

GAUDIUM ET SPES: ATHEISM, CULTURE AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

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There is no doubt that *Gaudium et spes* is a marvelous and compelling document. Although it follows a kind of template used in many encyclicals, hidden in this familiar structure are some revolutionary insights about the modern world and the role of Christians. The document is presented in three parts the first of which identifies a set of problems that plague modernity. These problems explain the genesis of the document and provide a rationale for its emphasis on specific themes. The second part attempts to provide a causal explanation of these disturbing phenomena and the third part engages in a reflection on some correctives. It is in the first part, though, that the main themes are set.

Problems of Modernity

From the first stages, *Gaudium et spes* marks itself as an unusual document. For although the Council fathers insist that they will describe phenomena that signify a “new stage in history”, the core preoccupation of the entirety of *Gaudium et spes* concerns a problem having ancient roots—the problem of the human condition. Is there a more timeless question than the meaning of human life and human suffering?¹ What is new about these difficulties? The only way to make sense of this preoccupation is to try to understand that the Council fathers recognized that the human condition is plagued by new conditions that create an odd and deeply troubling paradox. Whereas modern humankind has produced remarkable changes in the scale and range of knowledge and power, especially through technology, humans suffer more than ever from a lack of freedom, of political and social recognition and from the absence of control over their lives and destinies. Rapid and mass communication that should promise better understanding and greater unity among the world’s peoples seems instead to confuse and to divide humanity. It fails to illumine and inform but instead often propagandizes and promotes ideological divides. Unparalleled wealth and resources which offer the opportunity to reduce poverty, disease, hunger and homelessness instead seem only to increase the gap between the relative few who enjoy abundant, indeed excessive wealth, and the impoverished many who remain fixed in lives of suffering and despair. Even advances in knowledge of the human person—of the inner workings of the human mind and body—that hold so much promise for bettering the social and psychological circumstances of life, seem incapable of helping us to discern the way to improve the human condition and to reduce human misery. Why do these many difficulties exist? Why are the advances in power and knowledge in modernity not solving the problems for which they were designed? In the language of the Council fathers, why instead have they produced such drastic “imbalances” between the powerful and destitute, the developed and underdeveloped, the free and enslaved?

In their contemporary dimension, these difficulties are heightened by the fact that the human person “is modern in practical matters but whose theoretical system of thought...can neither master the sum total of its ideas, nor arrange them adequately into a synthesis.”² The intellectual imbalance of knowing *how* but unsure as to *what purpose*, is itself the cause of yet other imbalances—imbalances in global economic and developmental opportunities, between personal autonomy and the common good, between the interior inclination to live for higher purposes on the one hand and to satisfy “boundless desires” on the other.³ These imbalances press themselves upon the modern world because there is no clear guiding structure by which human culture may develop in an authentic way, that is, in a way that gives guidance and meaning to the power made possible by science and technology.

If one reflects for a moment on the Council fathers’ characterization of modernity, one cannot help notice that the very act of describing it in the conceptual framework of a problem is a significant first step in this document. For, it signifies not merely the recognition that some modern phenomena fall short of an ideal, it also presupposes a standard of right order—of what ought to be. So, in the very identification and classification of these phenomena as problematic, we are provided with a clue about the authors’ minds regarding the way things ought to be and thus how they ought to be changed.

It is at this early point in the document that one might consider an objection. Is characterizing modernity in terms of troubling “imbalances” presenting it through a colored lens—one that disfigures rather than illumines the world? Are these “imbalances” really problematic? Is it a problem, for example, that mass communication tends to be used to spur consumption or to engender approval for political or social issues? Is the mere fact that there are countless poor in the world an indictment of the modern means of production and distribution? Is the lack of education a reason to think that the advances in human knowledge, power and communication are somehow flawed? Why not see the modern world as merely diverse rather than imbalanced?

Consider as an example of this sort of objection the different approaches one might take with regard to unemployment. Some regard forced unemployment as a problematic aspect of any economy. Yet, others argue that a measure of unemployment is necessary in a healthy economy in order to respond to new and unanticipated demands for workers. On this view, some unemployment should not be regarded as an “imbalance” or a problem. Depending on one’s beliefs about right order in society then, some unemployment will be regarded either as a problem or part of the normal workings of an economy.

Although the Council fathers make no mention of this kind of “colored lens” objection, they seem to anticipate it and offer a remarkable response. They assert that all who fail to acknowledge the profound and far reaching imbalances of the modern world are “infected with a practical materialism [and] are blinded against any sharp insight into this kind of dramatic situation; or else, weighed down by unhappiness they are prevented from giving the matter any thought.”⁴ Is there a more plausible explanation for someone’s inability to see the problematic in the increase of inequalities of distribution of power, development, educational and employment opportunities even with regard to the most basic goods necessary for life? The Council fathers include in that list of ills, “...mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself...subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery,

prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons.” Surely these ills are a “poison” in human society and a “supreme dishonor to the Creator.”⁵ An inability to see these problems signals a profound spiritual blindness.

These troubling phenomena are symptomatic of a more basic problem. Modernity is incapable of doing something that must be done. It is incapable of answering questions such as: “What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress?...What follows this earthly life?”⁶ These ultimate realities of human existence, suffering and death, remain a mystery for many in the modern world. No amount of power, pleasure or wealth, not even incessant consumption can distract us from the weight and horror of our own mortality. Advances in medicine and technology cannot protect us from suffering. They remove pain for a time, but this is little consolation for life’s sorrows. And to try to remove suffering by hastening death is to be conquered by death rather than to overcome it. To think that modernity has or will overcome these sorts of problems is to deny that we are human.

The identification of these troubling “imbalances” drives the document into a thematic terrain, but does not in itself provide a means of understanding or indeed of remedying the modern situation. It is in the second part of the document that the Council fathers turn to a search for the causes of modern ills.

