

## **Gaudium et spes , 50 years after Vatican II**

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(DRAFT WORKING PAPER, NOT FOR CITATION)

I am deeply honored for the invitation to be with you on this important occasion, the inauguration of the new chair entitled *Gaudium et spes*, which are the opening words of the culminating document of the Second Vatican Council, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. For this occasion, it seemed to me important to take these moments this afternoon to reflect on the document and on the council that produced it, and to try to show how the name is appropriate for this new phase in the history of the Istituto Giovanni Paolo II. I will do so by examining the document and the council as historical phenomena, as responses to the reality in which the church found itself, which, despite the many changes of the past fifty years, is the reality in which the church largely and even more intensely finds itself today.

Councils are meetings principally of bishops, gathered in Christ's name to make decisions binding on the church. That definition applies to the hundreds upon hundreds of local or provincial councils that began to proliferate as early as the second century and that became one of Christianity's most characteristic institutions. It applies as well as to the twenty-one councils Catholics recognize as ecumenical. It applies, therefore, to Vatican II,

The definition is the bond of continuity among the councils. No matter how diverse the councils may have been in their agenda, in their participants, and in the issues they addressed, they have all been meetings principally of bishops, gathered in Christ's name, to make decisions binding on the church. Nonetheless, as historical events each of them was distinctive and in some measure different from the others. None is more distinctive and different from the others than Vatican Council II. It fulfills the definition but does so in ways that radically reorient it.

In the first place, Vatican II is by far the most complex of the councils. The reasons for the complexity are especially two. Unlike any previous council, Vatican II took as its scope the examination of virtually every aspect of church life, practice, and teaching. No previous council had been that ambitious. Vatican Council I had contemplated a somewhat comparable agenda, which is a similarity between the two Vatican Councils that is not a mere coincidence.

In 1848, Cardinal Luigi Lambruschini first sowed the seed in the mind of the young Pius IX for a council that eventuated in Vatican I. He told His Holiness that at an appropriate time he should convene a council, a remarkable idea at the time because no ecumenical council had met for three hundred years. The reason Lambruschini gave for this radical measure was simple, "Since the evils are so general, a general remedy must be applied."

Lambruschini was correct, but the problems the church faced in the middle of the nineteenth century were much more profound and radical than Lambruschini recognized. The new dogmas of liberty, equality, and fraternity upset the foundations upon which church and society has rested since the most ancient times. The Scientific Revolution made obsolete the seemingly unchallengeable verities of the physics and cosmology of the ancient world. New philosophies had displaced Plato and Aristotle from their thrones. The Industrial Revolution had effected profound changes in the structure of society, producing a downtrodden urban proletariat

who had nothing to lose but their chains. The Enlightenment had thrown history's goal into the future, thus transforming tradition from a source of wisdom into an obstacle to progress. Finally, scholars now applied their newly critical historical methods to every form of tradition, including sacred texts and sacred doctrines, and they conclusively showed that certain doctrines and practices attributed to Christ and the Apostles developed centuries later.

When considered in their cumulative impact, such changes and the many others with which we are all familiar resulted in a situation radically different from anything previous in the history of humanity. Vatican I set out to address them but was unable to do so because the seizure of Rome and the Papal States by forces of the new Kingdom of Italy ended the council prematurely. If the council had addressed the modern world, its response would have been largely negative, undergirded by the conviction that modernity was transitory and that a strong and infallible church could reverse history's course.

In the century that intervened between Vatican I and Vatican II, the seismic changes that shook traditional verities in the nineteenth century did not disappear, as hoped, but only increased and became more intense. Freud set off a revolution in approaches to human sexuality, which was only one aspect of new and sometimes shocking probes into the potential of the human body. With the end of Colonialism, the traditionally European church had to face a global and multi-cultural reality newly assertive. Moreover, Vatican Council II met just after the bloodiest and most destructive half-century in the history of the human race.

The modern world, that is, the reality in which Vatican II took place, -was not going to disappear, and it affected every aspect of the church's life, practice, and teaching. It was not a reality "out there," not a reality separate from the church, but a reality that penetrated to the very heart of the church and that affected it in almost every conceivable way. In retrospect, we see more clearly than did many contemporaries that the council had to address it.

At first in helter-skelter fashion and then more deliberately and intentionally, the council attempted to do precisely that. Therefore, although the process culminated in *Gaudium et spes*, it was operative from the very beginning. That perspective renders clear that every document of the council is in large measure about "the church in the modern world."

We still today hear it said that Vatican II was distinctive because, unlike other councils, it did not meet to deal with a crisis. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Vatican II met to deal with arguably the most severe crisis in the history of the church, a crisis all the more serious because often not recognized as such. Vatican II is distinctive not because of the absence of crisis but because the crisis it faced was so devastatingly radical. Responding to it required recourse to the most fundamental message of the gospel.

