

Gaudium et spes: On the Church in the modern world, an offer of service to mankind

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World covers a huge amount of ground. The title itself with its very interesting phrase ‘in’, note, not ‘and’, the Church **in** the modern world, is a subject worthy of discussion. What direction does that give us in today’s dealings with what some believe is a world antagonistic to organised religion? What about the document’s rich anthropology, its methodology, or its treatment of significant moral issues: are they still relevant? How have things changed? These are all important and interesting questions. However if we are thinking of ‘a sure compass’ it seems to me that what is of most interest and relevance is a sentence that comes the third paragraph in, the idea of the Church offering “service” to, as the document puts it, the “human family”, to mankind¹. The Fathers say it is “man who is the key to this discussion”: man “whole and entire”, body, soul, heart, conscience, mind, will, not just the spiritual aspects of human beings². What service does the Church offer to ‘whole’ man? And what about seeming to put mankind first, a theology ‘from below’ if you like?

At the outset it is necessary to say that for many people, including myself, the Second Vatican Council is now history. We did not know the Church before. Inevitably perhaps I see through the lens of what has happened after the Council and in particular through the influential prism of Pope John Paul II. After all as Archbishop and then as Pope, John Paul said it was his personal mission to implement the Council³ and he himself saw *Gaudium et spes* as most influential in his own work⁴. On a different note, while recognising the importance of gender inclusive language this discussion uses the language of the document itself.

Many people see *Gaudium et spes* as the document that best expresses Pope John XXIII’s hopes for the Council. Consider for a moment that highly contested word *aggiornamento*, bringing up to date, but look at it from the point of view of St Peter’s Basilica. A common picture postcard view is to see St Peter’s Basilica opening out into St Peter’s Square, the great elliptical esplanade, leading to the straight road out into Rome itself. St Peter’s reaching out, if you like, to the world. But that road and the gathering place of the Square with its embracing colonnades is also St Peter’s bringing people in: a new evangelisation rather than simply an opening out to the world. In his speech at the opening of the Council⁵ Pope John XXIII disagreed with “prophets of doom”, people who only see the world in terms of disaster. Yes he agrees that there are errors and problems but he thinks that the world is “on the threshold of a new era”. Moreover Pope John said the Church can meet “the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than condemnation”. New evangelisation. Safeguard Christian truth, expound it with greater efficacy. Keep up to date but do not lose sight of the truth. The Church’s “treasure” is not a museum piece but something to be put to work.

So how is this discussion going to work? I am going to take four of these services to mankind found in *Gaudium et spes*. I will argue that these four services point us in the right direction and that they have weathered the storms of nearly fifty years of change, they are anchor points if you like. But before the service, what about mankind? To begin with *Gaudium et*

¹ *Gaudium et spes* #3

² *Gaudium et spes* #3

³ Karol Wojtyła *Sources of Renewal*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1979.

⁴ http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01051997_p-28_en.html

⁵ <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/vatican2.htm>

spes sees human beings as “the key” to the discussion: because it is the concrete human being who is to be saved. Theology from below? Well, *Gaudium et spes* roots this turn to human beings securely in the Incarnation. And it is a move very much in the patristic tradition. The very fact of the Incarnation, the Second Person of the Trinity who came to be man and pitched his tent here with us as the way to the Father, means that the Church, following the mission entrusted to it by Christ, is to set all human beings on the path to holiness, the path of Christ. With this as the framework on this journey *Gaudium et spes* offers four particular services to real concrete human beings: firstly it gives weight to historical human experience, and this is not simply describing joy and hope, grief and anguish. Secondly it offers dialogue because the Church’s mission is for all human beings. Thirdly, it offers solidarity: in fact that is the subtitle of the preface, “solidarity of the Church with the whole human family”, the Church in ‘the world’. The Church in the world because all human beings share the same divine origin and the same destiny. And fourthly, answers. Unusually in a numbering system I am going to begin with four: what about answers?