Modernity’s imbalances and the search for causes

It is one of the marvels of this document that it engages in a painstaking search for the causes of the many imbalances of modernity. One is reminded of the Aristotelian notion that to understand something, even something practical or moral, one must know its causes. The shift from the first part of the document to the second therefore is a movement from the mere *description* of modernity to an *explanation* of it. Whereas a description consists in sufficiently marking a phenomenon and distinguishing it from others, an explanation does something quite different. If adequate, it provides a reason or causal account as to why and how something occurs. This is *analysis* in the strict sense, where one moves beyond mere identification to understanding. To know the causes of something is a difficult philosophical task. In addition to the theoretical difficulties this type of search must overcome, it has profound real-world implications as well. Wrongly identifying causes means one’s solutions will be flawed.

One challenge to a search for causes is to recognize that it is conditioned by one’s beliefs about the kind and number of causes at work. Questions about the existence, nature and number of causes are at root philosophical and theological. So, a search for causes, if done in an impartial and careful way, requires or at very least presupposes some serious investigation into the nature of causality, i.e., what types of causes there are and how they work. There are dangers in such a task, to be sure. For example, one could render a search for causes fruitless by relying on an inadequate causal theory. Not seeing the full causal picture of a practical or moral situation will surely lead to confusion about remedies or worse, might actually exacerbate problems. In essence, if one’s causal inventory is too narrow, or confuses symptoms with causes or penultimate with ultimate causes, then one does not understand what one encounters and surely will not find adequate solutions.⁷

What are the causes of the many modern “imbalances”? Here one can think of economic and social analyses that attempt to explain and remedy the problem of poverty and of underdevelopment in terms of material resources alone, that is, in terms of material costs and benefits. Such causes function and so must be included as part of a complete explanation. Surely shortages of resources as well as economic, sociological and political factors are partly responsible for the current difficulties. These constitute a very real part of the causal situation in which we find ourselves, but they are only penultimate causes. If one limits oneself to these forms of causality so that humans are conceived of and treated as mere statistical or biological entities, to be counted as just another type of physical reality, then their value as humans will not be much different than other inhabitants of the world. This way of thinking makes it possible to regard humans as a type of “commodity” in the world—another resource to be measured in terms of others. It is at this level of analysis where one hears of “overpopulation” as an explanation of the shortage or inequality of the distribution of resources in the world. This is “procrustean” materialism at work where, when the resources do not match human needs, the human person is seen as the cause of the imbalance. In a materialist analysis of global imbalance, the cause is obvious—there are too many humans. The solution is equally obvious—the number of humans must be reduced to fit the available resources. Surely it is easier to lessen the number of humans than it is to increase other physical resources or to re-distribute them, especially when such distribution would threaten one’s standard of living or “quality of life”. A deeper penetration into causes is required, if one is going to avoid these forms of practical materialism.

The Council fathers offer a deeper explanation by relying on a more radical form of causality. They refer to another kind of cause underlying the many social, economic, political and ideological ills of modernity. It is intellectual and moral turmoil—both at the personal and communal level. Such turmoil works against genuine welfare by obscuring and obstructing effective solutions to the world’s problems. Even these, though, are intermediate or penultimate causes. Lying yet deeper is a spiritual deformity—human sinfulness. Sin, in the first place, obscures the truths humans need to understand and remedy modern problems. The Council fathers assert that sin renders us “practically sightless”.⁸ In essence, a materialist analysis misses the causal reality of spirit—of God first and foremost, but also of other created spirits—human souls, saints, angels and the devil.⁹ So a purely materialist causal picture is flawed because it mistakes a partial causal picture for the entire picture. It confuses the penultimate causal reality of the physical world for the ultimate spiritual order. We are instructed to see the causes of imbalances in the world as rooted in something deeply personal and as symptomatic of a “more basic imbalance...rooted in the heart of man.”¹⁰ What causes and thus explains the imbalance of modernity is the personal struggle going on in each of us.

...it cannot be denied that men are often diverted from doing good and spurred toward and by the social circumstances in which they live and are immersed from their birth. To be sure the disturbances which so frequently occur in the social order result in part from the natural tensions of economic, political and social forms. But at a deeper level they flow from man's pride and selfishness, which contaminate even the social sphere. When the structure of affairs is flawed by the consequences of sin, man, already born with a bent toward evil, finds there new inducements to sin, which cannot be overcome without strenuous efforts and the assistance of grace.¹¹

In addition to spiritual blindness, the Council fathers note that there is a second influence of sin—a moral influence that mars us and inhibits our pursuit of truth and goodness.

*...man is split within himself. As a result, 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.*¹²

There are weaknesses in the human spirit due to sin. It is in the mind, which is incapable of seeking or unwilling to cleave to the truth. It is also in the heart, which refuses to submit to the guiding principles that promote authentic forms of freedom. As a consequence, “the modern world shows itself at once powerful and weak, capable of the noblest deeds or the foulest; before it lies the path to freedom or to slavery, to progress or retreat, to brotherhood or hatred.”¹³

The solution to the problems of modernity, then, must address their fundamental spiritual causes. Not surprisingly, the Council fathers turn to a discussion of God as the remedy of these ills. God is both the source of illumination and of healing strength. We can overcome our inability to understand modernity’s problems and to act for genuine remedies only by relying on the Cause of all truth and goodness. It is against this background that the Council fathers conclude that the absence of or loss of religious faith, and most centrally atheism, are prime causes of deeply personal and social imbalances.

The problem of Atheism: An argument

In characterizing atheism, the Council fathers acknowledge that the term is used to refer to a variety of “phenomena which are quite distinct from one another”¹⁴. It is most commonly understood as an explicit denial of God’s existence. But it can also refer to an agnostic stance, in which one “can assert absolutely nothing about Him”. It could consist in the view that the concept of God is meaningless, or that we cannot know any truth including any truth about God. It might even manifest itself as indifference to God.¹⁵

In effect then, an atheistic attitude however it arises and manifests itself closes us off from two significant realities. Without a sense of how God and sin figure into the modern world, we lack a full causal explanation of its many problems. In addition, denying or rejecting God prevents us from viable solutions. If God is the only path to truth and goodness, then atheism forms a block to human liberation. Rather than being superfluous or antagonistic to authentic cultural and social development, knowledge and friendship with God is indispensable. In summary, one can see the Council fathers proposing an argument of this form.