That is the first reason that Vatican II is the most complex council in the history of the church. There is, however, another reason why Vatican II is so distinctive and complex, and why it has so often baffled its interpreters. The council adopted a style of discourse that created a *forma mentis* new for a council. The *forma mentis* promoted the attitude the council adopted toward the modern world

In his extraordinary address opening the council, Pope Saint John XXIII observed that, despite many aberrations, modernity had brought benefits for the church and for humanity. He directed the fathers of the council to address the problems facing the church by "making use of

the medicine of mercy rather than of severity . . . demonstrating the validity of the church's teaching rather than by condemnations." Without forgetting the prophetic mission of the church, the council should strive to show the church as "the loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness."

With those simple words, the pope set in motion a process that made Vatican II abandon the most characteristic function councils had performed up to that time. As councils developed in the Hellenistic world of the second century, they as a matter of course adopted procedural models used in the Roman Empire, most especially in the Roman Senate. Although the so-called Council of Jerusalem described in chapter fifteen of the *Acts of the Apostles* remained the scriptural justification for councils, the Roman legislative and judicial procedures determined what councils did and how they did it. The Senate made laws, to which it attached penalties for non-observance, and it rendered verdicts on persons accused of high-level crimes against the state.

This development culminated and received paradigmatic form with the Council of Nicaea, 325. The role of Emperor Constantine at it strengthened the analogy between council and Senate. The Emperor convoked the council. He in large measure set the agenda, which was resolution of the doctrinal controversy ignited by Arius, and he determined that the council meet in the imperial palace under his watchful eye.

The Emperor convoked the council as a first step in restoring public order in the Empire, which the Arian controversy had badly disrupted. Even so, the bishops had direct control of the meeting. If the Emperor's goal was restoration of public order in the Empire, the bishops' was to restore doctrinal order in the church and thus to preserve the church from doctrinal and moral contamination. The bishops' goal was largely coterminous with the goal of the Emperor.

The council heard the case against Arius and found him guilty of propagating heresy. It pronounced anathemas against his impious opinions. In subsequent centuries, councils continued to condemn persons convicted of propagating heresy, most notoriously in the condemnation of Jan Hus at the Council of Constance.

Although the bishops at Nicaea took the case against Arius as the major business of the council, they used the occasion to settle other matters. They made laws prescribing or proscribing certain behaviors, with penalties attached for non-observance. They, for instance, levied penalties against clerics who castrated themselves. The juridical genre the council used to formulate such laws was a generally short ordinance called a canon. Literary genres produce vocabularies and styles of expression peculiar to themselves. The language of canons was terse and often technical, language proper for laws.

Nicaea established the pattern for future councils, which generally formulated even their doctrinal decrees in canons, that is, as laws. As laws, even the doctrinal decrees dealt with observable behavior, not with motivation or conscience. The formula was standard: "If anyone should **say** or **teach** such and such, let him be anathema." Not "If anyone should **believe** or **think** such and such."

Councils therefore early came to be meetings of a certain kind. They were essentially legislative and judicial meetings, and their function was to promote good public order in the church in doctrine and discipline. Although councils over the course of the centuries made use

of a variety of literary forms, such as confessions of faith, bulls, letters, instructions, constitutions, and verdicts against ecclesiastical criminals, they most frequently, most consistently, and most characteristically employed canons to accomplish that aim. The Council of Trent, for instance, issued over 250 doctrinal and disciplinary canons. Even with its drastically abbreviated agenda, Vatican Council I issued twenty-one, Vatican Council II issued not a single canon, the first clue that something of high significance was taking place.

At Vatican II, the bishops heard Pope John's directive to avoid condemnations and severity, and they wanted to comply. To say something positive rather than negative means praising it rather than criticizing or condemning it. Praise became therefore the major rhetorical form the council adopted. Praise-language is utterly different from legislative and judicial language, and it results in a different *forma mentis*. Of course, the sixteen final documents of the council do not reduce to one literary form. Nonetheless, their consistently positive language removed them from the legislative and judicial forms followed by every previous council.

This displacement of one genre of discourse with another had profound repercussions, perhaps more profound than its authors realized and certainly more profound than most commentators on the council subsequently grasped. The consistent employment of the panegyric genre meant a replacement of laws and punishment with norms and ideals. At Vatican II, the council remained a meeting, principally of bishops, that made decisions binding on the church. However, the decisions now consisted largely in articulating norms values and ideals to guide persons---popes, bishops, priests, religious, and laity, including non-Catholics---in their choices and mode of life. The persons made their choices and lived their mode of life, the council wanted to make clear, not in an ideal world but in the modern world, "with its joys and hopes, with its grief and anguish," as *Gaudium et spes* told them.

