

The Call to Justice: The Legacy of *Gaudium et spes* Forty Years Later

Theological and Ecclesiological Foundations of *Gaudium et spes*

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Introduction

I do not believe that this subject matter can be exhausted in this brief conference. The theme of the theological and ecclesiological foundations of *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), a document of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, is richer and more fascinating than what I can present here, given both my human limits and the limits of time. I shall not deal with this theme as a professional theologian would, rather I shall simply present it as a pastor of the Church. Within these limits, I shall attempt to underline certain aspects of the theme that strike me as more significant and pastoral.

Pope John XXIII first expressed his idea of celebrating a Council for the whole Church when, on 25 January 1959 in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, he said, and I quote: "Venerable Brothers, Beloved Sons! It is certainly with a little trembling because of the emotion, but at the same time with humble resolve of purpose, that we announce in your presence the name and the proposal ... of an Ecumenical Council for the Universal Church" (AAS 51 [1959], pp. 65-69). The Pope's concerns and intentions are above all pastoral, for updating the Church so that she might be "the Church of all, especially the poor" (cf. G. Alberigo, *Historia dos Concilios Ecumenicos*, Sao Paulo, pp. 397-398). He is concerned for modern humanity and its openness to the Church of Jesus Christ.

In the Bull *Humanae Salutis*, convoking the Council, John XXIII writes: "Today the Church is witnessing a crisis under way within society. While humanity is on the edge of a new era, tasks of immense gravity and amplitude await the Church... It is a question in fact of bringing the modern world into contact with the vivifying and perennial energies of the Gospel" (*The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, S.J., America Press, 1966, p. 703).

Now, the document *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) was identified as constituting the fundamental *pastoral* text, and the longest text, of the Council, such that it was given the name of Pastoral Constitution. The Most Reverend Emilio Guano, President of the Commission that drew up the initial draft of this Constitution, stated on 17 October 1964, in a conference given to journalists just a few days before the discussions of the draft began, "This draft is not like the others. Its immediate and direct object is not Church doctrine. It does not deal with the Church's self-awareness, nor with Revelation, nor with the renewal of spiritual or liturgical life, nor with Church discipline or canonical issues... The world of today with all its problems is the theme of this document. It is the Church directing her gaze upon modern civilization,

upon the needs and aspirations of contemporary humanity, upon the new transformations and orientations that characterize modern society... The interest for all that is human is something essential in the Church, for she was founded for humanity by the Son of God made man, a member of the human family. These motivations prompt the Church to seek to understand men and at the same time to be understood by men... Naturally, upon entering into contact with daily reality, the Church cannot forget that her mission is that of proclaiming the Gospel, of communicating divine life to men, of leading men to God. With the present proposed document the Council seeks to express and promote the Church's dialogue with the modern world. The purpose, moreover, of the document is to define the Church's attitude with regard to the problems facing men today".

Overall, this pastoral character of Vatican II and, particularly, of *Gaudium et Spes* has theological and ecclesiological foundations, from which will consequently arise various concerns, content and aims of a pastoral nature. Let us now speak of some of these foundations, the theme of our conference.

1. God acting in human history: Incarnation, earthly realities, eschatology

The understanding that God acts in human history is not recent but comes to us from tradition. It belongs itself to Judeo-Christian tradition, forming part of the central core of the Old Testament. This is what we read, for example, in Ex 3:7-8, when the liberating action of God on behalf of his people is proclaimed. This same action is also present in the central core of New Testament faith, as a fundamental understanding of the Incarnation of the Son of God, and hence we read that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14), becoming Emmanuel, "God-with-us".

History is not foreign to its Creator. The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* (DV) of the Council teaches that the revelation of God is made in history (DV 2), God becomes present in history so as to offer salvation to humanity by means of his Son made man, Jesus Christ. Here, we find the affirmation of the total relevance of the Church's faith in the Incarnation of the Son of God, who became man for the salvation of mankind, as was already proclaimed by the Nicene Council (cf. Denzinger, nos. 125-126 [H. Denzinger & P. Hunermann, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, Paris, Cerf, 1997]).