1. One can identify and remedy the many ills that plague modernity only if one understands their ultimate causes and has the moral energy to overcome them.
2. Grasping these ultimate causes is to acknowledge our sinfulness and need of God’s healing grace.
3. But atheism closes one off from grasping revealed truths as well as the healing necessary to overcome them.¹⁶

4. Hence, atheism prevents one from understanding and remedying the many moral and intellectual ills that plague modernity.

Given this view, one might ask, what causes atheism? Is it natural or is it acquired through experience and inculturation? The Council fathers insist, "...atheism is not a spontaneous development but stems from a variety of causes".¹⁷ What might these causes be? Here we find a startling and disturbing explanation. Although the Council fathers grant that evil, especially the experience of suffering and death, can cause atheism, they also point to a critical reaction against religious beliefs and "against the Christian religion in particular" as another of its causes.¹⁸ This is perhaps one of the most significant and compelling insights of the entire document. Although religion, and especially Christianity, can offer a path out of the spiritual darkness of atheism, paradoxically it can cause the very darkness and moral enslavement it seeks to remedy.

How does this happen? When members of religious groups profess falsehoods or engage in immoral activity on behalf of or through religion, they trigger anti-religious reactions. Specifically with regard to Christians, if they neglect their religious training or are improperly catechized, they are prone to disseminate false teachings about God, Christ and the Church. These can provoke anti-theist and anti-religious sentiments. So too, when believers are "deficient in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion."¹⁹

Atheists therefore, are not always fully culpable for their non-belief and consequent spiritual blindness. Instead, it is Christians who sometimes bear the guilt of producing atheistic or agnostic reactions by their promulgation of false teachings. Paradoxically, a false or faulty evangelization here becomes a cause of atheism rather than a remedy to it. Christians also provoke atheism by their repudiation of authentic Christian teachings in the manner of their lives—that is, through their hypocrisy.

In this admission, the Council fathers offer an indictment and a powerful sign. By acknowledging some level of responsibility by Christians they display their refusal to co-operate, not even through their silence, with the evils that the Church itself may have caused.²⁰ That they refuse to hide, rationalize or ignore the problems within the Catholic community, even within its organization is, therefore, itself a profound evangelical sign.²¹ In light of these considerations we can add the following claims to the general argument.

5. In some cases, Christians cause atheism either by promulgating falsehoods about God and the world or by repudiating the teachings of Christ through their actions.
6. Hence, such Christians prevent people from acknowledging or remedying the many moral and intellectual ills that plague modernity.

Solutions

The incisive account of the harms caused by an inauthentic and false religious faith forms the basis for the remainder of *Gaudium et spes*. Having exposed atheism as an obstacle to knowing God, it can be overcome only by the re-evangelization or re-catechizing of Christians. Put another way, modernity has infected not only the secular world, but the Christian community as

well. Given the two-fold causes of atheism—false belief and hypocrisy—a remedy must be two-fold as well. The Council fathers propose that a solution “is to be sought in a proper presentation of the Church's teaching as well as in the integral life of the Church and her members.”²² Indeed, they argue that living an “integrated life” accomplishes several ends. It causes greater understanding of life’s difficulties and the path to overcome them. It also produces greater strength in acting rightly. The only corrective is a faith “purified and perfected by the power of Christ's cross and resurrection.”²³

Viewed in terms of causality, then, modernity suffers from a malady that is three-tiered. At the most obvious level, it is the result of a complex set of economic, political, sociological and psychological imbalances. These factors, though, are symptomatic of a deeper level of causality rooted in the human mind and heart. Human ignorance and the lack of will to search for or carry out genuine solutions explain the many faceted difficulties of modernity. These intellectual and moral problems are themselves the result of the most radical tier of causality. At root these imbalances are the result of a spiritual malady—human sin. Sin is the ultimate explanation because it creates “internal divisions, and from these flow so many and such great discords in society.”²⁴ The sin in our hearts reverberates into the world where it infects our actions.

Because the causes of the world’s imbalances are three-tiered, the solutions must also be three-tiered. Since the more obvious causes, such as flawed or ineffective economic or social policies, result from intellectual, moral and ultimately deeper spiritual problems, there can be no economic and political solutions without a spiritual solution. This is why the Council fathers focus on atheism and its spiritual damage.

On the 30th anniversary of *Gaudium et spes*, Pope John Paul II not only accepted partial responsibility for drafting the document, he also reiterated “the challenge of contemporary atheism” and its causes in the Christian community.²⁵ He notes the Council fathers’ “striving to grasp the reasons that give rise to” atheism and commends their courage for not merely “denouncing error, but together with an understanding attitude towards the erring, not hesitating to recognize the guilt of believers themselves in this regard, due to inadequate instruction and above all to inconsistent behavior”.²⁶

Seen in this light, the document is itself an instrument of the very re-evangelization of Christians called for by the Council fathers. A remedy must include a teaching meant to overcome not merely the un-belief of the atheist but also the culturally conditioned or distorted belief of the Christian.²⁷ Their exhortations to live in accord with those teachings are meant not only to soften the hardened heart of the non-believer but also the Christian heart hardened by doctrinal error and hypocrisy.

At this juncture, one might expect to find a litany of specific ways that the Christian community has contributed to contemporary atheism either by its false promulgations about God or through the errant behavior of its members. For instance one might expect to read accounts of the ways Christians repudiate the Gospel message in their personal lives. One might expect to read specific instances of false teachings that have triggered anti-theism. Instead, the document is void of any particular descriptions of Christian errors. Readers are left on their own to speculate what these might be. I think that there is an important reason, perhaps more than one, why the

document omits reference to specific abuses within the Christian community. As one continues reading the document, one realizes that it is a profound teaching instrument for Christians, for from this point forward, it is dedicated to rectifying some of the more pressing problems in modern Christianity as well as the modern world. In order to do this, though, the Council fathers need an audience open to re-thinking its views on basic teachings. One can easily imagine that such openness would be threatened by listing specific evils that would target portions of the Christian community. By going into details about the ways that modern Christians have erred, the document could easily trigger defensiveness antithetical to the receptivity needed for re-evangelization.