The decisions were, therefore, less intent on preventing crimes and more intent on providing encouragement for persons' best instincts and aspirations. The council thus became a meeting in which the church explored its identity, recalled and elaborated its most precious ideals, and proclaimed to the world its vision for humanity.

The employment of this new genre constitutes the second reason why Vatican II is so complex. The genre was new for councils, and Vatican II therefore required a new hermeneutic for interpreting it. The council required a hermeneutic newly sensitive to the use of language and aware that style is not an ornament of speech but the vehicle that conveys meaning. A style-choice is an identity-choice.

If the new genre of discourse Vatican II adopted contributed to its complexity, it paradoxically imbued it with a simplicity and coherence no previous council had known. It imbued the council with a few basic orientations that instilled in the council a remarkable simplicity and coherence amid its extraordinary complexity. Unlike previous councils, therefore, Vatican II is not a collection of documents independent of each other. On the contrary, no document of the council stands on its own. Each relates to the others, a phenomenon revealed by the remarkable intertextuality of the council's documents. The council requires, therefore, a hermeneutic that takes full account of this reality.

Important in generating the underlying simplicity and coherence of the council were two official documents to which commentators have generally paid insufficient attention. I refer to

Pope John's inaugural discourse, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, mentioned earlier, and the "Message to the World" that the council fathers formulated and promulgated in the first days of the council.

I have already called attention to the salient passages from *Gaudet Mater Ecclesiae*, and I now restrict myself to repeating only the vision of the church that Pope Saint John articulated for the council: the church as "the loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of goodness and mercy." The pope intended the words as an expression of reconciliation, for they end, "full of goodness and mercy to all those separated from it."

The "Message to the World" is brief, but it expressed sentiments of compassion and reconciliation similar to Saint John's. I quote from the central paragraph: "We urgently turn our thoughts to the problems by which human beings are afflicted today. Hence, our concern goes out to the lowly, the poor and the powerless . . . As we undertake our work, therefore, we want to emphasize whatever concerns the dignity of the human person and whatever contributes to a genuine community of peoples."

These two documents provided the council with its basic orientation, which becomes evident from an examination of the council's characteristic and vocabulary, which often consists of words hardly found in previous councils. Prominent among those words are friendship, cooperation, collaboration, collegiality, mutuality, and dialogue. These are words of reconciliation, and they occur so characteristically that they reveal the council as essentially a council of reconciliation, which is a fundamental instance of the council's simplicity amid complexity.

In *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, "On the Sacred Liturgy," the council sought to reconcile the church to the new global and multicultural reality of the world by validating the inclusion of non-Western traditions in the liturgy. Chapter three of *Lumen gentium* sought to reconcile the relationship between the papacy and the episcopal college, a relationship fraught with problems since the Council of Constance in the fifteenth century. Other decrees are susceptible to the same analysis, but the most obvious among them are of course the decrees on Ecumenism, Non-Christian religions and, finally, *Gaudium et spes*. In *Gaudium et spes*, the council made its boldest statement of mutuality and reconciliation when it acknowledged that the world helped the church, just as the church helped the world. For all its boldness, the statement was basically an acknowledgment of an obvious fact.

Even during the first period of the council, 1962, the dynamic of reconciliation reached a point where a document such as *Gaudium et spes* became its logical culmination. The rapid development of the idea for such a document is remarkable in that nothing like it was foreseen before the council opened. That fact suggests that *Gaudium et spes* must rank as a document most genuinely revealing the true nature of Vatican II. Significant in that regard is the ease with which the council accepted the idea for such a document when Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens on December 4, 1962, first explicitly proposed it. The council fathers surely saw Suenens' proposal as a validation of the "Message to the World" they had promulgated in the council's earliest days.

The document experienced, however, a difficult course through the council, and at the last moment ran into serious difficulties especially from the German episcopacy for being too optimistic and sociological, that is, too responsive to "the signs of the times." Though revised to take into account such criticisms, it even after the council did not lack critics, some of whom

saw it as merely a “pastoral” document, lacking the gravity of a “dogmatic” document. Others saw it as not much more than a transitory and superficial expression of the “optimism of the Kennedy era.”

If there was such a thing as “the optimism of the Kennedy era”, it had definitely ended by 1965 when *Gaudium et spes* received its final form. Moreover, the council offered the church as a helpmate to the world not because it judged the world too favorably but because it recognized the world’s frailty and urgent need. A careful reading of *Gaudium et spes* shows that it in its revised version certainly does not minimize the ravages of sin in the world.

