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Gaudium et Spes : Joy and Hope The Church in the Modern World 43 Years Later



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Vatican II went through a firestorm with its primary document on the Church. The schema left over from Vatican I's unaddressed business was brought to the floor, only to receive the scathing critique of Bishop De Smet that it was riddled with triumphalism, legalism, and clericalism, and could not be used as it was. When the schema returned to the floor, the beautiful *Lumen Gentium* document was the result. But it was not enough. The bishops realized the document dealt with the Church's inner life, not its mission to the world. And so a second document was crafted. Its title was to be *Gaudium et Spes*, in English, *The Church in the Modern World*. Little known and even less implemented, this second document on the Church in the midst of the world holds a vision not only for the Church. It offers a vision and a challenge to humanity.

Introduction

This is an anniversary year for ITEST. The organization known as the "Institute for the Theological Encounter with Science and Technology" is forty years old. This same year the Vatican II document known as *Gaudium et Spes* or in English, *The Church in the Modern World*, is forty-three years old. It is fitting that we ask if there is any wisdom this document might have to offer us as we celebrate this anniversary.

We will begin by taking a good look at the context at the time of the birth of ITEST, and the context that made Vatican II so significant. But we live with today's challenges, and we will then highlight our own present context.

A curious question often asked is "Why two documents on the Church?" The answer to this question points to a significant shift that took place at the Council itself, a shift that made *Gaudium et Spes* not only possible but necessary. As we reflect upon what the Church has written about its own relationship to the modern world, we will be both amazed and saddened. The amazement comes from the vision of the document itself. The sadness stems from the fact that it is one of the Church's best kept secrets. Really implementing the document would transform the Church.

The Context: Then

It has often been said that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. A wide view of what has taken place in the history of culture and of the Church gives us a framework, a backdrop for what is happening today. Present events influence future events, both in the Church and in the culture.

We often forget that the Church lived in fear much of the time until the Edict of Milan in 313. At that time it was at last free to come above ground and gather publicly. With this freedom came the beginnings of the outer structures of the Church that we know today. Buildings were dedicated. New territories were evangelized with bishops placed as overseers. As Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, the authority of the Church grew even in political matters due to the fact of feudal structures and emerging city-states. The clergy were often the most educated men around, and so looked to for leadership.

The medieval context, those centuries immediately prior to 1750, knew a remarkable synthesis. Life was not yet rigidly compartmentalized, but instead offered a wholeness of the sacred and secular dimensions of daily living. The Church was everywhere in the culture, and the culture greatly influenced the shape of the Church.

With the Enlightenment, dated about 1750, all of this changed dramatically. Reason stepped boldly forward, asserted its prominence, and relegated faith to the periphery of life where it was tolerated by some and dismissed by others. Taken with the emergence of the physical sciences, intellectuals unfortunately set up a false dichotomy between faith and science, pitting one against the other. Science and reason would finally explain everything to us, pushing aside the need for faith in what extended beyond reason's grasp. It would simply be a matter of time, and faith would not be needed. Science would explain it all. The real was reduced to what the human mind could comprehend.

The dawning of the twentieth century with its World Wars, its industrialization and technological progress and its interest in human psychology, fed the ideology that science and reason would one day triumph, vanquishing the need for religious faith, the authority of the Church, and religion itself at last. Modernism was born. Its worship of human intelligence was a wonder gone astray. The industrial age was unveiling one startling new invention after another, and so, with the help of psychology, the self and its intelligence and creativity took center stage. *Modernism* placed the human reason as prime and ultimate authority. No government, church, mosque, or synagogue was going to tell us what to do.

The mid-twentieth century brought a rude awakening. The depression, the H-bomb, the death camps, and the horror of the two World Wars revealed what horrors the human intelligence could devise. With all our best scientific effort, the Challenger still exploded. The gods of science and reason suddenly had clay feet. Reason and science could wreak self-destruction.