Answers

Today, and certainly in my experience people, particularly students, want answers: what precisely does the Church say about IVF, gay marriage, war....not why, not theological underpinnings, but just the answer. The second part of the document is well known for presenting the Church’s view on some “urgent problems”. Well, I would like to say something first of all about ‘answers’. The document says that the Church does not necessarily have ready answers to every question and this is repeated by Pope John Paul II in many of his social encyclicals; it even says that the clergy are not experts in everything⁶. However answers. One thing is clear there is THE answer. And it should come as no surprise. The whole tenor of the Council from its call in the document on the liturgy to bring the Paschal Mystery to bear in all the sacraments, to its document on Revelation to attend to Scripture and the Good News that is Christ, the Church and the people of God as priest, prophet and king, the whole focus is on Christ who has set us free. I am not going to discuss whether a christocentric focus is problematic for Trinitarian thinking. But perhaps remember Pope John Paul’s subsequent trilogy of encyclicals focusing on Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit. I wish only to point out this: our sure compass is Christ and the Church’s mission and service, as clearly expressed in *Gaudium et spes* is to help people find Christ who is the way to the Father and who is the Redeemer of Man. This is a service of the Church because Christ’s mission is carried on by the Church. Hence we need an understanding of worship, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, what Church is, *Lumen Gentium*, and then who the mission is directed at, human beings, their joys, hopes, anguish and fear, *Gaudium et spes*. And Redeemer of Man? Well, Pope John Paul’s first encyclical. Pope John Paul himself speaks about how significant *Gaudium et spes* was for him – he proves this by the frequency with which he quotes paragraph 22, that it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear, and paragraph 24 that man discovers himself only by a sincere gift of self. Passages that are key for understanding the thought of Pope John Paul. So yes the Church does have answers. However the Church does not merely give a yes or no answer. Rather by prayer, by deep reflection on scripture, on tradition, on what leads to human flourishing and what leads away from it, the Church offers the why as well. And any investigation into recent challenges in healthcare and medicine demonstrates that these answers are thoughtful, considered and up to date.

⁶ #43

The service of offering answers goes hand in hand with the other three services of experience, dialogue and solidarity so that, as the document itself says, neither the pastoral emphasis nor the doctrinal emphasis is overlooked⁷.

Human experience

The modern turn to experience, privileging individual experience, marks perhaps the trend of twentieth century philosophy, in particular existentialism, understood as a certain attitude: in a nutshell, the isolated individual in a universe often without meaning, where history is merely a series of events, and progress if there is any, is the move away from superstitious, religiously dependant man to a more self-reliant independent person. However, *Gaudium et spes* is doing something different. It is not privileging **individual** human experience, joy, hope, grief, anguish, as **the** only source of knowledge, as the measure of what is true, as **me** finding **my** own meaning. Instead *Gaudium et spes* takes two aspects of human experience, the individual and the universal and it locates human beings in historical reality where that reality has spiritual meaning. On the one hand *Gaudium et spes* reminds us that redemption is of concrete human beings and these concrete human beings ask the same, perennial questions about living life well, love, dying, what we hope for, what we fear. On the other hand *Gaudium et spes* offers a rich anthropology, insights into every human being, based on man as created in the image of God, wounded by sin, in need of redemption, but also with intrinsic dignity, a dignity that is never lost, and moreover with a desire for the truth. Of course there have been many questions about the use of experience in the document. Whose experience did the document take up? There is great concern that this is a primarily European document – what about African experience, South American experience, and the experience of women? Therefore how accurate is it? From these concerns we have had various liberation theologies and theologies that begin from particular rather than universal experience. In response to this in Catholic Social Teaching and in Pope John Paul's writing there is an added focus on starting from individual experience: workers, the poor and marginalised, on social justice, structures of sin as well as personal sin, on the role of women. However this first anchor point reminds us that there is a universal truth about human beings.

Many people have criticised the document for its overly optimistic tones about human experience, and this is not simply the post war 1960s optimism. Rather it is the optimism that the world has a certain autonomy and stability, that it can (and perhaps should) find its own way. Nevertheless it is worth noting once again the opening words of the document. *Gaudium et spes* tempers the joy with the grief, the hope with anguish. Moreover, *Gaudium et spes* does not avoid a certain realism as it points to the dangers of confusing some forms of progress with a genuine progress that keeps the authentic truth and good of human beings in mind, a theme taken up by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Populorum progressio* and then by Pope John Paul. But one question is, nearly fifty years on is there more pessimism about the world today? Certainly a read of some of Pope John Paul's encyclicals on the state of things – how technology in bioethics has left ethics far behind, the ever increasing gap between rich and poor, war and terrorism, means that the kinds of questions addressed in the second part of *Gaudium et spes* appear to be outdated. We are no longer talking about marriage but about redefining marriage; we are no longer talking about birth regulation but now it is IVF, cloning, stem cell research, assisted dying. Not so much about inculturation as the culture of death versus the culture of life. Not so much economy and work as greed, the banking crisis, and a whole generation that has never worked. Not so much the just war as terrorism, revolution, genocide, states killing and gassing their own people. *Gaudium et spes* may have

⁷ Note to Preface

drawn attention to the fear and anxiety that people had but are we reaching a stage where people have forgotten fear, a Promethean culture in technology and healthcare where whatever can be done should be done?

Despite these changing experiences the first service remains: and the first service is to say that human experience and human history matter. In terms of moral theology as Pope John Paul points out in *Veritatis splendor*, (and this is the structure for all of his writings) we find out first where we are because a close attention to human experience tells us that even if we make mistakes along the way, people are seeking for something, for truth, meaning, spirituality, like the rich young man in Matthew's Gospel. We can then be moved on towards the light of truth. Experience matters and as subsequent papal teachings have shown the Church still has relevant insights that take account of this experience. The 'signs of the times', history matters because God is a God of history: he acts in history, he reveals himself in history and his work goes forward on earth though it is not for earthly purposes but for our salvation. Unlike versions of existentialism, *Gaudium et spes* reminds us that human experience demonstrates that there is meaning in our existence.

