Gaudium et Spes: The Church in the World

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The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, or Gaudium et Spes, was promulgated on the final day of the Second Vatican Council, December 7, 1965. It was not among the original schemata for documents for the Council; rather, it arose out of the deliberations on the Council floor. It is one of four Apostolic Constitutions of the Council, i.e., documents representing the highest authority of the Council. It is the only such Constitution called “pastoral,” two others being called “dogmatic” and one simply “Constitution.”

Gaudium et Spes is emblematic of many dimensions of the Council as an event. It embodied the originating vision of Pope John XXIII, who convened the Council. It positioned itself vis-à-vis the world in what was then a new way. Its very composition and content bespoke a new way of doing theology. And in all this, it became a kind of blueprint for the Church recognizing itself as a world-wide Church (rather than a European institution with branch offices) for the first time. This article will trace those developments.

Pope John XXIII’s Vision of the Council

Pope John XXIII’s announcement on January 25, 1959 that he intended to convene an ecumenical council caught everyone by surprise. It was clear that he had thought through what he intended to have happen. It was to be a pastoral council, that is, one focused upon engaging the pastoral needs of the modern world rather than one focused on issuing condemnations of errors. It was not intended to issue new dogmatic definitions of faith. He reiterated those ideas in his address to the Council Fathers at the beginning of the first session on October 11, 1962. There, in Gaudet Mater Ecclesia (Let Mother Church Rejoice), he spoke out against what he famously called the “prophets of gloom” who took an unremittingly negative view of the modern world.

The first session dealt with the proposals that had been developed in the preliminary commissions which bore the heavy stamp of the thinking of the Roman Curia, who were at best skeptical about the need for such a pastoral council. Indeed, a good deal of frustration among the Council Fathers was increasingly evident. It came to a head on December 4, when a speech by one of the four Council Presidents, Cardinal Leo Suenens of Belgium, called for developing a document that addressed the face of the Church toward the world. The proposal was met with thunderous applause in the aula.
Pope John's encyclical letter, *Pacem in Terris*, appeared on April 11, 1963. In many ways, this letter was the Pope's final testament. (He died two months later.) In it he set out his vision for world peace. There the Church embraced the modern concept of human rights for the first time and supported the development of international institutions to secure peace among nations. Most notably, each section of the encyclical made reference to the “signs of the times,” a phrase that comes from the Scriptures (see Mt 16:3 and parallels). Starting in the 1920s, it was used in both Catholic and Protestant social action circles to speak of the analysis of current reality as a starting point for theological reflection. The French Dominican theologian Marie-Dominique Chenu is credited with introducing it into conciliar circles. It would become one of the watch words of *Gaudium et Spes*:

At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, she should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which men ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the others. We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live (GS 4).

The positive engagement with the world—rather than focusing on things to be condemned—marked this encyclical and had a profound effect on those drafting what was to become *Gaudium et Spes*. Indeed those very opening words of the Pastoral Constitution—“joy” and “hope”—bespoke the tenor that the Constitution was to take:

The joy and the hope, the grief and the anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and the hope, the grief and the anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts (GS 1).

Pope John died June 3, 1963. But his spirit continued to animate the efforts that would bring about the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*.

**The Church and the World or The Church in the World?**

The concerns for a genuinely “pastoral” Council reached well beyond the drafting of *Gaudium et Spes*, but this Constitution represented a kind of lightning rod for a broader question: how was the Church to position itself in regard to the modern world? Since the seventeenth century, it had been in a defensive position as a result of the attacks arising out of the French Enlightenment. And for more than a century, it had turned its face away from the world in response to the political upheavals in Europe—the French Revolution, the Revolution of 1848, and the demise of the Papal States. Pope Pius X had sealed this policy with his attack on what was known as Modernism—all those movements (political, social, intellectual) that had moved Europe away from its traditional roots and political arrangements.

The front against Modernism was directed not only at the Church’s stance toward the world; it was operative in policies that systematically silenced theologians who suggested any accommodation to the modern world, as well as movements and institutions that supported such ideas. It is well known that some of the major theological architects of the final documents of the Council had been silenced by the Vatican in previous years.

The stance toward the world ran deeper than politics. It was a theological one as well, mirrored especially in the “nature and grace” debates of the first half of the twentieth century. At stake in those debates was the relationship of the natural to the supernatural world and the presence of God’s grace in the natural world, apart from grace
mediated through the Church. By the later 1950s, a “theology of earthly realities” that asserted the autonomy of the world in the divine economy would begin to be articulated. It would come to be echoed in Gaudium et Spes:

If by the autonomy of the world we mean that created things and societies themselves enjoy their own laws and values that must gradually be deciphered, put to use, and regulated by men, then it is entirely right to demand that autonomy (GS 36).