With this realization, modern self-perception entered a period of disenchantment. If reason and its prodigious science could no longer be worshipped, where shall we turn to pledge our allegiance? The newly discovered science of psychology held the answer. The narcissistic exploration of inner space began. Interiority would explain ourselves to ourselves.

And so the exploration into the human psyche and how it influences behavior began in earnest. *Post-Modernism* is marked by the quest for personal experience and personal value, and that experience alone as the litmus test for what is real. The result is highly critical self-analysis, and a relativist understanding of truth. There is only my truth and your truth, verified by our experience and our interpretation. There is no *the* truth. This is our age. This is the prevailing philosophy of our age, captured well in such current films as *The Golden Compass*. The enemy is any authority, including the Church, that questions the effects of my exercise of personal freedom.

The Shift in the Church's Self-understanding

The Church is people. The people of God are part of the culture and the shifts we have described. What then has been happening to the Church in this historical unfolding from a medieval self-understanding through Enlightenment, Modernism and finally Post-Modernism? The Church too has been developing. The "wheat" has been growing with the "weeds." Each historical shift has brought both blessing and curse. We have been describing the curse – the rapid disintegration of the medieval synthesis into the fractured relativism of our present day. Contrary to the opinion of some, the Church is not being destroyed. Rather, it is learning, for this age is asking questions of itself and of the Church that could not have been asked in a former time.

We would do well to remember that the *sensus fidelium*, the deep sense of the faith that dwells in the heart of the Church by the presence and action of the Spirit of God, gives the community the *nose* to detect what does and does not belong to the spirit of the gospel. The Church sniffs out the truth and knows that it is not merely self-induced. Faith knows that the truth is ultimately a person, the One who has shown us what is real and what is passing away. This sense gives the Church the capacity to distinguish what is good in each of these developments while at the same time being wary of what is poisonous to its life in God. This is the heart of discernment.

The medieval synthesis was not all good. While recognizing that the faith, religion, and the Church are a vital part of human life, this world view also tended to sacrifice the individual to the common good. The individual was expendable. An example of this weakness was the fact that peasant taxation, indentured servants, and human slavery were not seriously questioned as facts of life. Despite this weakness, the "wheat" of this period can be identified as a "wholeness," a sense that religious conviction was a vital part of all human endeavor. During this period, Christ the King was on the *offensive*. The Church as the religious authority took the lead in influencing social life, economics, and political authority.

With the Enlightenment a radical shift occurred. With roots in the emergence of individual interpretation espoused by the Protestant Reformation, reason now struggled to break free of faith and set out on its own. The Church, divested of its unity by the middle of the sixteenth century, attempted to regroup and attempt its own reformation through the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Christ the King was no longer the great Pantocrator, ruling in majesty from above the main altar of the basilica, but the suffering Christ of the cross. As was clear in the language of the Council of Trent, the Church went into *defensive* mode.

As reason continued to ascend the throne in its rise to prominence, it was joined in its rise to power by the impressive reneue of the physical sciences. Faith, religion, and the Church were more and more marginalized as impediments to reason's power and self-sufficiency. Once again, despite the obviously bloated perception of human intelligence, "wheat" can again be identified. The Modernist worship of human reason and its scientific capability gifted the world with a remarkable self-confidence in human intelligence, creativity, and invention. This gift would usher in undreamed of progress for the human family.

"Pride goeth before a fall." Thus reads the old proverb. The arrogance of the Enlightenment with its rational and scientific prowess peaked in the events of the twentieth century. The industrial revolution was underway. Flight was developing a capacity for use in war. The World Wars scarred Europe's landscape. The atomic bomb devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Nazi death camps horrified the world. This is what the new deities of reason and science had wrought. The world sank into depression. The "wheat" of this disillusionment was the honest realization that we could self-destruct by use of our reason and science.