One can imagine other reasons why the Council fathers might resist mentioning specific wrongs within the modern Christian community. Although the document was written within a particular historical setting, its teachings are not limited to a specific time or audience. Perennial truths of the Christian faith are addressed to all people at all times. If the document descended into too much detail about specific ills, it might be regarded as dated and devoid of permanent relevance. Furthermore, itemizing particular ills stemming from the Christian community might trigger a backlash, either by non-Christians or by non-believers who could use such information to mount an attack against the Church and its members. Those of us who have watched the way contemporary scandals within the Catholic community have been treated by the media are familiar with this sort of anti-Catholic sentiment.

At this point in the document, the Council fathers leave some work for the reader. In the first place, they do not amplify what they meant when they referred to the deficiencies in the moral or social lives of Christians.²⁸ We know that the hypocrisy of Christians is cited as one cause of atheism, yet little more is said about its nature and effect. To whom might we look to gain a deeper understanding the pernicious influences of hypocrisy? Cardinal Newman's reflections are helpful in understanding how hypocrisy fosters anti-religious sentiments.

Newman refers to Christ's warning to the apostles about avoiding the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Newman claimed that this form of hypocrisy was widespread even in his own time. Indeed, he thought it was a timeless temptation, because it consists in a preoccupation with worldly standards and fear of the world's disapproval. He alleges that the Pharisees "shape their actions by the world's rule rather than God's will."²⁹ Christians are guilty of hypocrisy when they seek to conform to the world's standards long before their "Christian principles have time to act"³⁰. They prize the virtues that the world applauds while ignoring those the world despises. There is also a self-deception that accompanies and contributes to hypocrisy. Newman notes that such hypocrisy fails to deceive non-believers.

*The world sees through him, detects, and triumphs in detecting, his low motives and secular plans and artifices, while he is but faintly sensible of them himself, much less has a notion that others clearly see them. And thus he will go on professing the highest principles and feelings, while bad men scorn him and insult true religion in his person.*³¹

Newman recognized the widespread scandal of Christians who choose not to act in accord with Christian principles yet who try to appear blameless. Scandal provides a kind of proof that Christians too are "unbelievers in their heart". Hypocrisy is not really a matter of momentary

weakness but rather stems from constant and sober conviction. Newman asks, “is there any antecedent prejudice against religion so great as that which is occasioned by the lives of its professors?”³² He suggests that in the case of Christians, hypocrisy is all the more egregious, since as members of Christ’s body, they enjoy powerful spiritual benefits found in participation in the sacramental life.

Along with hypocrisy false religious belief is the other cause of atheism and its many consequent ills. Given the limitations of the document the Council fathers restrict themselves to the promulgation of “some of the more basic truths” in an attempt to begin the process of re-evangelization.³³ These teachings include; the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, the Eucharist, the doctrine that we are all members of a single human family, that true advancement in the world is possible only if it advances the well-being of the human person—of every human person, that we must respect those who think, believe and act differently, even in political and religious matters and the dignity of marriage, procreation and family life. I wish to concentrate on only two of these basic teachings. In so doing I want to comment on some of the ills each of these truths is meant to correct.

The first application: The role of women

The first claim I want to consider is that all humans are children of God, each equally imaging the divine—especially as this applies to women. The Council fathers assert that all humans belong to one family in a universal brotherhood and sisterhood under God.³⁴ This is based on the premise that all possess a rational soul and so not only share in God’s likeness, but are “redeemed by Christ and share the same calling, destiny and equality”.³⁵ This doctrine cuts across racial, religious, ideological and gender lines.

What falsehoods is this doctrine specifically designed to correct? In general, it is the error of regarding some humans as superior to others and thus deserving special rights on earth or of enjoying special regard or affection from God. Could Christians be guilty of such falsehood, thinking that their Christian faith raises them in the esteem and love of God? At this point in the text the Council fathers mention the injustices of discrimination based on “sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion”. These injustices are “to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent.”³⁶ The Council fathers turn immediately to the plight of women who, because of their gender, have been denied various fundamental human rights, such as the right to choose a husband freely, to freely embrace a “state of life”, to education and cultural benefits equal to men. Those who think that women are inferior to men—are incapable of understanding as well as men or lack capacity for moral agency—place themselves against God and authentic Christian teaching. To see women in this light is to commit a grievous error against daughters of God.

*Since all men possess a rational soul and are created in God's likeness, since they have the same nature and origin, have been redeemed by Christ and enjoy the same divine calling and destiny, the basic equality of all must receive increasingly greater recognition.*³⁷

Are Christians guilty of such injustices against women? They are if they use Scripture to try to justify making women subservient to men under the pretext that they suffer from natural

intellectual or moral deficiencies that preclude them from sharing equally in political or economic rights. This becomes especially egregious when such thinking is justified by some putative command of God for women to subject themselves to men in marriage. For surely this makes God complicit in denying the very revelation God has given about the equal dignity of women and men. How can it be that all humans, as rational beings, are equally created in the image of God but some are appointed as superior on no other basis than gender? So, when the Council fathers insist that women must be able to freely choose a husband or a state of life, they also condemn customs and attitudes which promote or tolerate the attempts by fathers, husbands, or even other women, who coerce women with regard to specific vocations or forms of work. Equally unjust is the denial of women to the same education as men on the pretext that it would be a waste of resources because women are unable to benefit from or ill suited to such education.³⁸

Pope John Paul II also treats the question of women in his brief reflection on *Gaudium et spes*, commending the Council's "extremely wide horizon" especially with regard to the "very special defense of women's rights and dignity".³⁹ He mentions his Apostolic letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, explaining that he attempted to follow the directives outlined by the Council fathers. In this context it is important to note that he warns not only against viewing women as inferior, less God-like than men, but against the equally pernicious view that women are in no important way different from men. He insists that women possess characteristics that mark them in a unique way from men and that roles and opportunities ought to accommodate these differences. For example, he talks about the distinct spirituality of women as well as their unique capacity of reflecting a creative God through their role as mothers.

