

GAUDIUM ET SPES: AN INVITATION TO DIALOGUE WITH THE WORLD

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Abstract

Gaudium et spes stresses several times the necessity of dialogue between the world and the Church. This paper first explores the foundations for such a dialogue : the dialogue between God and mankind and the dialogue between men. It then tries to describe the characteristics of the dialogue between the Church and the world, as it is expressed by the pastoral constitution. Confronting this view of dialogue with some contemporary research (W. Isaacs), it then opens to some specific consequences of dialogue for the Church's self consciousness and action.

Introduction

The fathers of Vatican II Council open their final address to the world by stating that « [...] the council yearns to explain to everyone how it conceives the presence and activity of the Church in the world of today . » (§1) This message - the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* - makes more than 15 times the use of the word « dialogue ». It even ends up with a whole paragraph (§ 93) describing the kind of interaction that She wants with the world : « By virtue of her mission to shed on the whole world the radiance of the Gospel message, and to unify under one Spirit all men of whatever nation, race or culture, the Church stands forth as a sign of that brotherhood which allows honest dialogue and gives it vigor. » In this paper I would like to explore *Gaudium et Spes* as an invitation for dialogue, and more specifically as an invitation for the Church to dialogue with the world. After remembering some biblical and philosophical foundations for dialogue, I shall focus on what *Gaudium et Spes* says about the dialogue between the Church and the world. I shall then relate these proposals with some contemporaneous work on dialogue. This will help outlining some consequences for us to answer to this invitation for dialogue.

1. Foundations for dialogue

Dialogue between the Church and the world is grounded in two realities : one is the relationship between man and God and the other is the relationship between men.

1.1. Dialogue between God and Men

In §19, the fathers say : « The root reason for human dignity lies in man's call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin man is already invited to converse with God. » This conversation is the essence of human's calling. There is no space here to develop this theme, let me just evoke a few points :

- ✓ In the first Covenant, for example, the story of the origin of humanity has to do with the dialogue between God and Man and the rupture of the communion due to disobedience (Genesis 3, 9). All stories of Covenants start with God calling a man by

his name, thus (re)-starting a deep dialogue with Him. « Where are you ? » : this is the everlasting question that God is asking us.

- ✓ In the New Testament, we are touched by the ongoing conversation of Jesus with his Father. This is the foundation for all theology of Trinity. Our God is the Father of Jesus Christ. At the same, this ongoing dialogue between Jesus and his Father – alive until the last seconds on the Cross (Mt 27, 46) – has an enormous influence on his way of being with the persons he meets. For example, what must have been the nature of the conversation between Jesus and Zaccheus to produce such a spectacular result (Luke 19) ? Among few complete dialogues that the Gospel reports, the conversation with the woman of Samaria gives us an exceptional insight of God's tenderness when dialoguing with a human being. This woman – stranger to official Jewish faith – is one of the very few that can receive the revelation of Jesus identity (John 4).

1.2. Dialogue between Men

- ✓ This interpretation of Scriptures through the dialogic view could also be enriched by a long philosophical tradition for dialogue. It can be said that Western philosophy was born within dialogues and this is the literary form that recalls the traces of the first « teachings » of Socrates. Closer to us, we should go deeper into Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue. His insights on one of the core structures of language – the couple « I » <-> « Thou » - have produced many fruits in today's philosophy of Otherness (Levinas, Ricoeur). Through dialogue, we find a fundamental notion that a christian anthropology can fully accept : my existence as a human being is dependant on the word of an other (an Other). Recognizing this otherness as legitimate in front of me is also the foundation for human ethics.
- ✓ The fathers recognize this fundamental dimension of human beings various times in *Gaudium et Spes*. At the beginning of Chapter II (the Community of Mankind), they recognize that « one of the salient features of the modern world is the growing interdependence of men one on the other, a development promoted chiefly by modern technical advances. » But immediately, they observe that « [...] brotherly dialogue among men does not reach its perfection on the level of technical progress, but on the deeper level of interpersonal relationships. » (§ 23)
- ✓ A few lines after, the document insists : « through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny. » (§ 25) We can see here the place of dialogue in the spirit of the fathers of the council : it is at the heart of human destiny.
- ✓ Such a place can then be observed in different circumstances of human life. In part II of *Gaudium et Spes* (« Some Problems of Special Urgency »), dialogue is specifically mentioned in dealing with :
 - Culture (« exchanges between cultures [...] should lead to a true and fruitful dialogue between groups and nations », § 56)
 - Labor conflicts (« When, however, socio-economic disputes arise, efforts must be made to come to a peaceful settlement [:] recourse must always be had first to a sincere dialogue between the parties », § 68)
 - World trade (« a sane world trade would be helped if everyone gives up its own prejudice and is open to a sincere dialogue », § 85)