The period of disillusionment that followed saw the promises of Modernism recede, and give way to a different focus. The concentration was still on ourselves as holding the solution to our own development, but the inquiry turned to the

source of both reason and science: human consciousness. The consciousness-philosophers beckoned us on to explore inner space. We shifted our attention now to search out the source of human thought, emotion, and decision. Moral decadence had led us into the desert. We began the trek into interiority, and it is here that we, and the Church with us, find ourselves in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Socrates had long ago said, "Know thyself." Christians have long believed that deep within the human spirit the Trine God has taken up residence. This would imply that a genuine self-knowledge leads to knowing God. Although the turn to philosophical interiority in our present age is secular in origin and pursuit, for those who see with the eyes of faith it is an opportunity for the rediscovery of the role of faith, religion, and the Church in a way never experienced before in human history. There can be no turning back. There can only be a moving forward. Like it or not, we stand on the shoulders of those who have flagranty dismissed the divine to the periphery of human life. At the same time, human seekers are being led to the inner depths of the human heart where that divine resides. What is different in our age is that we have already worshipped at the shrines of the idols and know they don't deliver. Reason and science have their limits.

Yet some are still convinced that the ultimate shrine and god is ourselves: the human, distinct and separate from everything and everyone, ruling with unlimited power. If we can unlock the secrets of consciousness, perhaps we can control the very source of human decision, and with that knowledge achieve the most ancient of yearnings: to be like unto God.

But there is another possibility. It is to rediscover ourselves as *already* like unto God, made so by that very Mystery. This would mean to rediscover ourselves, to find ourselves once again, now with all our discoveries, with all our intelligence and creativity, once more *in the midst* of the very Mystery we have relegated to oblivion. Christ the King is no longer either Pantocrator-ruler nor crucified victim. He is the Christ of the open heart, the Christ of mercy. Christ the King in our time is the servant footwisher, the shepherd king, kneeling at the feet of a stubborn sin-infected world.

The Context: Now

The sketch above was necessary for us to know the situation in which we now find ourselves. We are, if the cultural anthropologists are right, in a second axial shift. The first was the shift to reason and science from ritualism. The second is

the shift from reason and science to interiority. We have been disillusioned from an absolutist dependence on reason and science, and have turned to the pursuit of an understanding of human consciousness itself. We want to know what goes on there, and we want to know how to control what goes on there. Evolution continues, and it is not only biological.

For the first time in human history there is global concern about human issues: war, refugees, despotic rulers, failing economies that are not ours, debt forgiveness, human rights, clean water, ecological responsibility, conservation, recycling, health care, education, housing, trade and oil, to name just a few. Communications has made it possible for us to know what is going on across the world in seconds, to know and care about it.

Social Restructuring

Before our very eyes the world is being restructured. Socially, economically, and politically we have seen the European union emerge. South and Central America are considering something similar as well as Africa and the Mediterranean region. China is becoming a giant. India is becoming technologically literate.

The fact that a country is not providing for its people can no longer remain a secret. Communications will continue to expose Eastern European trafficking of women and children to feed the sex trade. No longer can vice confidently rot away human lives in hidden secrecy, but may find itself exposed to the prying eyes of someone in Kabul carrying a cell phone camera. On the positive side, people are talking to friends and family regularly anywhere in the world. Although we need to put down our cell phones while we drive and take care of other communication abuses, the world has never been more connected.

Human life issues are no longer just the concerns of the Mother Teresa's of the world. Marriage, family, procreation, and sexual orientation are common topics of conversation among both young and not so young. End of life issues are of real concern to hospital personnel. So is pre-natal care. Disease control of aids, viruses, cancer, diabetes, and autism are researched in laboratories all over the world. What will interiority have to say to the fact that the world as we know it is being gradually united into a virtual community whether we like it or not?

The Church in Transition

We no longer live in a medieval Church. We no longer live in an immigrant

Church defending itself against the Modernist onslaught. We are living in a Church immersed in a time of Post-Modern relativism, where the Church's very existence is irrelevant, even to some of the baptized. How do we evangelize in such a time? How do we speak to this Post-Modern age in such a way as to get the attention of its people and speak to the realities and struggles of their lives? To merely mouth the ancient truths, held dear to those who know how they have been forged in the fires of prayer and struggle, is not enough. Communication must find a bridge between those ancient truths and the spiritual hunger of this age. The message needs to engage the images and language of this time as carriers of the good news. How begin?

