

Vatican II and the *new* Mission of the Church for the World

An Ecclesiology in Context

On October 11, 1962, Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council to reinvigorate and redirect a church, that had become increasingly distant from the modern world.

John XXIII emphasized the need for *aggiornamento* in the church, which roughly translates as a “bringing up to date.” **Increasingly, the church had found itself in a world with pressing social, economic and political challenges that it was incapable of addressing.** From the time of the Council of Trent in 1545, the church had increasingly collapsed in upon itself. It condemned new developments in intellectual thought and resisted the modern age which was characterized by democracy and the diffusion of political and economic power (liberalism).

The Council began a deep reflection on what it means to be a Church in and for this world. Two documents of the Council deserve our special attention here.

Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, put forth how the church at Vatican II understood itself in a new light. It will become evident that *Lumen Gentium* represented a significant departure from the recent past, most notably, *Mystici corporis Christi*, of Pius XII.

Gaudium et Spes, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. In this final document of the Council, **the church put forth how it understood the world and the church’s mission in service to the world and its people. This signified a radical departure and movement beyond the “charity” model formerly embraced by the Catholic Church.** This departure has not been fully accepted by many, including some in the magisterium, even fifty years after the document was approved, e.g., the Diocese of Kalamazoo, Michigan.

***Lumen Gentium*.**

An important consideration for understanding the significance of *Lumen Gentium* is the fact that it offers a self-understanding put forth for the entire church, not just the hierarchy. For this reason, *Lumen Gentium* will frame its understanding of the entire church in ways that are a real departure from previous expressions.

1. The **overall image** used to understand the church changed in a big way. Prior to Vat II, the church had understood itself through the image of the “Mystical Body of Christ”, now it became the “people of God.” This new image characterized not only the laity but the entire church, prior to any division of hierarchy and faithful.
2. The **status and function of the laity** also changes significantly. Prior to Vat II, the laity were encouraged to worship, contribute and obey the magisterium. Following Vat II, they were encouraged to take the social teaching of the church and transform the world in the direction of the kingdom of God.
3. There was a new recognition of how all members of the church, from layperson to pope, have a **universal call to holiness**. Prior to Vat II, holiness resided in holy orders and the laity was considered spiritually inferior.

The People of God.

The Second Vatican Council saw the church in **both** its human and divine dimensions – and thus first considers it as a mystery.

1. The structure of the document considers the entire church as the people of God, prior to any distinction between hierarchy and laity.

2. The church is considered primarily a network of people connected and motivated by the love of God exemplified in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In this sense, the church manifests Christ to the world by imitating and concretely making real the love he lived, died, and resurrected within.
3. All of those baptized share equally in membership. There is no “two-tiered” system where those ordained are considered holier than laypeople. There is no justification for clericalism – the practice and attitude of putting ordained functionaries at the center of all decision making and community life.

There is still an irreplaceable need for hierarchy, communities need leaders. But a new model of servant leadership emerged, and an emphasis on collegial collaboration. “Pastors, indeed, know well how much the laity contribute to the well-being of the whole church. For they know that they were not established by Christ to undertake by themselves the entire saving mission of the church to the world. They appreciate that it is their task to shepherd the faithful and at the same time acknowledge their *ministries and charisms* so that all in their separate ways, but of one mind, may cooperate in the common task,” LG 30.

According to *Lumen Gentium*, **Christ institutes a new covenant with his people at the Last Supper and thus forms a new people of God from his closest followers. But it is not simply heaven that is their goal; it is something much more theologically rich: the kingdom of God.**

Kingdom of God.

***Lumen Gentium* clearly states a difference in the mission and purpose of the church:** “Its destiny is the kingdom of God which has been begun by God himself on earth and which must be further extended until it is brought to perfection by him at the end of time when Christ our life will appear and ‘creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons and daughters of God’ “.

This community, this new people of God, will be the instrument through which God brings about the kingdom of God on earth – a kingdom where the will of God and the will of human beings will unite to form a new social and spiritual reality.

The church is identified here as being in service to the kingdom. It is no longer for the glory of the church that we work. Rather the people of God work for the kingdom of God, as the Lord’s prayer has always reminded us. In order for this to happen, the church must be in service to something beyond itself. In fact, it must enter more deeply into the world it formerly viewed itself as being above. This service to the world and for the world is the new work of the church and, according to *Lumen Gentium*, especially the work of the laity.