God makes himself known to men and women by his action in history. Revealing himself in history, God makes himself present in history for the salvation of humanity, this is the truth in which the Church believes. This shows the closeness of God, whom Jesus proclaimed as a loving Father. In Jesus Christ and through him, God becomes God-with-us, in order to lead us to his kingdom. Thus, human history is taken up by Jesus as the history of the Word among us.

This perspective of God the Creator, who makes himself present in history, acts lovingly in history and reveals himself in history, allows us to see the value of earthly realities. *Gaudium et Spes* begins with words of a profound sharing in the whole of human reality in the world (GS 1). It affirms the deep-rooted goodness of the world created by God, despite the contradictions present in it that arise from original sin and from all personal sins. The text of GS says: "For by the very circumstance of their having been created [by God], all things are

endowed with their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order. Man must respect these as he isolates them by the appropriate methods of the individual sciences or arts. Therefore if methodical investigation within every branch of learning is carried out in a genuinely scientific manner and in accord with moral norms, it never truly conflicts with faith, for earthly matters and the concerns of faith derive from the same God. Indeed, whoever labours to penetrate the secrets of reality with a humble and steady mind, even though he is unaware of the fact, is nevertheless being led by the hand of God, who holds all things in existence, and gives them their identity" (GS 36).

In this way, the Council affirms "the autonomy of earthly affairs". It does so more explicitly in the following passage from GS: "If by the autonomy of earthly affairs we mean that created things and societies themselves enjoy their own laws and values which must be gradually deciphered, put to use and regulated by men, then it is entirely right to demand that autonomy. Such is not merely required by modern man, but harmonizes also with the will of the Creator" (GS 36).

This positive view of creation, of human activity, of science, of technology, of the laws of human society and of history is a characteristic of the Second Vatican Council, and in particular of the document *Gaudium et Spes*, which can also help us today in engaging in dialogue with society regarding the true autonomy of the State.

The clear recognition of the autonomy of earthly realities was a great advance made by this Council, which put it in step with modernity. In fact, faith is not opposed to science. GS states: "We cannot but deplore certain habits of mind, which are sometimes found too among Christians, which do not sufficiently attend to the rightful independence of science and which, from the arguments and controversies they spark, lead many minds to conclude that faith and science are mutually opposed" (GS 36).

On the other hand, GS rejects all scientism and secularism concerning the autonomy of "earthly/temporal realities": "if the expression 'the independence of temporal affairs' is taken to mean that created things do not depend on God, and that man can use them without any reference to their Creator, anyone who acknowledges God will see how false such a meaning is. For without the Creator the creature would disappear... When God is forgotten, however, the creature itself grows unintelligible" (GS 36).

Nonetheless, GS does not forget that creation, history and human activity were wounded by human sin, from the very beginning of the human race. Man moved away from God and turned to himself as light and rule, attempting to be the sole autonomous subject of his history and destiny. His deep-rooted self-centredness brought disorder, the consequences of which have remained throughout the ages. GS has described these consequences as follows: "When the order of values is jumbled and bad is mixed with the good, individuals and groups pay heed solely to their own interests, and not to those of others. Thus it happens that the world ceases to be a place of true brotherhood. In our own day, the magnified power of humanity threatens to destroy the race itself. For a monumental struggle against the powers of darkness pervades the whole history of man. The battle was joined from the very origins of the world and will continue until the last day, as the Lord has attested (Mt 24:13; 13:24-30 and 36-43)" (GS 37).

This situation of disorder needs to be healed. According to our faith, which GS seeks to

express, creation too and all human activity enter mysteriously into the paschal event of human redemption, taking part in their own way in the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Creation too groans in birthpangs, says the Apostle Paul. At the end of time, when human history will be fulfilled and the definitive reign of God will be established, with the resurrection of the dead, creation too and all human actions will be transformed and there will be new heavens and a new earth, "where justice will abide, and whose blessedness will answer and surpass all the longings for peace which spring up in the human heart. Then, with death overcome, the sons of God will be raised up in Christ, and what was sown in weakness and corruption will be invested with incorruptibility. Enduring with charity and its fruits, all that creation which God made on man's account will be unchained from the bondage of vanity... While earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God. For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured, when Christ hands over to the Father 'a kingdom eternal and universal'... On this earth that kingdom is already present in mystery. When the Lord returns it will be brought into full flower" (GS 39).

