Rememembering *Gaudium et Spes*: Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution Turns 50

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It is impossible to speak of the history of the Catholic Church since 1950, particularly the captivating pontificate of Pope Francis, without turning to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Vatican II was a religious event of unequaled scale and scope in the twentieth century. The Council was a global event *par excellence*, drawing 2,500 participating Catholic prelates and hundreds of theologians, journalists and ecumenical observers from around the globe for annual sessions each fall for four years. This manifestation of Catholicism’s global reach occurred at precisely the moment when ‘globalization’ was accorded a new standing in human consciousness due to both the maturation of global mass communication technologies and the global scale exhibited by the traumas and upheavals of the mid-twentieth century. The horrors of World War II and the Holocaust, the global-scale destruction threatened in the Cold War’s nuclear arms race, and the process of decolonization that was advancing through the developing world all weighed heavily on the mid-century mind. The Catholic Church was surely one of the few entities with the importance and the reach to comment upon and potentially shape in a meaningful way humanity’s response to the most pressing global concerns of the era.

Vatican II was an ecclesial affair, but truly its gaze ventured well beyond the boundaries of church life and that gaze was returned in the form of intense attention from both the Catholic and non-Catholic worlds. While there were many agendas at the Council, some related to *ad intra*
concerns regarding the liturgy, theology, and governance of the Church and others giving primacy to *ad extra* matters of ecumenism, sociopolitical dangers, and the global economic divide, there is surely a kernel of truth to E.E.Y. Hales’s idealistic comment that, as the Council’s began, the world beyond the Church “looked afresh to Rome for light on how to live, and how to act in accordance with justice…and how to rebuild peace.”1 In his opening speech to the Council on October 11, 1962, Pope John XXIII defined its purpose thusly: “Our task is…to give ourselves eagerly and without fear to the task that the present age demands of us…Christians and Catholics of apostolic spirit all the world over expect a leap forwards in doctrinal insight and the education of consciences in ever greater fidelity to authentic teaching.”2 The renewal of Christianity and the Church’s reckoning with what John XXIII called “a new order of human relationships,” which, he predicted, would “bring [the world] to the realization of still higher and undreamed of expectations,” were the twin objectives of the Second Vatican Council, often summarized with the Italian term *aggiornamento*.3

The journey to that opening session of Vatican II commands a history of its own, but only a brief sketch is possible here. Ecumenical councils played a large role in Church history, but at the time John XXIII convoked Vatican II that there had been but three since the mid-sixteenth century. The future Pope Paul VI, Giovanni Batista Montini, remarked to a fellow cleric after Pope John’s announcement, “This holy old boy doesn’t seem to realize what a hornet’s nest he is stirring up.”4 This ‘hornet’s nest’ concerned competing intellectual streams within the Church and within the episcopate concerning how Catholicism was to engage with modern cultural, political, economic, and social life. Pope Pius IX had rejected the

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid. 324

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necessity of Catholicism’s reconciliation with modern civilization in 1864’s *Syllabus of Errors* and had died a ‘prisoner of the Vatican’ in 1878 following the absorption of the Papal States into unified Italy, an event which marked the end of the Church as a temporal state power and, some thought, as a force in human affairs. Subsequent papacies had created the conditions that would soften Pius IX’s antimodern intransigence and ignited movements within Catholic intellectual life seeking to connect Catholicism’s theological and intellectual patrimony with modern claims. Efforts to adapt ancient teachings and settled doctrine to modern methods and epistemological criteria, known in different periods as modernism or ‘new theology’ led to flashpoints during the papacies of Popes Pius X (1903-1914) and Pius XII (1939-1958), which harkened back to Pius IX’s *Syllabus*. John XXIII had become convinced that a Council was required to overcome these difficulties and adequately reframe Catholicism’s engagement with modernity.