The Church will first need to assess its relation to this new world. How will it position itself? Offensively as in the past? Will it draw in and ghettoize itself to protect its ancient truths? Will it retreat with a whimper, walling itself up once again as an ancient fortress, concerned only about its own rules and inner order? Or will it assume the posture of its master, as shepherd-servant? What structure will serve it today? Will the former feudal structure continue to serve or must a more participative arrangement be found that is more life-giving?

The search today is for spirituality, while religion is avoided. What has made religion distasteful? Why is spirituality sought to replace religion rather than be supported by it? And most difficult of all, what is the image the Church needs to present to be taken seriously by a world that too quickly dismisses it as having no meaning?

Gaudium et Spes:

The Church in the Modern World Document

In the chaos of the sixties, when post-war Post-Modernism had broken upon us, the Catholic Church held a world-wide meeting. Kennedy was in office, draft cards were being burned, students at university campuses were rioting, and an elderly cardinal, Angelo Roncalli, became Pope John XXIII. The cardinals had hoped to calm things down so the Church could ride out the storm. The Holy Spirit had other ideas. The Church, still in its defensive mode like a medieval castle, shattered and with its moat bridge drawn up, entered right into the midst of the fray. The Church's labor and social documents were still unknown and unread. Plus XII had set the stage for renewal, but those in Rome, fearful of "upsetting the boat" kept the lid on any efforts toward real innovation. John XXIII, nearing the end of his life, pressed on and brushed aside their objections. In 1962, on October 11, the Second Vatican Council opened.

A Second Document on the Church?

As it engaged in its business and neared its closing in 1965, some cardinals and bishops realized something important was missing. The document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, had updated the Church's perspective on its own inner life. But it occurred to the Council Fathers that it said little or nothing about the Church's relation to the World. This would never do. And so a scramble was made to write a final document. The schema was prepared and a title was chosen. The document would be called *Gaudium et Spes*, Latin for "Joy and Hope," taken from the opening words of the text. In English the document is called "The Church in the Modern World."²

The document was unique in several ways. It was the first document addressed to all of humankind, not merely to the baptized.³ It is an international, trans-global, and ecumenical document addressed to people of goodwill everywhere. The document's significant mover and shaker was Belgian cardinal Leon-Josef Suenen. In a speech on December 4, 1962 he had proposed that the schema on the nature of the Church be divided into two parts: the first dealing with the inner nature of the Church, and second dealing with the Church's relation to the world. Suenen insisted that the Council enter serious dialogue with society, and his speech that day was met with such sustained applause from the Council participants that the president reprimanded the body for what he considered too boisterous a response! In the days that followed, many joined Suenen in his request, foremost among them Cardinal Montini, soon to be elected Paul VI.

As time moved forward and the full agenda of the Council was addressed, the Suenen suggestion waited in the background. Finally, after considerable work by the Suenen's supporters, a schema for *The Church in the Modern World* as a separate document was presented on October 20, 1964. The debate began. Several of the Council Fathers found the document much too social in character, and suggested it was not fit for the Council's consideration. The international press began to be very interested.

Corrections were made by subcommittees, and the final text was composed by Father Haubtmann of Paris, working closely with Father Bernard Häring. Still, from January 31 to February 6, 1965, and again from March 29 to April 6 that year, twenty-nine Council fathers plus other experts met to incorporate amendments to the text.⁴

Yet the debate continued. In the face of the pressure of the Council moving toward closure, the work still continued, and the draft met its deadlines. It came to the floor for a vote on December 7, 1965 and passed by a vote of 2,309 to 75.