Nonetheless, a certain optimism marks the document, as it marks the council as a whole. I attribute the optimism in part to the impact of the optimism and reconciling dynamic of theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas, to which the great Dominican, Jesuit and other authors of the council documents were so committed at that time. More fundamentally, *Gaudium et spes* and the other documents rest on the basic optimism of Christianity itself, which prays at mass that we become partakers of the divinity just as the Son of God became partaker of our humanity. There is no optimism greater than that. We should not be surprised, therefore, that human dignity resounded as a major theme of *Gaudium et spes*.

Signs of the times expresses a concern to address the world and its needs as the world in fact exists, here and now, a concern to be realistic about what is going on and a concern to smell the sheep as they actually smell. It is a concern to descend from the icy heights of abstraction to respond to human lives as they really are being lived. That is the concern, indeed, that animated the two recent synods on the family, as expressed in the Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris laetitia*. As we know, the synods and the Exhortation are the impetus for this new phase in the life of the John Paul II Institute.

Such a concern found its first official articulation with Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum novarum*, which many Catholics severely criticized at the time for meddling in matters that were none of the church’s business. The church, they said, was concerned about the next world, not the world in which the members of the church actually lived and breathed. Such criticism did not deter the popes, as Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo anno*, and John XXIII’s *Pacem in terris* testify.

*Gaudium et spes* moved that concern from the sidelines to a center in the church’s magisterium. That is an aspect of its high significance. *Gaudium et spes*, though entitled pastoral, is at the same time doctrinal. This should come as no surprise, for *Dei Verbum*, teaches that Revelation consists in truths that ‘serve to make the people of God live their lives in holiness and increase their faith’ (n.8). In other words, God revealed pastoral truths,

*Gaudium et spes* can in fact compete with the other constitutions of the council in the number and importance of the truths it teaches. Among such truths, the most immediately pertinent for the new cathedra we inaugurate today is the teaching that marriage is as “an intimate sharing of life and love” (*intima communitas vitae et amoris*, n.48), a definition of marriage never before found in such a high-level ecclesiastical document. The document more broadly teaches the dignity of marriage and the beauty of the vocation of married life.

*Gaudium et spes* furthermore teaches that, while the church has the heavy responsibility of proclaiming the gospel, it in accordance with the gospel has a responsibility for exerting itself for the well-being of the world. In other words, the church has a responsibility for the well-being

of the so-called temporal order. The document teaches that the church is by definition concerned about social justice, about the heinousness of modern war, about the blessings of peace, and about the advancement of every aspect of human culture. It teaches that Catholics must work with others in promoting such goals, even if those others were non-believers. It teaches that just as the church benefits the world, the world benefits the church. The church must, therefore, listen to the world and learn from it---a remarkable and unprecedented teaching even though, once again, it is simply an acknowledgment of an unassailable fact.

These are not trivial teachings. They are pastoral teachings, and therefore they are truly Christian teachings. They are teachings meant to “serve the people of God to live their lives in holiness and increase their faith.” *Gaudium et spes* teaches many other things, but for our new cathedra the chapter on “The Dignity of Family and Marriage” will always hold a special place. It is first chapter in Part Two of *Gaudium et spes*, the Part that deals with “Some More Urgent Problems” of the world in which we live. The Family and Marriage holds pride of place in *Gaudium et spes*.

*Gaudium et spes* teaches and proclaims, besides the dignity of the family and marriage, the dignity of moral conscience, that “secret core and sanctuary of the human person, where they are alone with God whose voice echoes in the depths of their hearts,” *Gaudium et spes* above all teaches and proclaims the dignity of the human person.

The new literary form the council adopted liberated the church gathered in council from the constraints of the legislative-judicial paradigm so that it could now reflect more expansively on its identity, articulate more effectively its most precious values, and proclaim to the world in clearer and more heartfelt terms its vision of the sublime destiny of humanity.

In the backbreaking work required for promoting that vision, no passage in the entire council tells us more forthrightly the identity of the church and articulate more clearly her deepest values than opening words of *Gaudium et spes*. “The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor and afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well”.

No passage better captures the vision of the church that Pope Saint John directed the council to adopt in his opening allocution, the church as “the loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of goodness and mercy.” If the new cathedra takes that vision of the church as its deepest quest, it will fulfill the mandate given the Institute by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Letter, *Summa familiae cura*: “We must be informed and impassioned interpreters of the wisdom of faith in a context in which individuals are less well supported than in the past by social structures, and in their emotional and family life. With the clear purpose of remaining faithful to the teaching of Christ, we must therefore look, with the intellect of love and with wise realism, at the reality of the family today in all its complexity, with its lights and its shadows”.