Such a position meant that the Church must take the world seriously as a conversation partner. In other words, the relationship would need to be framed as the Church in the modern world rather than the Church and the modern world. This idea was to be reaffirmed in the beginning of the pontificate of Paul VI. In his inaugural encyclical letter Ecclesiam Suam, he proposed that dialogue would be the cornerstone of his papacy. The sending of the Son and the Spirit into the world was rooted in God’s great dialogue with humanity.

There were voices that nonetheless urged condemnation of certain modern movements, notably atheism and Communism. While especially atheism would be addressed in Gaudium et Spes, the tone was much more one of engagement rather than outright condemnation. By taking such a stance, the Church was committing itself to listening to what the world had to say and then responding out of the Gospel. This did not preclude a critical stance toward the world. But it did preclude an a priori rejection of voices in the world as the Church pronounced its judgment on the world. Thus, “dialogue” and “solidarity” would become key terms for describing this engagement with the modern world.

The question that follows on this, however, is just how to bring about this engagement with the world, both theologically and practically.

**Developing a “Pastoral” Constitution**

What did it mean to develop a “pastoral” constitution? Dogmatic constitutions, as a genre, were clear enough. In such a document, the teaching of the Church would be set out in a coherent way to address contemporary need. But pastoral constitutions had never been promulgated from a council before.

The most commonly used sense of the term “pastoral” had a clear enough meaning. It entailed extracting from dogmatic statements the behavioral implications, as it were, for day-to-day church life. Thus, the bulk of moral theology could be “translated” into practice for the confessional by indicating the gravity of individual sins. “Pastoral” had to do with the concrete application of doctrine to life. What in the later twentieth century would come to be known as “practical theology,” a realization that every theory has practical implications and every practice is theory-laden, had not yet surfaced in Catholic theology.

Early drafts of the schema that was to become Gaudium et Spes continued to use this twofold distinction between doctrine and practice. What was envisioned was a dogmatic statement about the Church in the modern world, followed by a series of adnexa, i.e., questions or issues that needed to be addressed in the modern world from the perspective of Catholic doctrine. Debate continued about what the content of the dogmatic statement should include, as well as the list of adnexa to be addressed.

What was at stake here was the larger question about what was the point of departure for theology. Neo-Scholasticism had left a heritage of deductive thinking in which theology was always seen to proceed from defined teaching of the Magisterium that was then presented in an apologetic or polemical form of argument against errors. This method was born in the medieval disputatio and only sharpened in the polemics with the Reformers from the sixteenth century onward. At issue was the teaching, set in an ahistorical context. Theology seen in this way was
the preserve of the clergy. Debates continued up to the time of the Council as to whether theology could even be taught to the laity. For them, rather, a watered-down, catechetical approach was preferred.

What had been emerging in the decades immediately before the Council was another kind of approach. One approach, favored among German-speaking theologians, was a philosophical one, wherein a philosophical analysis of the human being would form a framework for interpreting Christian teaching. The philosophical analysis would give a coherence to Christian faith that would resonate with contemporary human beings’ understanding of themselves and their existence in the world. Karl Rahner’s work was a sterling example of this. Among French-speaking theologians, a slightly different approach could be discerned. A phenomenological or even sociological account of contemporary human life would serve to ask the questions about existence that the Catholic tradition was to answer. This more inductive approach privileged individual human experience as a prime source of theology. This was indeed a new approach in Catholic theology, inasmuch as the experience of fallen human nature was deemed an unreliable guide to truth. Marie-Dominique Chenu and his most famous student, Edward Schillebeeckx, are examples of this approach.

It was among these two ways of thinking—one more deductive, the other more inductive—that the development of *Gaudium et Spes* was argued out. Although there were (and continue to be) differences between these two approaches, they share one common assumption: one has to begin with a generally pastoral approach—an experience and analysis of the world in which contemporary men and women live. The legacy of these discussions continues to influence how Catholic theology is being done today.