The Role of the Laity.

Before Vat II, Pius XII had outlined the role of the laity as discovered: In marriage, which existed for the reproduction and proper education of children, and in a gospel call to model charity in the world, especially to those most vulnerable. *Mystici corporis Christi*, 1943.

There was no call for concrete acts to address injustice or for overt acts of peacemaking. But encouragement to flee from conflict, not engage with the world, and turn to prayer. A static view of history. An elevated sense of the sacredness of the church. Not seeing human reality as worthy of engagement.

“..duty is more clear than ever, when a gigantic conflict has set

almost the whole world on fire and leaves in its wake so much death, so much misery, so much hardship....it is the duty of all to fly from vice, the attraction of the world, the unrestrained pleasures of the body, and also from worldly frivolity and vanity which contribute nothing to the Christian training of the soul nor to the gaining of heaven". #108.

**Are we in the Diocese of Kalamazoo living in the 1940's ,
As if the Second Vatican Council had never happened ?**

Vatican II will see the laity and their role in a very different manner. The term laity is understood to mean "all the faithful, that is, who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ, are constituted the people of God, who have been made sharers in their own way in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ and play their part in carrying out the mission of the whole Christian people in the church and in the world". LG#31

The most significant change resulting from Vatican II is that now the layperson is encouraged, even required, to work for the kingdom of God here on earth.

Universal Call to Holiness.

How we live and interact on a daily basis with those in our community is essential to holiness.

Gaudium et Spes.

This is the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. It articulates how the church is to build up the Christian community and serve the world. *Gaudium et Spes* embraces a view of the Christian faith which sees it as actively in service to the world – even if the two societies come into conflict.

Because of the recognition that we must work for the kingdom of God here on earth, the church has and will have much to say as it guides and encourages a particular approach to social reality.

The perception of the church as isolated and separated from the world, a static view of history and the dualism that had only focused on "the above," has been effectively left behind. (GS 1.) "And so humankind substitutes a dynamic and more evolutionary concept of nature for a static one, and the result is an immense series of new problems calling for a new endeavor of analysis and synthesis." (GS 5)

Preferential Option for the Poor.

This is our human attempt to imitate how God interacts with humanity as revealed in scripture. The measuring stick is the way we treat the most vulnerable people among us.

Perhaps an analogy would be helpful here. Imagine that a member of your family is physically and/or mentally challenged. Would that person require more time, energy and resources than others in the family? Most likely. Does that mean that by giving that person more, you love or value them more than other members of the family? Not at all. The person needs more and so is given more.

For the church to make this commitment at the beginning of this document means two things:

1. The church's action in the world is to be defined by this preferential option for the poor.
2. The church now has a deeper awareness for social change in pursuit of justice, which ultimately serves the kingdom of God.

What is contrary to the kingdom of God is not merely personal sin but the dehumanization of people through poverty and injustice. Justice rather than charity alone, will finally and explicitly define the church's mission in the world.

This is why the diocese needs a Secretariat for Justice and peace, and why every parish pastoral council needs a Justice and Peace Committee/Commission.

There are five (5) overriding themes in *Gaudium et Spes* which articulate the church's mission to the world in new and bold ways.

1. When the church looks at the modern world, it affirms quite strongly a new focus on the category of the **"person"** as the meaning and fulfillment of created reality. This means that of all the ways to analyze and understand the world the default will always be how any given factor, issue, or system increases or diminishes the dignity of the human person. The entire integrated person becomes the center of church concern, not merely the disembodied "soul". To say that we are made in the image of God means that we are made to give, receive, and share love, which rests on the possibility of doing this by first having adequate material opportunities available for love to flourish.
2. In their inmost nature human beings are **"social"**, and, they can neither live nor attain their full potential by themselves. So the document moves from a claim concerning the inherent dignity of each person to the necessity and goodness of living socially. Emerging from the central Christian doctrine that love of God is love of neighbor, there is an obligation to cultivate interpersonal relations. "This is a matter of utmost importance to people who are coming to rely more and more on each other and to a world increasingly characterized by interdependence.
3. The criteria for how a truly human society cultivates increasingly complex relationships.

The social nature of human beings should be formed and managed with the genuine and **"common good"** of the human race foremost. People neither live nor attain their full potential by themselves. There is an obligation to cultivate interpersonal relations.