For those who do explore the Vatican II documents, one of their main stops will be *Lumen Gentium*, the first document on the Church's own inner life and structure. Is it no wonder then, that this second document is little known and little read? Yet without this document the Church is not known in its entirety. With this second document we have a charter for the future of the Church as it moves through time.

The Themes

Anyone who judges the Church to be out of step with modern day concerns will be challenged by this document. The document is in two parts. Part I deals with the human person and the Church's role in the world. Part II addresses several current problems that face all of us in the modern world. We will address its main themes briefly, and then ask how the document speaks to the scientific disciplines.

This council...having already looked in depth at the Church itself, now turns its attention on the whole of humanity. We want to state clearly our understanding of the presence and function of the Church in the world of today. . . Our entire subject is humankind, men and women: whole and entire with body and soul, with heart and conscience, with mind and will. . . We now wish to enter into dialogue with the whole human family about all this.⁵

The entire Preface paints the situation of a struggling humanity, often caught in the mismanagement of its own outstanding progress. Then with bold strokes, Chapter I moves to a discussion of the dignity of the human person as the central issue. The chapter addresses the various opinions about the human being stemming from the Post-Modern angst that characterizes the culture. After taking the real situation seriously, the council fathers describe human dignity, sin, the intelligence, liberty, moral choice and atheism, drawing from the Church's biblical base. The chapter closes with a reference to Christ as the fullness of a healed humanity.

Chapter II expands this vision communally, and Chapter III focuses on humanity in action, and reveals the Church's vision of human progress:

Thanks primarily to increased opportunities for many kinds of interchange among nations, the human family is gradually recognizing that it comprises a single world community. . . far from thinking that works produced by man's own talent and energy are in opposition to God's power. . . Christians are convinced that the triumphs of the human race are a sign of God's greatness and the flowering of His own mysterious design. . . Hence the norm of human activity is this: that in accord with the divine plan and will, it should harmonize with the genuine good of the human race, and allow men as individuals and as members of society to pursue their total vocation and fulfill it.⁶

With Chapter IV, the document plunges into the Church's role in the progress of humankind.

...the Church proclaims the rights of man...the rightful autonomy of the creature. . . [in doing so humanity] is reestablished and its own dignity strengthened. . . She acknowledges and greatly esteems the dynamic movements of today by which these rights are everywhere fostered. Yet these movements must be penetrated by the spirit of the gospel and protected against any kind of false autonomy. For we are tempted to think that our personal rights are fully ensured only when we are exempt from every requirement of divine law. But this way lies not the maintenance of the dignity of the human person, but its annihilation. . . [The Church has] no proper mission in the political, economic, or social order. . . [her mission] is a religious one. . . a function, a light, and an energy which can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine law. . . Hence. . . her very universality can be a very close bond between diverse human communities and nations. . . the Church is willing to assist and promote all these institutions to the extent that such a service depends on her and can be associated with her mission. . . They are mistaken who. . . shirk their earthly responsibilities. . . let there be no false opposition between professional, professional, social, and technical enterprises into one vital synthesis with religious values. . . Thanks to the experience of past ages, the progress of the sciences, and the treasures hidden in the various forms of human culture, the nature of man himself is more clearly revealed and new roads to truth are opened.⁷

This basic vision, now over forty years old, is yet to be fully absorbed by the faith community. Such an affirmation of human effort is foundational to what follows in Part II of the document. Here the Council addresses several primary areas of practical concern.

Part II of the document has five chapters. The first is dedicated to marriage and family. This key area is followed by four other chapters discussing the proper development of culture, socio-economic life, the life of the political community, and the fostering of peace and the development of a community of nations. Each of these chapters provides a vital blueprint for addressing the pressing problems that plague the human family. Yet each of these chapters has hardly been tapped as the world community struggles daily to address the problems that haunt it.