2. Jesus Christ and the new man: Christology and anthropology

In the desire to present the correct relationship between the Church and the world, GS begins with an anthropological synthesis, the fundamental elements of which are the following: man, created by God, created in the image and likeness of his Creator, created as a social being (male and female), one being composed of matter and spirit (body and soul), endowed with intellect, freedom and moral conscience as essential elements of a spiritual interiority and of a capacity to transcend the material world in which he has his roots, but at the same time with an internal division, rent from within by the wound of sin from the very beginning of human history. Consequently, "all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness. Indeed, man finds that by himself he is incapable of battling the assaults of evil successfully, so that everyone feels as though he is bound by chains" (GS 13).

GS highlights the subjectivity of the human being, which enables him to be at the centre of the universe, despite the wounds of sin. In highlighting this subjectivity and a consequent anthropocentric vision of the world, the Council prompts the Church to take a decisive step in the direction of modernity. In the end, the theme that is perhaps most representative of modernity -- introduced by the Enlightenment -- is precisely that of subjectivity. For example, when speaking of man and his subjectivity, GS follows the anthropological and anthropocentric themes of modernity, and in presenting the fundamental components of the human subject it makes a distinction between freedom/autonomy (GS 17), equality (GS 29) and brotherhood (GS 32), the inviolable dignity and authority of the depths of moral conscience. These are components of human subjectivity situated within the framework of the community dimension of the person (GS 24-26).

I mention separately here the very important doctrine found in GS concerning the dignity of the innermost moral conscience of the human subject. GS says: "In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him

to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths... In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships... Conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity" (GS 16). It is moreover proper to the dignity of the human subject, and a duty of his, to follow his conscience always, even when it may be in error because of invincible ignorance. In this latter case, then, the presumption is that there has been a prior and normal effort to form one's conscience correctly, seeking to discern the good to be done and the truth to be held, although without positive result.

Seeking the truth about man, beyond what the light of human reason can offer us, GS illuminates anthropology with the light of Christology and teaches that only in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, "does the mystery of man take on light" (GS 22). In fact, GS tells us, Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God", he is "the perfect man. To the sons of Adam he restores the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onward. Since human nature as he assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too. For by his Incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart". Hence, "Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear". Consequently, everything that GS says about the human subject and his inviolable dignity has in Jesus Christ its "root" and in him attains its "crown" (GS 22).

Light is also shed on the mystery of human life and death by Christ, and from him they receive their true meaning. "Born of the Virgin Mary, [Christ] has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin. As an innocent lamb he merited for us life by the free shedding of his own blood. In him God reconciled us to himself and among ourselves; from bondage to the devil and sin he delivered us... By suffering for us he not only provided us with an example for our imitation, he blazed a trail, and if we follow it, life and death are made holy and take on a new meaning" (GS 22).

This new meaning and this sanctification of man are made manifest and are brought about in those who believe in Jesus Christ and follow him. Thus they will be "conformed to the likeness of that Son who is the firstborn of many brothers"; the Christian man has "received 'the first-fruits of the Spirit' (Rom 8:23) by which he becomes capable of discharging the new law of love" (GS 22). This Spirit, who Christians receive, will one day raise them from the dead, just as Jesus was raised, in accordance with what the Apostle Paul says: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you" (Rom 8:11). This is moreover the sublime vocation and dignity of the human being. After this mortal life, in which Christians are faced with "the need and the duty to battle against evil through manifold tribulations and even to suffer death", Christians are called to take part in the glorious resurrection of Christ (GS 22).

At this point, GS opens the vast theme of the universality of this human vocation and of the Lord's consequent mercy for all human beings. It tells us that everything that is said about the Christian is also true for all people of good will who did not know Christ, but sought the path of good and truth. The text reads: "All this [what has been said about Christians] holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery" (GS 22). This doctrine is of great relevance today in interreligious dialogue, which is so necessary in a globalized world in which the different religions and non-believers too must necessarily live together.