Vatican II produced constitutions, declarations, and decrees with far-reaching impact. Few aspects of Church life or theology were untouched, including the liturgy, the interplay between sacred Scripture and Tradition, governance in the Church, relations with Judaism, and, quite notably, a dramatic elaboration of the Church’s teaching on religious freedom. But even next to these major developments, it is the final document approved on the Council’s final day in December 1965, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, or *Gaudium et Spes*, that has been, in retrospect, most revelatory of Vatican II’s meaning. The future Pope Benedict XVI, conciliar theologian Joseph Ratzinger, observed that *Gaudium et Spes* was both the most difficult and most successful of all the texts of Vatican II. He wrote, “It has come…to be increasingly regarded as the true legacy in which, after three years of fermentation, the real intention of the Council seems to have been incorporated.”

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the clearest expression of the Council Fathers’ intuition, in light of Pope John’s speech of October 11, 1962, to take up the emancipatory project of modernity while identifying—in light of Christianity’s established emancipatory vision—the limits of modernity’s ‘secular soteriology.’ That is, how it would bring about the liberation of man, as man. By taking up the pragmatic, political, economic, and social tasks facing modern man, *Gaudium et Spes* is infused by the desire to both pastorally direct the lives of Christians towards the building up of human society and to dialogue with all who share the Church’s concern for the good of the entire human family.

**A Brief Historical and Theological Outline of *Gaudium et Spes***

The schema which would become *Gaudium et Spes* had its origins during Vatican II’s tumultuous first session in fall of 1962. That session featured a protracted effort on the part of the assembled prelates from beyond Rome to surmount the cautious agenda set forth by the Preparatory Commissions dominated by Rome-based prelates. Cardinal Montini of Milan, the future Pope Paul VI, penned a letter to Pope John during the Council’s first session that outlined the necessity for the Council to deal with the Church’s relationships to other human groups, as opposed to its remaining an exclusively ecclesial affair. These documents, he envisaged, would have to be written in a different style than the statements of anathema or obligations that characterized previous conciliar writings.

As Ratzinger summarized in his later essay on *Gaudium et Spes*, there had been “no basic statement of the relationship that should exist between the Church and the world that had come into existence after 1789,” and the

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text “represents, on the part of the Church, an attempt at an official reconciliation with the new era inaugurated [by the French Revolution].”

In other words, the task that the Council Fathers attempted with *Gaudium et Spes* was novel, though it is important to remember that it built upon the tradition of Catholic social teaching inaugurated by Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. This new current of papal commentary on modern economic and social life was augmented by all of Leo’s successors, including John XXIII himself in his lauded social encyclicals of the early 1960s, *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem en Terris* (1963). *Gaudium et Spes* also drew upon theological currents that had emerged within lower levels of the Church, particularly in France, following the ‘modernist crisis’ of the early twentieth century. That crisis had prompted Pope Pius X’s condemnation of modernism as the “synthesis of all heresies” in the 1907 encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*. Five notable theological elements of *Gaudium et Spes* include its treatment of the historicity and relationality of the Church, its invitation to dialogue with secular modernity without prejudgment, its focus on kenosis, the elaboration on the ‘signs of the times,’ and its fundamentally optimistic posture.

*Historicity and Relationality*

Together with *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Gaudium et Spes* helped to establish a new hermeneutic for thinking about the Church. Against the excessive emphasis on the hierarchical constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium* brought an ecclesial horizontality back into view: the notion of the Church as the ‘people of God.’ This relational view complimented and moderated the visible hierarchical structure of the Church, which, while indispensable, is not its totality. Furthermore, the hermeneutic that viewed the Church as the ‘perfect society’ that lived outside of human history was also exhausted. Instead, *Lumen*
*Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* are documents which historicize the Church, rhetorically and theologically inserting the ‘People of God’ into human history as a pilgrim Church that is never fully at its destination on this side of heaven. The anthropological insight of being human is to be social (i.e. relational), which clearly reflects engagement with modern philosophy such as that of Martin Buber, which requires the rejection of a defensive withdrawal from the world and obliges the Christian to work within history in loving service to humanity.\(^\text{10}\) In *Gaudium et Spes* 43, the Council Fathers rejected explicitly the dualism that separates action for justice from spirituality.\(^\text{11}\)

*Invitation to Dialogue with Secular Modernity*

Another novel trait of *Gaudium et Spes* was its very genre and its dialogic posture. The document represented a move away from what had been the only two kinds of doctrinal pronouncements in Church history – a creed of obligation or an anathema of negation. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the relationship between the Church and the world is cast as a sort of colloquium, a mutual search for solutions. Section 44 even commends the help that the Church receives from modernity; noting that, as a visible social structure, the Church benefits from the development of human life in modern society.\(^\text{12}\) It is clear that in this document, the Church intends to begin a conversation with “the World,” which is understood to mean the secular spirit of the modern era and the whole scientific and technical reality found within it, without prejudgment and with a spirit of cooperation.

