

## GAUDIUM ET SPES: ITS RECEPTION

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### 1

*Gaudium et Spes* is very wide ranging in its matter, treating the great perennial problems of life: suffering, death, meaninglessness etc; and the great problems of our age: those affecting the family, culture, socio economic life, political life and war. It teats of these problems in the context of a dialogue between the church and the modern world, conscious as the church had become by the latter half of the twentieth century that many of the fields of these problems were becoming alienated from her and growing secularist.

This document, therefore, should not be seen in isolation from the document on *The Church* or from all previous documents which make up the corpus of catholic social teaching, going back to those of Leo XIII. It takes account also of the achievements of *Catholic Action* which were inspired largely by these documents. It builds on all of this putting it in the context of God's design for the world and man's role of co-operating with this design, and in the context of Christ as the Omega who recapitulates all things in Himself. Accordingly it rejects the accusation that the gospel is opposed to true science or to man's work of developing the world. On the contrary it explicitly states that man by his work in the world is co-operating with this design of the Creator when that work is done in a way that is morally good and for the genuine good of mankind. It speaks of the help that the church and the world can give to each other mutually as a result of their dialogue.

All of this is very positive, both in content and in tone. Indeed I would argue that this document is the centre piece in the council's effort at *aggiornamento*. But how well has it been received or how effective has it been in transforming those areas of life on which it tries to shed the light of the gospel ? I would give a mixed answer to that question. On the one hand many of its teachings have been implemented in areas such as socio-economic life and nuclear war: labour relations have become more co-operative rather than antagonistic, and nuclear war has been avoided so far. But such developments might be due as much to the fall of communism and the growing awareness of the disastrous effects of nuclear war, which renders all parties losers, rather than to the direct influence of catholics implementing the teachings of *Gaudium et Spes*; though in saying this I am not belittling the efforts of organizations such as *Opus Dei* and others since the council.

I would argue that the chapter on the family was pivotal in the document's reception. This is to be expected from the nature of the case, from the document's own assertion that the family is the fundamental unit of society. If the family is healthy, founded on God's teaching as presented by the church, then society will be healthier and many of its problems easier to solve, because many of its problems are a direct result of the breakdown of the family to begin with. Relations in political and socio-economic life, for example, will tend to be even more co-operative if seen as a kind of extension of

good family relations, because society will be seen as the wider family under God, the Father of us all.

Within the chapter on the family the most pivotal again, I would argue further, is section 51, which deals with family planning. I would describe it as both the strongest and the weakest link in the entire document.

## 2

It is the strongest because it states clearly that “sons of the church may not undertake methods of regulating procreation which are found blameworthy by the teaching authority of the church in its unfolding of the divine law”. Thus it was upholding the teaching of *Castii Conubii* by Pius XI and that of Pius XII and re-affirming its basis in divine and natural law. Had this section been accepted in this way by the world at that time and afterwards I believe that immense good would have resulted both for the family and the wider society. I can make this claim because my labours as a pastor have shown me the many many evils that result from artificial contraception, directly or indirectly: promiscuity, abortion, infidelity, divorce, age imbalance and even a re-defining of marriage as allowing for various kinds of unions which are unnatural. With the separation of life from love which it entails it leads to the artificial manipulation of life on the one hand, cloning etc., and on the other hand to hedonism and materialism and forgetfulness of the Creator. It thus proves true the saying “When the Creator is forgotten the creature is also lost sight of” to quote the document in another place.

One other very obvious and direct effect of artificial contraception is that with a lesser number of children being born in a given area, and those who are born growing up in a more materialistic world, there is a much lesser number of vocations subsequently to the priesthood and religious life. This, in turn, reduces the personnel available to the church to preach the gospel or present catholic social teaching to active lay people or, generally, to counter the growing secularism of our time. Many priests in the days prior to the council were able to give their energies to catholic action, promoting various kinds of social projects, because they were able to presume that the Christian family was sound and not in need of defence; whereas today the much fewer priests there are have to give much more of their time to defending the family from various attacks and to the administration of the sacraments. Of course catholic action then as now was more properly the domain of lay people in the secular arena. But then as now it had need of instruction in social teaching, spiritual guidance and moral encouragement which it is properly the role of the clergy, as shepherds and teachers, to provide. The clergy are not there in sufficient numbers now to give this help. In other words artificial contraception, as long as it remains acceptable in the wider society, and more so by many in the church, will continue to undermine both society and the church in a variety of ways.

Section 51 is the weakest link in the document because it came to be seen as somehow provisional on the findings of the later commission which Paul VI would set up on family planning to take account of new developments in demography and medical science. But seeing it thus it could hardly be considered binding in faith – if a moral teaching is provisional then its violation can hardly be intrinsically wrong - and the fact that the pope took time to deliberate on the commissions findings (which he had

to so as not be accused of imprudent haste) weakened the section further. As a result when *Humanae Vitae* was issued in 1968, a faithful sequel to *Gaudium et Spes*, it became a matter of controversy and open rebellion straight away. To make matters worse, sadly, many clergy of all ranks, in many countries, failed to support the pope at that critical moment.

### 3

It was a lost opportunity because at that time new political parties and other groups (such as Green Peace) were springing up advocating respect for the environment and for nature which should have made it easy for clergy to advocate respect for the laws of human reproduction. Put simply, if these secular groups were calling for respect for mother nature then catholic clergy had an opportunity to take that one step further and call for respect for mother woman by insisting that people observe the natural cycles her body by adopting natural methods of family planning. But they failed to do so. They hid behind a wall of silence, intimidated by the sexual revolution of the sixties, or they declared that contraception was a matter of private conscience, or even openly dissented from *Humanae Vitae* in many cases. They thereby enabled artificial contraception to become widespread and catholic teaching and catholic living to be undermined, leading to a great erosion of morals and subsequent loss of faith in the developed world.

In light of that great surrender can *Gaudium et Spes* be salvaged and made into the force for the christianization of the secular world that it was intended to be? Yes, I believe it can. But that requires that we stop running away from *Humanae Vitae*, that we return to it again, face up to its demands and start preaching it with conviction. We can proceed to *Gaudium et Spes* then, which is the wider context of *Humanae Vitae*, and take up afresh the other issues of the document: the economic, cultural and social issues etc. We have the advantage now of having the legacy of the theology of the body of Pope John Paul II available to us, a rich starting point from which to represent the church's teaching on chastity, the right to life, fidelity, family planning etc.

Then with the family, the building block of society, restored to a healthier foundation work on these other issues should be easier and more successful. With a renewed emphasis on life, as against material possessions, couples might be willing to have more children and mothers might be willing to give more time to them in the home. Many social problems, so prevalent today, will then be avoided. Happier family-type relations will spread out into the work place and perhaps even into the international arena. There will be a peace that is more secure and lasting. Then the light of the gospel will shine more brightly on the secular world and we will be on line to restoring all things in Christ.