2. Dialogue between the Church and Mankind

As it is developed in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council's view on dialogue is marked by two components : solidarity and respect. This is stated openly in § 3 : « Giving witness and voice to the faith of the whole people of God gathered together by Christ, this council can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with, as well as its respect and love for the entire human family with which it is bound up, than by engaging with it in conversation about these various problems. »

2.1 Solidarity

One of the major novelties of the Council is the assertion that the Church is not external to the world, but part of it. This is expressed so beautifully in the first paragraph of the constitution : « The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. [...] This community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds. » (§ 1)

This solidarity of the Church with Mankind is expressed in many other parts of *Gaudium et Spes*. In particular, the call for solidarity – even with people who disagree with our religious view of the world - is testifying very strongly the commitment of the Church to dialogue. This call is done twice :

- ✓ « While rejecting atheism, root and branch, the Church sincerely professes that all men, believers and unbelievers alike, ought to work for the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live; such an ideal cannot be realized, however, apart from sincere and prudent dialogue. » (§ 21)
- ✓ « For our part, the desire for such dialogue, which can lead to truth through love alone, excludes no one, though an appropriate measure of prudence must undoubtedly be exercised. [...] We include those who oppress the Church and harass her in manifold ways. » (§ 92)

2.2 Respect

The importance of respect as a pre-condition for dialogue is constantly recalled. Again this is particularly true when it comes to adversaries, *Gaudium et Spes* proclaims : « 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. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them. » (§ 28) This point relates to another major assertion of the council : the liberty of conscience.

The respect ought to everyone in dialogue is strongly related to what the document expresses in its first part, called « The Dignity of the Human Person » (§ 12 to § 22). There, the fathers insist on the role of conscience in the common search for bettering the world. « 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. » (§ 16) It is because conscience is at the heart of every human being, as a gift of God, that the Church can engage with confidence a true dialogue with any person or group. This presence of conscience also explains the firm belief that the scrutiny of the « signs of the times » cannot be done only among Christians. Other believers are called to help the Church in that task, as § 92 says : « We think cordially too of all who acknowledge God, and who preserve in their traditions precious

elements of religion and humanity. We want frank conversation to compel us all to receive the impulses of the Spirit faithfully and to act on them energetically. »

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Aside from respect and solidarity, some other characteristics of dialogue are mentioned in *Gaudium et Spes*. Here is a short view of them :

- ✓ dialogue demands that diversity be acknowledged, especially between christians : « Such a mission requires in the first place that we foster within the Church herself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, through the full recognition of lawful diversity. Thus all those who compose the one People of God, both pastors and the general faithful, can engage in dialogue with ever abounding fruitfulness. » (§ 92)
- ✓ Dialogue transforms also the Church by helping Her to better understand her own mystery : « Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with the various civilizations, to their enrichment and the enrichment of the Church herself. » (§ 58)
- ✓ Dialogue with the world demands study (and is a special responsibility for bishops !) : « By unremitting study [bishops] should fit themselves to do their part in establishing dialogue with the world and with men of all shades of opinion. » (§ 43)
- ✓ Dialogue cannot elude the possibility for conflict : « Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter. [...] They should always try to enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good. » (§ 43)

3. *Gaudium et Spes* and contemporary theory on dialogue

After this short overview, we can say that the vision of dialogue given by *Gaudium et Spes* is very coherent. It is interesting – in a spirit of dialogue with the world ! – to confront it with the most recent theory and practice on dialogue. I shall try to do so using mainly the dialogue’s theory developed by William Isaacs (W. Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, Currency Doubleday, 1999).