GS concludes this reflection on the human vocation by saying: "Such is the mystery of man, and it is a great one, as seen by believers in the light of Christian revelation. Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful. Apart from his Gospel, they overwhelm us" (GS 22).

3. The Church of God: In the world, as a servant, in solidarity with the poor, in dialogue, the universal sacrament of the unity of salvation, promoter of justice and peace

The ecclesiological foundations of GS show its understanding of the Church as being in the world. The Church "exists in the world, living and acting with it" (GS 40). It is not an institution parallel to the world or an abstract institution, but is in the world. However, *Gaudium et Spes*, as the final Constitution of the Council, understands the mystery of the Church in a way consonant with the previous Council documents that dealt with the Church, principally *Lumen Gentium*, although looking closely at the Church in terms of her necessary insertion in the modern world and looking closely at the consequences of her being in the world.

Thus, GS sees the Church in her beginnings as "coming forth from the eternal Father's love, founded in time by Christ the Redeemer and made one in the Holy Spirit" (GS 40). Her origin, her foundation and her model is the Blessed Trinity, a mystery of communion. Being of the world, she, whose model is the Blessed Trinity, is constituted as a sign and instrument of the unity of the human race (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1). Today, in a world that more and more is globalized and interconnected thanks to the advances of communication technologies, the Church's mission, if it is to be an instrument of unity for the human race, becomes more relevant and has new possibilities and challenges.

The Church, according to GS, is also and principally an instrument of salvation for the whole human race, a salvation "which can be fully attained only in the future world" (GS 40), beyond human history, that is, in a transcendent eschatological fulfilment. "But she is already present in this world, and is composed of men, that is, of members of the earthly city who have a call to form the family of God's children" (*ibid.*). The Church is at the same time "a visible association and a spiritual community" that walks "together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot which the world does. She serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God's family" (*ibid.*).

GS, taking its lead from all the reflections made by the Council, emphasizes that the Church is at the service of man and of every person, at the service of humanity, and she cannot seek to dominate humanity. In this she follows the example of Christ who came as a servant. "I am among you as one who serves" (Lk 22:27). "The Son of man also came not to be served but to serve and to give his life" (Mk 10:45). "I have given you an example ... a servant is not greater than his master" (Jn 13:15-16). This is within the context of the love with which God has loved the world: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:16-17). The Church is at the service of humanity. She "believes she can contribute greatly toward making the family of man and its history more human" (GS 40).

In this context, the Church supports and fosters all current efforts aimed at the full personal development of every human being, and she promotes the fundamental rights, dignity and freedom of man. But she also wishes to help man to discover the full truth of the human being and his vocation in this world. For this reason she points to Jesus Christ, in whom this full truth is found. GS states: "man will always yearn to know, at least in an obscure way, what is the meaning of his life, of his activity, of his death... But only God, who created man to his own image and ransomed him from sin, provides the most adequate answer to the questions, and this he does through what he has revealed in Christ his Son, who became man. Whoever follows after Christ, the perfect man, becomes himself more of a man" (GS 41). In the light of this anthropology upon which Christology meditates, the Church "announces and proclaims the freedom of the sons of God... has a sacred reverence for the dignity of conscience and its freedom of choice... proclaims the rights of man; she acknowledges and greatly esteems the dynamic movements of today by which these rights are everywhere fostered" (GS 41). But the Church does not fail to give a warning: "Yet these movements [fostering human rights] must be penetrated by the spirit of the Gospel and protected against any kind of false autonomy" (*ibid.*).

A servant Church must have solidarity with the poor as her priority. The Apostle Paul wrote that what matters is "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6). Faith must be expressed in love and in solidarity, which is the social version of love. This is an eminent form -- extremely relevant, urgent and indispensable -- of the Church's presence in the world. GS makes a marked distinction between the service that the Church must give to the world through solidarity with all the poor and efforts to overcome poverty, misery and hunger in the world. Today more than ever, the Church takes up this challenge. In fact, effective solidarity with the poor, whether individuals or entire countries, is indispensable for building peace. Solidarity corrects injustices, re-establishes the fundamental rights of individuals and nations, conquers poverty and thus combats the revolt that injustice incites, removes violence that is born from revolt and builds peace.