For many North Americans, this is counterintuitive. Part of our historical development has included the ethos that by pursuing our individual self-interest, the common good will somehow emerge (invisible hand?). **G.S.** arrives at quite a different position. By pursuing the common good, our individual good emerges. From a Catholic perspective, society is not supposed to be a contractual partnership of essentially separate individuals. It is instead a partnership in the pursuit of goods that are best realized and fulfilled in common. For example, a basic level of health care among all members of society is necessary for a community to genuinely and truly flourish. Health-care facilities and the treatment they

provide are not only commodities for those with substantial financial resources to buy and sell. The church's commitment to the common good as the most basic principle of social, economic, and political relationships challenges the self-interest orientation that is manifest in a radical free-market perspective, which sees health care as simply another commodity like other consumer goods whose allocation is solely determined by who can afford to pay rather than by right and necessity. One's individual good emerges from a society that cares for its entire people.

4. In order to facilitate the common good, **the church deeply commits herself to the pursuit of justice** by seeking "more humane and just conditions of life and directing institutions to guaranteeing human dignity". Charity is good, but is never enough !

Working for Justice gets at the systemic roots of why there is so much need and tries to change the social realities that create the need in the first place. **The church would begin to challenge the wealthy.**

5. All social, economic, and human development ought to be directed to the **complete fulfillment of all citizens**, with those wealthier individuals and nations opting to help those less developed individuals and nations.

"In the midst of huge numbers deprived of the bare necessities of life there are some who live in riches and squander their wealth; and this happens in less well developed areas as well. Luxury and misery exist side by side. While a few individuals enjoy almost unlimited freedom of choice, the vast majority have no choice whatsoever of exercising personal initiative and responsibility, and quite often have to live and work in conditions unworthy of human beings." GS 63.

Riches and poverty are relational. This scandal of inequality has both widened and deepened globally since 1965. Economic inequality in the United States has come to mirror global trends.

"To satisfy the demands of justice and equity, strenuous efforts must be made ...to remove as quickly as possible the immense economic inequalities, which now exist and in many cases are growing and which are connected with individual and social discrimination." Economic Policy Institute, #66.

It is clear from *Gadium et Spes* that the tradition of Catholic social teaching, formally initiated in 1891 with *Rerum Novarum*, is finally penetrating the ecclesiology that for so long had resisted it. Prior to Vat II, the social encyclicals seemed to be an unrelated corollary to the true business of the church in the world. This separation, or compartmentalization, is over. *Gadium et Spes* reiterates the core principle of Catholic social teaching and pledges, **as a work of the church**, to articulate this vision more forcefully in the world. "God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples. Thus, under the leadership of justice and in the company of charity, created goods should be in abundance for all in like manner." GS 69.

Conclusion

How the Catholic church understands its role in the world changed at the Second Vatican Council, and this change was nothing less than astonishing. The change includes a transition from a church that perceived itself as above the affairs of the world, and only grudgingly part of it, to a church deeply rooted in mission to the world, as it cooperates with God's grace to build God's kingdom. It moves from a church heavily focused on its hierarchy and holiness to one which validates every member of the church as called to a specific vocation by God. Finally, the church embraces **justice**, especially for the most vulnerable. It now seeks to address the causes of dehumanization as its main posture toward the world, a posture that will always include charity but never be limited to only charity.

As with any major shift in identity, these changes have been difficult for many members of the church. It could be argued that the majority of North American Catholics have not accepted or internalized the profound changes of Vatican II. There are many reasons for this, but much of the contemporary tension in the church centers on differing interpretations, or outright rejection, of some of these changes.

Shortly after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, Paul VI would author an encyclical titled ***Populorum Progressio***, On the Development of Peoples. This encyclical essentially asks (and partly answers) the question, what does ***Gaudium et Spes*** mean for developing countries throughout the world?

Subsequently, the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM) would meet in Medellin, Colombia, and try to adapt the teachings of both *Gaudium et Spes* and *Populorum Progressio* to their own situation.

Perhaps it is now time for the Bishops of the United States to meet and finally try to adapt the teachings of these two documents to our own situation in the world's only super power.

Condensed and annotated by Jim Rauner from Chapter 3, of "**When the Gospel Grows Feet**" by Thomas M Kelly, Associate Professor of Theology, Creighton University