Implicit in this dialogic posture is a recognition of the legitimate autonomy of the secular sphere. Even if—as Ratzinger observed both in early commentaries and decades later—the contra-distinguishing of ‘the

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\(^\text{10}\) Hanvey S.J., *Vatican II: For the Life of the World*, 45-68.

\(^\text{11}\) *GS* § 43

\(^\text{12}\) *GS* § 44
Church’ and ‘the World’ for the purposes of having dialogue is problematic and indicative of a subliminal ‘ghetto mentality,’ this recognition of the secular sphere’s legitimate autonomy frees those who speak for the Church from any accusation of working for the restoration of the *ancien régime.*

*Gaudium et Spes* is notably anthropocentric because of this recognition of secular autonomy; far from starting conversation with this world through a theological door (i.e. dialoguing with those who already are ‘fearers of God’), the Council has now legitimized the anthropological door, with concern for man’s development as man being the an authorized basis for dialogue with other possible humanisms that do not share Christianity’s theological premises.

*Kenosis*

The theological concept of *kenosis* refers to self-emptying, or the power that is realized only from *inverting* power, through meekness, poverty, and humility. Kenosis is borne of an elaboration of Christianity’s core tenet that salvation was gained not through any sort of worldly triumph, but rather through Christ’s ultimate surrender and humiliating death. *Gaudium et Spes* calls for the Church’s motives when engaging the modern world to flow from kenosis rather than self-interest or self-defense. Kenosis transforms our understanding of power with real implications for how the Church aligns itself within society’s structures. In *Gaudium et Spes* 76, the Council Fathers noted that the Church “does not put its hope in privilege tendered by civil authority, and it will even renounce its exercise of some rights which it has lawfully acquired where it has decided that their exercise casts doubt on the sincerity of its witness…” Patriarch Maximos Saigh of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church was surely anticipating the elevation of *kenosis* in the life and mind of the Church when he observed

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14 *GS § 76*
from the Council floor that, “Modern man is scandalized by a mediocre, selfish Christianity that defends its own interests.”

*Elaboration on the ‘Signs of the Times’*

Perhaps the best known passage of *Gaudium et Spes* appears in the Introduction: “The Church has the duty in every age of examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.” But, Ratzinger posed an incisive question asking how the Church, which holds that events and a Person of the past were indeed decisive for humanity, can affirm that fundamental claim and also be the Church of the present. The orientation towards the future that characterizes the modern age presents a problem for the proclamation of a faith: will the Church not confirm its dismissal to the past by affirming, as it must, that the past was the decisive time?

The answer the Council Fathers gave – the obligation to *discern* the signs of the times – served to replace a purely chronological connection to a decisive past with a ‘Kairological’ connection to the current age. Reading the ‘signs of the times’ is not code for surrender to the momentary spirit of any age but rather is the acknowledgement that, in addition to possessing the chronological past in Jesus’s life and victory over death, the Church also possesses the present moment, the Kairos, “in which it must interpret and accomplish the work of the Lord as present.” As Pope John XXII strongly signaled the opening address to the Council, the contemporary age is also a part of salvation history and the Church, while always a prophetic presence, cannot limit itself to responding to the modern world as a ‘prophet of doom.’

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16 GS § 4
18 Ibid, 116-117.
The ‘Optimism’ of Gaudium et Spes

Perhaps the most common observation about Gaudium et Spes concerns its fundamental optimism. Gaudium et Spes has attracted much attention as a crowning statement for what had been for decades a growing reconciliation between the Church and the forces that have shaped the modern world. Constituent of this optimism is the clear invitation found in Gaudium et Spes for authentic dialogue and the absence of immediate judgment of most modern developments. As Ratzinger put it, the document breathes with an “astonishing optimism” which holds that “nothing [is] impossible if the Church and humankind work together.”