In effect, then, there are two ways to violate the dignity of women for which Christians must sometimes bear responsibility. The first is to conceive of women as lesser humans than men, as possessing diminished intellectual, spiritual or moral abilities. This gives rise to many forms of oppression of women under the pretext that they need to be controlled and should not have the same educational, economic, political and social rights as men. One can easily imagine other ways where women are diminished as, for example, when the spiritual lives of women are regarded as inferior to that of priests and male religious. How does this not strike one as either a very serious confusion or hypocrisy?

The other form of violation against women consists in denying that there are important and profound differences between women and men. *Gaudium et spes* proclaimed prophetically about differences that do not cause an inequality, but cause differences in manner of living and roles.⁴⁰ Diminishing of the importance of motherhood by regarding it as an impoverished and antiquated role for women, for example, is one significant way that women are violated.⁴¹

This is only a sketch of the concerns about women and how many, including some Christians, have violated their dignity and continue to do so in systemic as well as personal ways. The Council fathers call for a serious re-appraisal of the laws, customs and attitudes regarding the condition and status of women, a reconsideration that the Church's own sons and daughters are especially urged to do. Failure to remedy this type of confusion or hypocrisy regarding women can only fuel anti-Christian and anti-theist sentiments.

A second application: Solidarity with the poor

A second way that certain convictions have contributed to atheism is found in the treatment of the human person in the modern world. The Council fathers insist that the advancement of any human or social group is possible only if the advancement of each and every person is included. This view is contrasted with various forms of consequentialism which propose the advancement of some part of humanity at the cost of the well being of others. By overtly acting against or ignoring the dignity of some in order to achieve the goods for others, consequentialism commits a wrong of the highest order. Dignity belongs to humans in virtue of their humanity, not in virtue of their wealth, power, social standing, race, age, health, gender or even religious convictions. Hence, all have an equal share of rights and considerations under the law and in social or economic policies. It might seem an obvious point to assert that human advancement is authentic only if it provides for all, but the implications are enormous. For it is at this point that the Council fathers cite the duty to supply everything necessary for living a truly human life to those in need. This means that in addition to the negative precepts which forbid attacks on humans such as euthanasia, abortion and genocide, there is also a duty of “solidarity” through which we are obliged to help provide to those in need education, food, health care, the means to found a family, to choose various states of life, even religious freedom and to do so out of respect and love.⁴²

Coming down to practical and particularly urgent consequences, this council lays stress on reverence for man; everyone must consider his every neighbor without exception as another self, taking into account first of all His life and the means necessary to living it with dignity, so as not to imitate the rich man who had no concern for the poor man Lazarus.⁴³

It is not difficult to list the innumerable ways that those having wealth, power and security have ignored the poor and powerless of the world, but what is emphasized with such clarity in this document is that no real advance of anyone, or of any human culture, can happen without the concrete and systematic pursuit of everyone’s betterment. No project and no set of correctives can possibly work if they alienate or victimize a segment of humanity. Such policies create the very conditions of sinfulness that disable those wielding power and cause in them a “practical blindness” that perpetuates injustice.

We might be tempted to think that the Council fathers are condemning only actions which intentionally violate human life and dignity. The parable of Lazarus and the rich man tells us otherwise. To those familiar with this parable, it is abundantly clear that not carrying our duty of solidarity toward others, even where there is no special maliciousness on our part, still makes us blameworthy in a most serious way. Not knowing or caring about others in no way excuses us from the grave wrong of not assisting them—a wrong that will determine our immortal destiny.

It is especially interesting to note in this parable that the rich man learns of his need for Lazarus only after his death, when it is too late for him to benefit from Lazarus’ help. The Council fathers urged those in positions of power and wealth to realize the paradox of their own dependence upon the poor and the weak. It is a dependence of a most spiritual sort.

Are Christians blameworthy of such transgressions against others? The Council fathers suggest they are in some interesting ways. In one way it happens when we regard the underprivileged as somehow unworthy of our efforts perhaps because they do not share our same faith, as if they are not really like us and so not deserving of our assistance.

Further, the Council fathers point out that some Christians try to cite Scripture to dismiss poverty or to avoid taking steps to address it. One recalls Christ's words regarding the poor who will be with us always. Some have used this as a pretext to shirk the duty of solidarity.⁴⁴ Convinced of the transience of this life and the importance of the life to come, some Christians rely on these words of Christ to do little for the poor and instead spend their wealth and moral energy for other ends, even in glorifying God.⁴⁵ That worldly suffering will pass away can make it seem less real and less important than praising God. So, we find some Catholics spending not merely enormous spiritual energy on these higher things but directing their wealth to the construction of buildings and the making of art appropriate for God. The Council fathers assert, "the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age."⁴⁶ Indeed, they offer a powerful denunciation of such a view.

*They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation.... The Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation. Christians should rather rejoice that, following the example of Christ Who worked as an artisan, they are free to give proper exercise to all their earthly activities and to their humane, domestic, professional, social and technical enterprises by gathering them into one vital synthesis with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are harmonized unto God's glory.*⁴⁷

Those who live and work in the world have a duty to work, not for their own material gain or power, but for justice. The Council fathers remind us that the world is a gift from God to all brothers and sisters of Christ—even those whose religious convictions are different from ours.⁴⁸ God has left to humankind the task of developing and distributing these gifts. It is the duty of all, therefore, including those in the Catholic community, to embrace this work. Indeed, the Council fathers praise such efforts, even when conducted by non-believers.⁴⁹

The problems associated with poverty, for example: shortages or even lack of food and shelter, of medical treatment and supplies, of education and work adequate to the needs of the poor, the dearth of opportunities to counter these ill effects, seem to call for a solution found in supplying money and the resources it can purchase. Through money the poor are able to meet their immediate and subsistence needs as well and develop long-term solutions that address and overcome poverty. Typically, much of the aid offered by wealthier nations focuses on precisely these strategies: supplying material resources and the training to use them, forgiving debt and so forth. For many centuries Christians have joined others in the work of assisting the poor seeing it as a work given to them by Christ. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Christ not only blessed those who aided the poor by clothing the naked and feeding the hungry, he assured them that these and similar works were worthy of salvation. It is true as well that, mindful of Christ's

admonition to teach all nations, Christians have included, along with their material gifts, a generous supply of spiritual gifts as well. The Christian community, though, helps the poor by helping them overcome their material, social and political difficulties.