In the final redaction of the document, something of the older twofold approach of dogmatic statement and *adnexa* is still in evidence. Part One (GS 11-45) looks at the Church and the human vocation; Part Two (GS 47-90) addresses “Some Urgent Problems.” But the dichotomy of doctrine versus application has been blurred. *Gaudium et Spes* begins by invoking the necessity of reading the “signs of the times.” Then in Part One it presents a theological anthropology or understanding of the human being in the light of faith, rather than a series of propositions to be adhered to. It ends by situating the Church in the modern world, building upon the vision of Church presented in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. Part Two does not present so much a practical applications as it does a continued theological reflection based on Part One as it pertains to the questions of marriage, culture, economics, politics, and peace. Here a new paradigm for doing theology is presented. In this paradigm, one cannot do a theology that is addressing the world without hearing the voices of that world, as dissonant or discordant as they may be. They constitute the context in which the Church must function. Those voices are not heard uncritically, but they are to be heard sympathetically.

Second, implied in the human vocation is the idea that theological reflection is not just the province of trained specialists or the bishops. Returning again to *Lumen Gentium*, to do theological reflection is part of the vocation of all who are baptized. There are still gradations within the theological endeavor; there is a difference between the work of an academic theologian and the member of a base community. But this does not obscure the fact that all the baptized have a contribution to make to theological reflection and practice. It is part of the participation of the entire People of God on their way to the Reign of God.

**Toward a World Church**

Only about seven hundred bishops attended the First Vatican Council. Two-thirds of them were from France and Italy. Participation at the Second Vatican Council at times exceeded 2300 bishops, coming from every part of the world. As many people have noted subsequently, this was the beginning of Catholicism becoming a world-wide
Church. By the mid-1970s, the population center of Catholicism had shifted from Europe to the Southern hemisphere.

Catholicism began to become a world-wide Church—but in what way? Many commentators have noted that the agenda and procedures that followed continued to mirror the European Church. Secularization and Communism were seen to be the major threats to the Church at the mid-twentieth century. While such were real issues for Europe, they did not reflect what were often more important issues on the agenda of what would come to be called the Global South—the churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America. In Africa especially, independence from colonial rule and economic and social development were more burning matters. Poverty was a major issue in nearly all of these settings. Apartheid, military oppression, and underdevelopment were issues shared across the Global South. Asia grappled with Christianity being a religious minority amid ancient religious traditions.

Realizing the differences between Global North and South, the Council did make provision for smaller sessions where such concerns could be heard. Poverty as an issue did make some inroads, thanks to the advocacy of some European prelates, such as Cardinal Lercaro of Italy. But Global South issues did not make a significant impact on the agenda, nor did they get much time on the aula floor of the general sessions.

It was more in subsequent actions that the impact of the thinking of the Council was to gain traction in other parts of the world. The second conference of CELAM, the Council of Episcopal Conferences of Latin America, held in Medellín in 1968, translated the tenor of the Council documents into a Latin American idiom and had a profound effect on the Church there for several decades thereafter. The meetings of the Synod of Bishops in 1971 (on justice) and 1974 (on evangelization) had worldwide impact as the voices of bishops from the Global South were heard more clearly.

Both the letter and the spirit of Gaudium et Spes came to life for the World Church, therefore, subsequent to the Council. The forging of Gaudium et Spes consumed a great deal of the energy of the Council. Its potential could not, however, be realized within the confines of the Council itself. That was to continue through the next two decades. In doing so, it changed that way the Church did theology and how the Church saw itself in the world.

Conclusion

A half century after the first session of the Council, we see two things. First of all, we can place the Council more in its historical context. In wishing to respond to the world of its time, it inevitably would show some of the characteristics of its time. The twin modes of apprehension and optimism were in evidence. The Council opened at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which was as close as the twentieth century came to witnessing a third World War. But it was also a time of economic expansion in Europe and North America and optimism about a “third way” between capitalism and socialism in the newly emerging nations of Africa. The anxiousness to address and engage the world may have led to a too sunny view of the world, as subsequent commentators (not least among them, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) would aver. But it did allow a forward movement that few would have predicted in the first half of the twentieth century.

Second, the forces that contended at the Council are still very much with the Church today. The debates over the Council's continuity or discontinuity with the past are still among us. Defining what the “true spirit” of the Council is remains a polemical undertaking. What should the Church's stance be toward the world? Should she be deeply engaged in the world? Should she create a haven for a world in crisis? The debate goes on.
Beyond the high-level attempts to favor one position or the other, we might look more closely at how the New Evangelization is being carried out in different parts of the world. There we can see what kinds of thinking are prevailing. In doing that, Gaudium et Spes will continue to give guidance.

This is an abridged version of an address given at CTU as part of the celebration of the anniversary of the beginning of the Council.