Any association of the Church with a defensive or world-rejecting mindset is surely undone with passages such as paragraph 34, speaking on the value of human activity: “Far from thinking, then, that the achievements of human enterprise and ability are in opposition to the power of God, Christians are of the view that the successes of the human race are a sign of God’s greatness and...marvelous design.”

In section 73, the document’s authors explicitly bless the modern, liberating developments in political life, praising the expansion of the rights to free assembly, expression of opinion, and the protections extended to members of religious minority groups all over the world.

The optimism of Gaudium et Spes is frequently at root in the ongoing debate about the document. In the polarized key that governs much of the contemporary discourse on the Church, this debate is often cast as the adjudication between advocates for a blanket affirmation of the present and those who would impose on the Church an exaggerated, pessimistic theology of sin. Indeed, some prominent conciliar theologians who had a hand in the drafting of Gaudium et Spes later questioned whether the pervasive optimistic valence of the Pastoral Constitution obscured other critical

19 Ratzinger, Principles of Catholic Theology, 380.
20 GS § 34
21 GS § 73
tenets of a properly Catholic worldview. Pelagianism, or the belief that human nature was untainted by original sin, was a critical controversy in the early Church. The possibility of a Pelagian reading of Gaudium et Spes is at the heart of Ratzinger’s observation that, “The text...prompted the question of why the reasonable and perfectly free human was suddenly burdened with the story of Christ.”

Furthermore, Ratzinger wrote, “Here the theologically justifiable will to optimism...has been misinterpreted and has led to anodyne formulas which...deceive [Man] about the gravity of his situation.”

The ‘will to optimism’ originated in, among other places, Pope John XXIII’s remarkable opening address to the Council in 1962, but obvious consequences can result when this optimism obscures Christianity’s fundamental notions of human sin and the necessity of redemption. Locating God’s kingdom not above us but ahead of us—at some future point towards which we are rushing—can be wounding to the sort of faith and praxis that sustains religion. The natural and supernatural become conflated and old notions of sin’s crippling character are laid aside. For all the good intended by the establishment of an anthropological rather than a theological baseline for Catholicism’s dialogue with modernity in Gaudium et Spes, it might easily come at the cost of supplanting the centrality of the Pascal Mystery. That is, the event of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection held by Catholics and other Christians as the redemptive purpose for which God came to earth, which is critical for Catholicism’s coherence and purpose. For this reason, Gaudium et Spes resides near the center of the debate concerning what many note as the diminishment of Catholicism’s vitality in the decades following Vatican II.

22 Ratzinger, Part I, Chapter I, ed. Vorgrimler, 120.
23 Ibid. 138
Gaudium et Spes After Fifty Years

In the opening keynote of a March 2015 conference on Gaudium et Spes in St. Paul, Minn., Vatican II scholar Massimo Faggioli set in opposition the fortunes of the Pastoral Constitution and the pontificates of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Said Faggioli, “It is clear that the pontificate of Pope Francis has brought about a startling reversal of fortunes for the legacy of Vatican II and Gaudium et Spes.”

Faggioli cast Gaudium et Spes as mistreated, its legacy in jeopardy for decades following Vatican II. Faggioli attributed this to the pejorative conflation of Vatican II with ‘the 60s’ on the part of Catholic conservatives, particularly in the United States. According to the ‘conservative’ critique of Gaudium et Spes, the document subordinated Catholic theology to the prevailing materialistic humanism of the mid-twentieth century and thus represented the beginning of the end for the old moral order and pure Catholic identity.

It must be noted that this interpretation by Faggioli is questionable and polemical, as Karol Wojtyla, and later John Paul II, played a large role at Vatican II in the development of Gaudium et Spes. They both praised and cited it often in his papal pronouncements and writings. Ratzinger’s theological and pastoral career placed him in positions, particularly as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in which he confronted wild interpretations of Vatican II and Gaudium et Spes that the Council Fathers had not foreseen. He did consider Gaudium et Spes to be the weakest of Vatican II’s four constitution documents, but his judgement on the document has never been wholly negative. There can be no questioning Ratzinger’s agreement with the need for a revision of the Church’s relationship with the modern world at the time of the Council.