A Christian paradox

In light of these considerations the work of some Catholic communities poses an interesting paradox. Consider the relatively recent Community of the Lamb. The sisters, brothers and priests of this community take it upon themselves to work with and for the poor in various cities in Europe and South America. One would expect that their work would address the material needs of the poor, especially the immediate needs for food, clothing and shelter. Paradoxically, their ministry involves begging food and shelter often from those that they serve: the most poor and destitute of all. These women and men religious could acquire food and shelter in other ways. Many of them are quite well educated and, thus, are capable of earning significant wages for their communities and the poor they serve. Their begging from the poor, then, seems to take from the mouths of those who cannot spare it and gives it to those who do not need it. On the face of it their activity seems to contradict a basic Christian duty of justice. It appears also to contribute to rather than solve the problems associated with urban poverty. The poor are in need of our aid and generosity. How then is siphoning off their little wealth assistance in any meaningful sense of the term?

The community of the Lamb is not unique in the Catholic Church in this regard. For centuries there have existed communities whose “service” to others does not include supplying economic, political or social assistance. Indeed, in many cases, the poor along with the wealthy have been encouraged to help supply the resources needed to support these communities. The Carthusians, for example, have typically relied on the Christian community, even the less fortunate, to aid them in founding monasteries from which they rarely ventured. They would remain hidden from the world to do their *work* of praying for others, especially the poor, the ill and the downtrodden. One can ask how such communities think they are helping those in need when they require from them the very resources of which they are in need?

Some contemporary Christians and Catholics have answered this question by condemning the practices employed by communities like the Carthusians and the Community of the Lamb. They allege that failing to come to the economic, political, educational or legal aid of the impoverished is itself wrong. To take from those who cannot spare is irresponsible and harmful. Indeed, one hears sometimes the charge of hypocrisy leveled against members of these communities—that they profess what they do not practice and blithely dismiss their Christian duties to the poor and underprivileged. During the meeting on *Gaudium et spes* for which this paper was written, I met a fellow attendee who accused these kinds of communities of hiding in their castles while the poor suffer and die. Have we come to a moment of new and deep awareness about these communities? Are they misguided in their efforts or guilty of hypocrisy?

To respond to this challenge, one needs to reflect on two fundamental realities: Christ’s life and the needs of the poor. If there is a legitimate complaint against some Christian communities then it is even more powerfully directed against Christ himself. After all, if as He preached, the many problems of poverty needed to be overcome, why did He not solve them Himself? It is

inadequate to answer that He gave the work to us to do instead. For, if the problems associated with poverty and powerlessness are as serious as He indicated, it would seem irresponsible of Him to leave this work in the hands of incompetents and scoundrels. Wouldn't any of us object to appointing morally depraved and foolish people to address problems of poverty, especially if there were competent and honest people available to do the work? Surely, though, this is what Christ did by refusing to solve the problem Himself and handing it on to fallible and often malicious human agents. How does Christ avoid the same indictment of hypocrisy or ignorance that some have leveled against these Christian communities? Christ could have affected more radical and permanent solutions to poverty with less effort than any human community could possibly hope to do, but chose not to.

The way to overcome this objection against Christ and some contemplative or mendicant religious communities is to consider a few examples in Christ's life. There are two moments in His life that illustrate especially well how one ought to think about assisting the poor and underprivileged. The first is exhibited in Christ's conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. Note that He begins by demanding work from her. She is asked to draw and provide water for him to drink. He could have quenched his thirst without any assistance, indeed without water at all. Why then impose additional work on a woman alienated from her community and already overburdened by work?

The second illustration comes through Christ's miracle of the loaves and fishes. His disciples identify the problem—the crowds who had followed Christ to this remote place have insufficient provisions. Christ responds by demanding the meager provisions the poor had brought with them. How is this a solution, the disciples wondered? We see then, that these are used for Christ's miracle. In this action, Christ illustrates another, deeper kind of ministry to the poor. Surely He could have created food sufficient for everyone's need without this insignificant assistance. Yet He required that the poor participate by offering a donation they could ill afford to make. Why?

These two moments in Christ's life reveal something important about the underprivileged and how we ought to treat them. The problems of poverty and underdevelopment are not merely about distribution of resources. Indeed, the lack of resources, although a very real and urgent problem is not the central or most pressing problem of poverty. Christ shows that the problems associated with poverty, which include alienation, oppression, ignorance, illness, hunger and so forth, ravage people spiritually. The core impoverishment that poverty brings is spiritual because it robs people of their dignity and removes them from the human community. In the eyes of the world the poor are non-entities, barely visible to the rest of humanity. The world sees them as ugly and frightening shadows, useless parasites, unworthy of friendship. We become benefactors when we give them money and provisions, but they are not our brothers and sisters.

What we learn through Christ's actions oppose the modern approach to poverty with its obsession with power and security. If He had ignored the Samaritan woman, she would have been freed from serving yet another man's demands. She would have been saved from more work. From the perspective of material assistance, Christ did nothing for this woman. He siphoned her energy and her time, distracting her from her work. How then did He help her?

To be a benefactor is good, but it is also to acknowledge an inequality. To donate to the poor is to be unequal to them. It is a sign of one's worldly power and wealth to not needing anything from those who one helps. On the other hand, to receive is to remain subservient, indebted, the object of virtue, but not a performer of virtue. It is to remain a dependent and unequal, therefore, incapable of full participation in the spiritual realities of human life. It is to be only slightly visible to others, as worthy only of being assisted. In effect the world sees poverty as a reason to remove one from full moral and spiritual participation in the human community. By begging from the poor and destitute, Christ therefore solved a much greater problem of poverty. He called the poor into His friendship, thereby restoring their visibility. He permitted them to assist Him rather than be subjects of the benefaction of superiors. He made them equals by relying on their assistance.

