowing and loving distinguishes them as created “in the image of God” were “set by [the Creator] over all earthly creatures that they might rule them and make use of them, while glorifying God” (GS, #12). While human beings are reminded that they cannot treat the rest of creation “as if it had no relation to its creator” (GS, #36), the anthropocentric focus of the document is clear. The proposed goal is to “make life more humane and conquer the earth for this purpose” (GS, #38). The constitution proclaims that all of creation will share in the consummation of redemption in Jesus Christ, but once again we are reminded, that “all of creation, which God made for humanity, will be set free from its bondage to decay” (GS, #39, emphasis added).

The conviction that nature exists for human use and is not willed as a good for its own sake is precisely the one that scientist Lynn White identified at that time as a primary source of the Western arrogance toward nature which has resulted in the ecological crisis (White, 1203–7). Awareness of the extent of the ecological crisis and corresponding ethical responsibility has developed significantly since that time. In 1990 Pope John Paul II added his voice to that of other religious leaders when he called Christians to realize “their responsibility within creation
and their duty towards nature and the Creator [as] an essential part of their faith” in his New Year’s message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace (John Paul II, 222). That same year international scientists summoned religious leaders to turn to their traditions for resources to contribute to efforts to preserve the earth and prevent further “crimes against creation.” In their words, “[W]hat is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred” (“Preserving and Cherishing the Earth,” 145).

In the context of unprecedented ecological devastation, Christian anthropology needs to relocate human creatures within the larger frame of God’s cosmic creation and identify how human beings are dependent upon and interdependent with the larger community of creation. As many have noted, that cosmological perspective actually has a longer history in the Christian tradition than does the anthropocentric starting point of modernity. Greater attention to the relationship of human beings to the rest of creation and to our natural environment can also contribute to more adequate theologies of human embodiment, finitude, and death—all aspects of Vatican II’s anthropology that need further development in a post-modern context.

**Dialogue with Science**

Recognition of the interrelationship of human creatures with the rest of the evolving universe—a perspective accepted as “more than a hypothesis” by John Paul II in his 1996 Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on Evolution—raises further questions of the uniqueness of the human species and the transcendent depths of the human person. The question of how to maintain Vatican II’s emphasis on the unity of the material and spiritual dimensions of the human person in the context of evolutionary biology without falling into either philosophical dualism or material reductionism remains problematic. Further, the definition of human nature as unique based on rationality and the capacity for relationality becomes disputed as we learn more about levels of consciousness, language, and communication among higher forms of animal life. Dialogues such as those sponsored by the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in conjunction with the Vatican Observatory are crucial if the church is to speak credibly of the spiritual vocation of the human person and the sacredness of human life in a post-modern evolutionary world.

**Historical Consciousness and the Limits of Any Understanding of the Human**

One of the major anthropological advances of Gaudium et Spes with significant implications for moral as well as systematic theology was the shift from classical terminology of “unchanging human nature” to an historical worldview. Yet Vatican II’s turn to history remains in tension with its attempt to continue to
speak of “the essence of the human.” or of human persons in universal terms. Historical consciousness is grounded in the insight that human experience occurs only in concrete and particular social and cultural contexts. Human persons are born and socialized into vastly differing cultural and linguistic frameworks of meaning that provide differing perceptions and experiences of what it means to be human. In contrast to the abstract and universal speech about human experience and culture in *Gaudium et Spes*, post-modern thinkers emphasize that human experience is always co-determined by a unique combination of cultural, social, and historical factors and shaped by a specific linguistic framework.

Edward Schillebeeckx, for one, has argued that if we take history seriously, not only in terms of its irreducible plurality of human experiences, but also with attention to the radical suffering and evil within history that is utterly unable to be rationalized or explained within any system of meaning, then we have to grant that no fully-articulated universal understanding of history or of the human person is possible (Schillebeeckx, 1979, 612–25). While he underscores the irreducible particularity of human experience and cultures, Schillebeeckx does not abandon the notion that dialogue is possible across the boundaries of difference. He notes that human persons with differing theories of what constitutes full humanity may nevertheless find common cause in protesting violations of human dignity (“negative contrast experiences”). Further, he suggests that there are constitutive elements of personal identity (“anthropological constants”) that are necessary dimensions of human life in every cultural context and that therefore need to be included in any Christian account of ultimate flourishing or salvation (Schillebeeckx, 1980, 731–43). One of those constants that received new emphasis at Vatican II and has been explored in a more full and complex way since that time is the relational and social character of being human.

**Persons as Relational, Social, and Irreducibly “Other”**

Like the turn to history, the turn to the person as relational and the emphasis on persons as subjects and agents in *Gaudium et Spes* marked a significant development in Catholic understandings of anthropology. The pastoral constitution used the language of Christian personalism to speak of human freedom, responsibility, vocation, and destiny. Vatican II’s emphasis on human relationality and description of persons as destined for communion with the other and ultimately with God, have become central to the theological anthropology of John Paul II as well as to the anthropological writings of numerous trinitarian and feminist theologians, among others, over the past four decades. Reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity with an emphasis on the mystery of self-communicating love and persons defined as relations has led to a dialogue with process thought and other forms of philosophy in search of a relational ontology that can express the dynamic and relational mystery at the heart of all of reality. A growing number of theologians have noted that developments in trinitarian
theology since the time of the council offer rich possibilities for describing human persons created in the image of God in more social and relational terms.