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In Faggioli’s address, he sketched out a ‘hermeneutic of acknowledgement’ that *Gaudium et Spes* helped to introduce. This hermeneutic speaks to the new reality that the Church in the modern world must speak with and about what is ‘out there.’ This can only be interpreted as a correction to an exaggerated dualism that had been operative within the Church since the eighteenth century which suggested that the Church should always be suspicious of the world. Propositions flowing from a hermeneutic of acknowledgement include a recognition of the ‘signs of the times’ must take its place alongside the scholastic notion of timeless truths if the modern proclamation of the faith is to be credible. It does not eradicate the rightful place of those timeless truths accessed by Doctors of the Church, such as Thomas Aquinas, but it affirms that these truths might always be elaborated more perfectly as salvation history marches on. Acknowledgement also means that the historicization of the Church is a necessity and the rhetoric of resentment towards the modern world must be supplanted. Finally, Faggioli holds that the hermeneutic of acknowledgement changes the methods of Catholic theology; after *Gaudium et Spes*, theology and the magisterium must account for the present cultural horizon in testing the validity of its claims, accept that moments of rupture and communicative dissent within the Church are unavoidable in the modern age, recognize the global responsibility of the Church for the world and humankind, and acknowledge modernity as the ‘runaway son’ of Christianity.

Faggioli astutely noted that it is precisely the relationship of the Church with ‘the world’ that is the core issue behind the major rift in the interpretation of Vatican II.27 Thus, the placement of *Gaudium et Spes* at the center of the debate over Vatican II’s meaning and reception is correct and was prefigured by the competing intellectual steams that were evident even before the Council. *Gaudium et Spes*, the landmark document that it was, is not the last word. That said, Ratzinger poses what is perhaps the

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key question to consider when it comes to the contested legacy of Vatican II: is the Pastoral Constitution’s relationship to other Dogmatic Constitutions and conciliar documents, promulgated as it was on the Council’s final day, one of an arrow pointing away from a traditionalism that had not yet been overcome in the Council’s earlier stages? Such a conviction would justify the efforts of many enthusiastic prelates, national bishops’ conferences, and some religious orders to move ‘beyond’ the letter of the Council and to challenge settled Church teaching in the first decades after Vatican II. On the other hand, it was certainly the position of later Church leaders, particularly John Paul II and Ratzinger himself, that “disenchantment and crisis” marked the decades immediately following Vatican II due to chaotic experiments and movements that had become disassociated with the core of the Christian tradition. Whether these pontiffs engaged in a prudent course correction or a revanchist rejection of Vatican II and the insights of *Gaudium et Spes* is a hotly, sometimes bitterly, contested question in a Church that today is more divided than John XXIII could have foreseen in his courageous address on October 11, 1962.

*Gaudium et Spes* remains worthy of consideration fifty years after its promulgation because, despite the decidedly dated quality of the ‘urgent problems’ sketched in the latter half of the document, it was the first re-articulation of the Church’s relationship with the world that had come into being during the age of liberal revolutions. It remains a profound statement of traditional religious principles grappling with modernity, not motivated to return to the *ancien regime*, but to establish humble, loving service to humanity as the evangelical strategy for a global Catholic Church. Modernity’s many contradictions and tensions—what Jürgen Habermas has called ‘radically uprooting modernizations’—require what Ratzinger and Habermas himself concluded in a 2004 public debate as a necessary “double process of apprenticeship” through which religion and reason (read: mo-

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dernity) can learn to become dependent on each other.29 That very debate would appear to be a singular example of aggiornamento in practice, the fulfillment of the utter necessity for Catholicism to constructively engage with modern ideas so that the good of modernity can be rescued for the benefit of humanity. This is the task of a properly historicized Church that was bequeathed by Gaudium et Spes and the Second Vatican Council. In this way, the Church can fulfill the authentic and rightful optimism found in Gaudium et Spes that is rooted in that reassuring promise of Jesus Christ: “And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”30

Bibliography


30 Matthew 28:20