We might ask what difference it makes for the Church to have written this document when it is so little known and read. The significance is great, for once you have written your convictions, the entire world can hold you responsible for living them out. In declaring itself, the Church has made itself vulnerable to the very influence of the world whose wisdom it has declared it humbly seeks.⁸

The Critical Importance of Science In Implementing the Vision of the Document

In taking so affirmative a stance regarding the progress of humankind while realistically pointing out how we can abuse our very humanity, the Church reaches back into history to affirm every positive development while refusing to focus on the horrors perpetrated by human beings who twisted those developments to their own devious purpose. By setting this course, she invites us to a stance of keen discernment. She also invites us to keep the bigger picture always in view.

That bigger picture simultaneously holds all of reality in tension. The divine plan and purpose is probed by our faith, a knowing that is born of religious love. Such knowledge refuses to eject the vision of a reality beyond measurable data. Faith affirms that there is reality that reason cannot as yet comprehend. This knowing is not unreasonable. It simply posits an intelligible that is now beyond our sensory grasp with all its means of measurement. Yet as intelligible, it is most knowable, and will one day be comprehended by a reason transformed to be able to embrace it. The fever of human arrogance and impatience will push for dismissal of what it cannot immediately understand in the face of this process of human transformation.

The natural sciences are affirmed and celebrated by this document. Physical science provides a knowledge of the building blocks for our understanding of the cosmos. As such, the physical sciences become a sacred metaphor for an evolving revelation of the continuing creative power of God.⁹ *The Church in the Modern World* document provides a basis for the ongoing collaboration between

theologians and physical scientists, each finding deeper understanding in light of the insights of the other.

The same holds true of the social and psychological sciences. Both deal with the human being and the conditions for human flourishing. The human sciences have and will continue to call into question our penal systems, our health care systems, and our understanding of mental illness.

The urgency of the study of human consciousness promises to be an exciting frontier. Rather than succumb to the absolutism of the human as totally self-sufficient and autonomous, such study can disclose the need for social and communal support for human development and full human flourishing. Once the study of the energy of human love and forgiveness is plumbed, data now being financed and researched by secular institutes, the findings can shed significant light and direction on human spiritual development beyond the limits of psychological measurement.

Finally, there is no doubt in this document of the intimate relationship between science and the probing questions of meaning posed by philosophy and theology. The age-old questions of human meaning, human purpose, and human suffering need to include in their pursuit the hard data provided by the physical, social, and psychological sciences. The assuming of matter in the form of DNA by the Incarnate Word of God is either the final and definitive text on which the divine has written, or we who preach this wonder are deceiving the human family. In this mystery the most important affirmation has already been given. This One has become one with us physically, socially, and spiritually. The Church has done well in taking its clues from such a Mystery, for this fact sets its face toward becoming a vital part of the world assumed by the One who is the object of its faith and the love of its life. Perhaps then, and only then, will the insight of a current anonymous writer be realized:

There will not be

A renewal of Christianity

Until a manual of science

*Cannot be written without a reference
to the Incarnation.*

(Endnotes)

- 1 I am indebted to Joe Holland of the Center of Concern in Washington, D.C. for this three-fold description of the transitions of the Church.
- 2 For the full text of the document, see Walter M. Abbot, SJ, *The Documents of Vatican II*. (Piscataway, NJ: New Century Publisher, Inc., 1966): 183-316. The Flannery edition also provides the full text, as well as the Vatican website. Readers might be interested to know that this document is the longest of all the Council documents.
- 3 For readable and clear background on the Council and its documents see Bill Huebsch, *Vatican II in Plain English: The Constitutions*. (Allen, Texas: Thomas More, 1997), and Gerald O'Collins, SJ, *Living Vatican II: The 21st Council for the 21st Century* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2006).
- 4 See Huebsch, 121-125.
- 5 Preface. See also Huebsch, 126-127.
- 6 Abbott, 231-233.
- 7 Abbott, 239-246.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 245-247.
- 9 For a challenging read by this very title see Elizabeth Michael Boyle, OP, *Science as Sacred Metaphor: An Evolving Revelation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006). Another provocative study is *Environmental Stewardship in the Judeo-Christian Tradition* published by the Acton Institute, 2007.

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