In this fight against injustice, GS appeals to the principle of the universal destination of earthly goods and says: "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). It is important to emphasize that GS notes a difference between this Christian position and mere justice, which the world takes as its guide, because many are the times that justice is not sufficient to rescue the poor, charity too is necessary, and faith alone can be the basis of charity. How can

the rich and developed nations be brought truly to share the goods of the earth with the poor nations? How can the poor nations be brought to take their places at the universal table of the goods of the earth, in the context of the new worldwide globalized order of open and free markets? The Church must work hard at this task, proclaiming the rights of peoples, placing herself at the service of poor countries, engaging in dialogue about what needs to be corrected in the new world economic order. This is the path for building peace, because poverty creates a just revolt, which unfortunately erupts often in violence. Could it be that one of the elements of modern terrorism is the revolt against a poverty that is imposed and felt as practically unavoidable in the near future, a poverty that is not just short-term?

In a broad and extensive manner, GS exhorts Christians to fight against poverty, misery, hunger, the degradation of so many people and entire countries. We read: "Christians should cooperate willingly and wholeheartedly in establishing an international order that includes a genuine respect for all freedoms and amicable brotherhood between all. This is all the more pressing since the greater part of the world is still suffering from so much poverty that it is as if Christ himself were crying out in these poor to beg the charity of the disciples" (GS 88). It is here that GS condemns the following as a scandal: "some countries with a majority of citizens who are counted as Christians have an abundance of wealth, whereas others are deprived of the necessities of life and are tormented with hunger, disease and every kind of misery" (GS 88). We all know how sadly true this is even in our own day; the fight against poverty in the world poses a challenge for the Church's action on an international level.

The Church, present in the world and active in human society and in history, does not exist to exercise political power nor to govern society, for "the purpose which Christ set before her is a religious one" (GS 42). However, she cannot remain indifferent to politics, in the broad sense of the word, as the quest to organize and promote the common good. "The Church and the political community in their own fields are autonomous and independent from each other. Yet both, under different titles, are devoted to the personal and social vocation of the same men" (GS 76). The same is true for all sectors of public life, such as the economy, social and charitable services for the poor, building peace and so on.

In a special way, the Church is a kind of "sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind" (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). The unity of the human race continues to be ever more keenly seen in our modern day, mostly because of the phenomenon of globalization. This phenomenon was already foreseen by GS, which demonstrates how the Church can and must be at the service of this unity. In this process, according to GS, "the Church recognizes that worthy elements are found in today's social movements, especially an evolution toward unity, a process of wholesome socialization and of association in civic and economic realms. The promotion of unity belongs to the innermost nature of the Church" (GS 42). In this service to the unity of the human race, the Church does not seek any type of earthly power in society: "the force which the Church can inject into the modern society of man consists in that faith and charity put into vital practice, not in any external dominion exercised by merely human means" (GS 42).

Conclusion

I conclude by saying that in all her involvement and living presence in human society, the Church must constantly engage in dialogue. This may perhaps be one of the most important

methods today for creating a positive and constructive relation with society. A courageous dialogue that is open, honest, sensitive and humble. A dialogue with modern man, with human reason, the sciences, the advances of biotechnology, with philosophy and cultures, with politics and the economy, with anything that has a connection with social justice, human rights, solidarity with the poor. A dialogue with all of society and its various component parts.

A dialogue with religions. A constant, systematic, professional, constructive dialogue of quality. A dialogue that is able to listen, discuss, discern and assimilate what is good and true, just and worthy of man: this is the kind of dialogue that is proposed. A dialogue that at the same time is able to proclaim the truth, which the Church has received and to which she must remain faithful. But always a dialogue and never an imposition of her beliefs and methods. Propose, not impose. Serve, not dominate. A Church that engages in dialogue with the modern world, this is what GS outlines and promotes. A Church that, taking up the mission of Jesus, is in the world, not to judge humanity but to love it and save it (cf. Jn 3:16, 17).