Christ provides the Samaritan woman with an opportunity to participate equally in a spiritual and moral relationship with Him. It is then that the conversation between them begins. He manifests this most clearly in His discussion of God and her moral condition. These are the realities that draw humans together into friendship. She is no longer a shadow figure hovering at the well. She is a partner in a deep theological discussion. Poverty is alienating and isolating. As a benefactor to Christ, she is now ready for a personal encounter with Him. He assures her that great human virtue is within her immediate grasp and that God is keenly interested in her life. In her poverty and alienation, she had been trapped and alone in her misery. By assisting Christ, she has been given more work, but through it, she has given something to Him and, thus, become a contributor to someone else's good. She is visible. She is equal and, so, capable of friendship with another.

In the miracle of the loaves and fishes, Christ seeks food from the poor who cannot spare, and so allows them to contribute to a miracle. They are raised from the level of mere recipients of God's abundant gift, (who can object to this?), to being agents in its production. They are cooperators in a miracle and have become visible, indeed, have become near-equals to Him. They have done something virtuous with the little they have. To spend meager resources to become full and visible members of the human community is a small price to pay. They pay a small material price for enormous spiritual gain. They are ennobled by their generosity to Christ rather than harmed by it. He has provided them with a choice to show charity, to be effective moral agents and thus, to be escape the role of dependent and of inferior.

Mindful of these examples, we find in them a defense of religious groups like the community of the Lamb. These gracious religious imitate Christ's life in a powerful and compelling way. They ask for help from the poor and, in so doing, acknowledge the poor as their brothers and sisters. Where under ordinary conditions, they beg and receive from others, the community of the Lamb give the disenfranchised an opportunity, indeed, a right, to display generosity. The poor who respond to the request for food and lodging know that they have made a difference by their choice to help. They are now benefactors instead of being mere objects of benefaction. This opens the way, as it did for Christ, for serious human interaction. The condition for equal participation in friendship has been met. The poor take a new place in the community of humans. The sisters and brothers of the Lamb become present to the poor in a spiritual way. The moment of evangelization is prepared.

Drawing the poor out of the isolation of poverty is a considerable gift to the poor that cannot be wrought through material giving alone because it is moral and spiritual work. In providing the poor with a chance to become family through their generosity, the community of the Lamb indicates an interest in the poor that creates the conditions for a dialogue about the difficulties of poverty but also about God. It opens both sides to the spiritual dimensions of poverty and of life.

It is interesting to note that these women and men religious beg in wealthier areas of cities as well. Paradoxically, they have found that they have much better luck begging from the very poor than they do from the wealthy. When one learns of their experiences about the often abrupt and unwelcome responses they receive from the wealthy, it suggests that here, too, there are deep spiritual difficulties attending poverty. Such experience illustrates that poverty poses moral and spiritual obstacles to the wealthy who are often rendered blind and insensitive to the majority of humanity. The invisibility or horror through which the wealthy view poverty obscures the reality that these are brothers and sisters who not only need our help, but who can help us in deeply spiritual ways. As Lazarus lay barely visible and plagued by the wounds of poverty and illness, the wealthy owner lived a shadow life as well. In his pre-occupation with power, wealth and pleasure, he realizes only too late that he had profound needs that only Lazarus could sate. Wealth, like poverty, can separate us from genuine participation in the human community because it creates fears, insecurities and attachments that block friendships and sever us from the Source of spiritual healing.

As Christians we know that the problems of poverty are not merely economic, political or psychological. They are human, spiritual problems. The solution to poverty, then, must include a spiritual solution. Christ's life and teachings indicate that overcoming poverty requires the surrender of power and wealth in order to achieve spiritual wholeness. To deal with poverty in a way that rejects or scorns the spiritual needs of the poor and wealthy alike, is to fail to deal with poverty—regardless of how much is spent or given. True benefit is spiritual benefit that comes not merely from the treatment of material needs but of spiritual needs. Poverty ravages rich and poor alike by isolating humans, by rendering some invisible to others, by robbing many of the opportunity for genuine friendship, by instilling fears, anxieties and spiritual emptiness. Christ exhibited a mysterious way to overcome these problems. We help by seeking help. We ascend by demeaning ourselves.

Religious groups like the Carthusians and the Community of the Lamb have talented members who are quite capable of producing wealth. Instead, they choose to serve the authentic, spiritual needs of the poor by praying for them and by calling them into friendship in Christ. It is true, as many point out, that little is accomplished at the economic or political levels by such work. If these were the only or most pressing human realities, if they were the only problematic aspects of poverty, then such service by these communities is wasted. But, unlike the wealthy man in the parable of Lazarus, they have discovered that the root of the many sufferings affecting the poor, as well as the wealthy, is spiritual.

...if anyone wants to know how this unhappy situation can be overcome, Christians will tell him that all human activity, constantly imperiled by man's pride and deranged self-love, must be purified and perfected by the power of Christ's cross and resurrection.⁵⁰

¹ GS, 10. “Nevertheless, in the face of the modern development of the world, the number constantly swells of the people who raise the most basic questions of recognize them with a new sharpness: what is man?”

² GS, 8.

³ GS, 10.

⁴ GS, 10.

⁵ GS, 27.

⁶ GS, 10.

⁷ There are several pitfalls one needs to avoid in the search for causes. One way of going wrong is to mistake a symptom for a cause, thinking that a sign is actually a cause. In this instance, a remedy will fail to treat the real causal source and so will be doomed to failure. There are at least two other ways that one can go awry in the search for a causal explanation. One is to confuse penultimate causes which themselves depend on more basic causes—as instrumental causes. Another error is to believe one has a complete causal account when one has identified only a part of the causal source—perhaps by isolating necessary but not sufficient conditions. In both cases, one fails to understand what is really happening and so, one is prevented from uncovering solutions to such problems.

⁸ GS, 17.