Yet the very term “human person” when applied without distinction to all human beings (as is the case in Gaudium et Spes) masks the profound difference that sex, race, class, ethnicity, and all aspects of social location make in one’s concrete human life. The oft-cited paragraph 29 of Gaudium et Spes condemns all forms of discrimination based on sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion, and names “excessive economic and social disparity between individuals and peoples of the one human race” as “a source of scandal [which] militates against social justice, equity, human dignity, [and] social and international peace” (GS, #29). Six years later, however, Justice in the World, the document from the 1971 Synod of Bishops, recognized that the prophetic force of that condemnation is undercut if the church does not respond to its own call to conversion. That synod’s claim that “[e]veryone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes” (GS, #40) has been underscored in the past four decades not only by feminist and liberation theologians but also by numerous voices in the context of the sexual abuse scandal within the church.

Post-modern thinkers raise a related issue, noting that Gaudium et Spes is written from a white, male, Euro-centric perspective. Even in its prophetic statements, what is lacking is an awareness of the real difference that differences of sex, race, class, and the many diverse aspects of social location make. While the pastoral constitution refers to human life as social and refers to the impact of socialization on the human person, it lacks serious analysis of how profoundly the diverse aspects of social location condition human experience and the power relations that are inevitably operative when any person or group claims to speak for all. As noted above, modernity’s awareness of the historical and cultural conditioning of all human experience has given way to a post-modern emphasis on the radical and irreducible differences between human persons and societies, differences that can no longer be considered accidental modifications of a universal human nature or personhood. The term “alterity” with its reminder that “the other” can never be reduced, absorbed, or appropriated to “the same” has become a hallmark of post-modern discourse.

But just as Gaudium et Spes has been criticized for an uncritical appropriation of modernity, the uncritical acceptance of post-modern claims is equally problematic for a church that claims to reflect on the “signs of the times” in light of the

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Gospel. Post-modernity shares the modern insight that philosophical pluralism and diverse religious perspectives cannot be reduced to a single universal linguistic understanding of what it means to be human. But the post-modern claim that these multiple perspectives are social constructions that are incommensurable ones beyond any possibility of mediation or dialogue raises serious ethical questions. Numerous philosophical and religious thinkers have reminded us that to abandon the ability to make claims about the dignity and rights of human persons only allows repressive power structures to operate without critique, which is to say, at the expense of the most vulnerable. Here the church can find dialogue partners and allies among the other religions of the world and the growing movement of concerned human beings calling for some sort of international recognition of human rights and accountability. The second Parliament of the World’s Religions, for example, took as the starting point for its “Initial Document Towards a Global Ethic” the fundamental demand that “every human being must be treated humanely” (“A Global Ethic,” 21).

**Religion and Violence**

The search within interreligious dialogue for a global ethic that can provide a basis for diverse peoples living peacefully together gives evidence that in the present climate of terrorism and violence perpetrated on the basis of absolutist religious claims, the greatest religious challenge facing the church in the postmodern world is no longer atheism. A more fundamental concern is the growth of various forms of religious absolutism and intolerance and the related connection between religion and violence. Here, as in other areas of dialogue, the church is called not only to condemn all violations of human life carried out in the name of religion but also to reflect on the connection between religious absolutism and violence in its own history and practice.

**Solidarity with the Poor and the Global Market**

While atheism may not be the major challenge facing the majority of the world’s population, a form of practical atheism undergirds a globalized market economy when it fails to recognize the God-given dignity and inherent value in human persons or any corporate responsibility to serve the common good. In the mid 1960s, *Gaudium et Spes* offered a primarily positive assessment of the achievements of science, technology, the communications media, and the increased interchange between nations as contributing to a “human family [that is] gradually coming to recognize itself and constitute itself as one single community world-wide” (*GS*, #33).

Four decades later, there is abundant evidence that the very developments that were meant to draw the world together have in many ways increased the gap between rich and poor nations, resulting in the systematic exclusion of many from any real participation or power in the so-called world-wide community. Deprived
of the fundamental resources that are necessary to sustain human life, those who are materially poor—and especially those who are doubly and triply oppressed because of gender, race, or ethnicity as well as poverty—are rendered insignificant and treated as non-persons in a global system based on economic profit. Gustavo Gutierrez has identified the challenge that faces a church that proclaims solidarity with “those who are poor or in any way afflicted” with his question: What words are we to use in telling those who are not even regarded as persons that they are the daughters and sons of God?” (Gutierrez, xiv).

**Conclusion**

Ten years ago—three decades after the publication of *Gaudium et Spes*—Walter Kasper remarked that in theological anthropology, as in so many other areas of theology and church life, the reception of Vatican II still lies before us. Specifically, he called for “the systematic development of a christologically grounded and defined anthropology and the fully articulated formulation of corresponding individual and social ethics” as “an urgent desideratum” (Kasper, 140). The challenge of attempting to articulate that anthropology and develop a corresponding ethics in a global village marked by radical suffering, plural worldviews, increasing economic disparities, hatred and fear of the stranger, violence, terrorism, and ecological devastation is clear. Only from a stance of dialogue with “the other” and concrete solidarity with the poor and the marginalized of the post-modern world will the church be capable of the task that Vatican II identified as essential to the future of humanity—“providing generations to come with reasons for living and for hope” (*GS*, #31).

**References**