Basically, Isaacs defines dialogue as being « a conversation with a center, not sides ». Although dialogue is anchored in very archaic practices, it seems that the habit of dialogue has vanished from our modern societies. He argues that modern thinking habits (abstraction, fragmentation, confusion between thinking and remembering,...) lead to a greater difficulty to engage genuine dialogues. He then tries to identify the conditions necessary for dialogue, each of them being a part necessary for building the « container » that will allow dialogue to happen. According to him, these conditions are four :

- ✓ Respecting : being aware of the integrity of another’s position and the impossibility to fully understanding it
- ✓ Voicing : speaking the truth of one’s own authority, what one really is and thinks
- ✓ Listening : listening what the other person says, but also listening inside ourselves what thoughts or feelings are preventing us from listening fully
- ✓ Suspending : trying to put aside our judgements or assumptions for a while in order to be able to generate new thinking

Only when these conditions are being present can a conversation lead to what W. Isaacs calls « generative dialogue », where a group invent unprecedented possibilities and new insights – the sort of dialogue that current burning issues of the world require.

Isaac's view of dialogue is of course more complex than what can be said in this paper, but I would like to apply this theory to the dialogue between the Church and the world.

- ✓ We have seen how *Gaudium et Spes* indicates a remarkable step forward in naming « respect » as a basic condition for dialogue. There is no need to develop this point again.
- ✓ We can probably say that the constitution also indicates clearly the willingness of the Church to give a voice to what She thinks and believe - as § 3 says : « The council brings to mankind light kindled from the Gospel, and puts at its disposal those saving resources which the Church herself, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, receives from her Founder ». One of the legacy of the whole Council could well be the constant voicing of the Church point of view about socio-economics issues, be it on a worldwide level or in various countries or particular situations.
- ✓ One can probably argue that the whole Council has demonstrated a greater openness from the Church to listening different voices. The debate among the fathers, as historians show it, was one of true acceptance of difference. The process of the bishops expressing their thoughts in the Vota, the first speech of Pope John XXIII and the listening to experts in the commissions were all elements that contributed to this « climate of listening ». Probably, these processes are still alive in many parts of the Church, and this is also one fruit of the Council. Nevertheless, this effort of listening has to be started afresh again and again, since it is also through it that one can « discern the signs of the times ».
- ✓ As for « suspending » our judgements, I think that there is a more complex issue. On an immediate level, the very nature of belief is that it takes an assumption about the world to be the whole truth about it. By definition, it cannot be suspended without the risk of denying itself. You cannot ask a believer to enter in dialogue with a non-believer on the basis of the suspension of his or her faith. It either has no meaning or leads to a very superficial exercise (« let's assume that I do not believe... »). Nevertheless, there is a difference between faith and judgements. Maybe, the exercise of suspending our judgement can help us discern better what in our faith is a matter of « thought habit » and what is a matter of free « choice ». I think that it can be the same for the Church. The whole dogma and christian thinking have evolved on the « field » of a certain humus – for instance Jewish faith or Greek philosophy. This incarnation of our faith is fundamental. Jesus is not a sort of extra-terrestrial, he is a jewish rabbi with words that are understandable in a particular context. At the same time, we say that he is Christ and that in Christ, « there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female ». (Gal 3). Can't we say that dialoguing genuinely with the world means for the Church trying to discern more and more in herself what remain as « cultural preconceptions » inherited from her history and what comes from the meaning of Jesus Christ words, life, death and resurrection ? In that respect, dialogue may well be a mean to achieve simultaneously two goals : keep on discovering the wholeness of Christ (« I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now ». John 16, 12) and servicing the world by sharing her knowledge and commitment for the benefit of all.

4 Conclusion

This paper is too short, of course, to deal with the depth of the issues raised. It only indicates some directions for further theological and practical research and for concrete action. It is also a way to receive the legacy of *Gaudium et Spes*, trying to understand how - 40 years later - the pastoral constitution can still inspire our thinking and our dialogue with contemporary culture.