⁹ Even the ravages of nature cannot be fully understood without reference to God whose providential plan tolerates evil such for moral and spiritual goods. So, while recognizing the vast disproportionality of resources possessed by humans—most having almost none while the few have abundance—the Council fathers opt for another, anti-reductionist explanation. In current terms this as a problem of underdevelopment, of too few resources for the poor and disenfranchised. But, there cannot be too many people because each is a miracle of creation and a prized possession of God. So, there is no “overpopulation” any more than there could be too many miracles.

¹⁰ GS, 10.

¹¹ GS, 25.

¹² GS, 13.

¹³ GS, 9.

¹⁴ GS, 19.

¹⁵ GS, 19.

¹⁶ See GS, 19 for a fuller explanation of the term “atheism”. It includes an agnostic attitude as well.

¹⁷ GS, 19.

¹⁸ GS, 19.

¹⁹ GS, 19.

²⁰ For example, the authors assert in GS, 42, “For this reason, the Church admonishes her own sons, but also humanity as a whole, to overcome all strife between nations and race in this family spirit of God's children, an in the same way, to give internal strength to human associations which are just.”

²¹ GS, 43. “Although by the power of the Holy Spirit the Church will remain the faithful spouse of her Lord and will never cease to be the sign of salvation on earth, still she is very well aware that among her members, both clerical and lay, some have been unfaithful to the Spirit of God during the course of many centuries; in the present age, too, it does not escape the Church how great a distance lies between the message she offers and the human failings of those to whom the Gospel is entrusted. Whatever be the judgment of history on these defects, we ought to be conscious of them, and struggle against them energetically, lest they inflict harm on spread of the Gospel. The Church also realizes that in working out her relationship with the world she always has great need of the ripening which comes with the experience of the centuries. Led by the Holy Spirit, Mother Church unceasingly exhorts her sons ‘to purify and renew themselves so that the sign of Christ can shine more brightly on the face.’”

²² GS, 21.

²³ GS, 37.

²⁴ GS, 10.

²⁵ 8 November 1995 General Audience *Only Christ Can Fulfill Man's Hopes*, 2. “In fact, I must confess that Gaudium et spes is particularly dear to me, not only for the themes it develops, but also because of my direct involvement in its drafting.”

²⁶ 8 November 1995 General Audience *Only Christ Can Fulfill Man's Hopes*, 5. "The attention which the conciliar document devotes to the challenge of contemporary atheism (cf. 19-21) is also connected with the problem of meaning. The Council treats it in its typical dialogical style, seeking to distinguish the different expressions of this complex phenomenon but, above all, striving to grasp the reasons that give rise to it. It does so with the courage of the truth in denouncing error, but together with an understanding attitude towards the erring, not hesitating to recognize the guilt of believers themselves in this regard, due to inadequate instruction and above all to inconsistent behavior, which ultimately "conceals rather than reveals the true nature of God and religion".

²⁷ GS, 21.

²⁸ GS, 20. John Paul 2 also acknowledges this problem within the Christian community in his remarks on *Gaudium et Spes*, but does not develop it either. See, *Only Christ Can Fulfill Man's Hopes*.

²⁹ John H. Newman. Parochial and Plain Sermons, chapter 10, *Profession Without Practice*. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1987, p. 88. (Reprint of Longmans, Green and Company, London and New York, 1891.)

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³³ GS, 23.

³⁴ GS, 24.

³⁵ GS, 29. "Since all men possess a rational soul and are created in God's likeness, since they have the same nature and origin, have been redeemed by Christ and enjoy the same divine calling and destiny, the basic equality of all must receive increasingly greater recognition."

³⁶ GS, 29. "Nevertheless, with respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent."

³⁷ GS, 29.

³⁸ GS, 31. "Above all the education of youth from every social background has to be undertaken, so that there can be produced not only men and women of refined talents, but those great-souled persons who are so desperately required by our times."

³⁹ *Only Christ Can Fulfill Man's Hopes*, n. 9. "These brief observations are enough to underscore the extremely wide horizon in which *Gaudium et Spes* moves. With it the Church truly desired to embrace the world. Looking at men in the light of Christ, she was able to grasp their deep yearning and concrete needs. The result is a sort of "Magna Carta" of human dignity to be safeguarded and promoted. Seeing things from this point of view, the Council was able to focus on topics and needs which were then to emerge ever more clearly in humanity's awareness. Think, for example, of the very special defense of women's rights and dignity that *Gaudium et Spes* makes (cf. 29). From the Council to the present moment, much has been done in this respect, but much still remains to be done in the international community and in individual nations. The Church, for her part, as I have pointed out in numerous interventions-especially in my Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* and in my Letter to Women-feels strongly committed to faithfully following the Council's directives, working for the true well-being of women all over the world."

⁴⁰ GS, 60. "Women now work in almost all spheres. It is fitting that they are able to assume their proper role in accordance with their own nature. It will belong to all to acknowledge and favor the proper and necessary participation of women in the cultural life."

⁴¹ GS, 52. "The active presence of the father is highly beneficial to their formation. The children, especially the younger among them, need the care of their mother at home. This domestic role of hers must be safely preserved, though the legitimate social progress of women should not be underrated on that account."

⁴² GS, 27.

⁴³ GS, 27.

⁴⁴ Mark, 14:7.

⁴⁵ See, GS, 27-28.

⁴⁶ GS, 39.

⁴⁷ GS, 43.

⁴⁸ GS, 28: "Respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters."

⁴⁹ GS, 42. "With great respect, therefore, this council regards all the true, good and just elements inherent in the very wide variety of institutions which the human race has established for itself and constantly continues to establish."

⁵⁰ GS, 37. Also GS, 58: "The Gospel of Christ constantly renews the life and culture of fallen man, it combats and removes the errors and evils resulting from the permanent allurements of sin." It never ceases to purify and elevate the morality of peoples. By riches coming from above, it makes fruitful, as it were from within, the spiritual qualities and traditions of every people and of every age. It strengthens, perfects and restores them in Christ. Thus the Church, in the very fulfillment of her own function, stimulates and advances human and civic culture; by her action, also by her liturgy, she leads them toward interior liberty."