Dialogue

The idea of dialogue requires considerable unpacking. Many I think see *Gaudium et spes* as essentially a dialogue of the Church with the modern world as if the Church is trying to explain its activity as a simple gathering of individuals who share a religious vision to a world that is a separate and autonomous body: the document itself talks about the "rightful autonomy of earthly affairs"⁸. Certainly the world in *Gaudium et spes* is heading towards freedom, equality, rights, progress and the Church wants to acknowledge the good aspects while also pointing to the dangers: the joy and grief. The Church also wants to link her activity to this project of authentic progress as part of God's plan and offers concrete solutions to some modern problems. Indeed the Church is in dialogue with the world. However the Church recognises that the mistakes in this project come out of the perennial human mistake: thinking that we are independent, autonomous and free – that is free of God. The result, the real problem facing human beings is a lack of meaning in our activity and in ourselves. We are directionless. So to begin with *Gaudium et spes* reminds the modern world that the human person, understood correctly, is the focus of both the Church's and the world's activity.

Dialogue in *Gaudium et spes* is located theologically speaking in Revelation. The anthropology in *Gaudium et spes*, "what does the Church think of man?"⁹ is based on man as the image of God, man the material and spiritual being, a seeking being, who is naturally drawn to his Creator, who from his very beginning is invited to converse with God and who hears the voice of God in his conscience. Moreover it is only in the revelation of the God-made-man that human beings can come to understand themselves. Yes, there is sin, human beings are sinful and divided within themselves, human beings experience both a "high calling" and a "deep misery"¹⁰. But there is hope because Christ has restored human dignity and also raised it to a dignity beyond compare. In dialogue as the second service to mankind the Church becomes the critical consciousness of the world and offers human beings direction, a sure compass.

⁸ #36

⁹ #11

¹⁰ #13

But what about a dialogue with people who do not believe? Of course one of the criticisms levelled at *Gaudium et spes* is that the atheism it critiques is now different, especially since the fall of communism. In fact *Gaudium et spes* lists several different forms of atheism, and the document suggests that the really problematic version is not the atheism that believes that there is not a God but rather the atheism that is without the belief that there is a God. Unbelief and indifference. Moreover *Gaudium et spes* holds believers to account for this attitude. We have promoted a reward and punishment type of belief; we have failed to be leaven in the world, we are not witnesses to a lived and mature faith, we have not become educated in our faith¹¹. It may be timely here to bring in a serious sign of our very own times: child abuse by priests, its scandal and cover up. Clearly the damage that abuse causes to the victims, the survivors, families is indescribable and the Church has a long way to go in healing that wound. But many argue what can a Church who has allowed that to happen have to say to us? How can the Church criticise the world when the sins of her own members are not acknowledged or indeed deliberately hidden? To remark that cases of child abuse by priests have seriously affected the Church's authority to be a critical consciousness is more than trite when it has caused such untold damage in the real lives of many real human beings. The only thing to do is to stop and reflect on our sinfulness.

However I think we can still rescue the service of dialogue by returning to the focus of both the Church's and the world's activity: human beings. One of today's central conversations is about the notion of human dignity: is it a useless concept, too vague, does it simply mean rationality or autonomy, what about other non-human animals? Despite modern calls to ditch the notion we cannot bring ourselves to do it. And the Church has deep insights that contribute to this conversation. In its explanation of human dignity *Gaudium et spes* sees intrinsic dignity in every human being here and now simply as a human being, no matter his capacities by virtue of being made in the image of God and that dignity is raised by Jesus to a new height. Moreover it calls everyone to look on the other as another self. Especially where there are so many assaults on human dignity, so many appeals to a false compassion that offers death as the solution to physical and spiritual suffering, a conflation of being in an apparently undignified situation of radical dependence with genuine human dignity that can never be lost, we need to be reminded that every human being always has full dignity as a human person from womb (or now perhaps petri dish) to tomb. Certainly one of the dangers of an apparent open-mindedness is that it may lead to indifference or a dialogue of the deaf or merely a trading of opinions. Nevertheless the Church recognises that people are searching to make sense of their lives, we want to live authentically, we do realise that truth has an important place. This is why Pope John XXIII urges us to explain, deepen and proclaim our faith so that in dialogue the truth can unfold¹².

Solidarity

And whether it is inadequately expressed in gangs or teenagers all dressing alike, even people desiring brands and designer clothes, people want to belong. We are not simply isolated individuals. And so to the third service to mankind: solidarity. The Church has always emphasised the common brotherhood of all human beings, and for Pope John Paul the call to brotherhood, solidarity, is absolutely crucial. There is a natural bond that joins all members of the human family which is why the way of living out life in all areas from the family to society, economic, political, national life concerns everyone. But *Gaudium et spes* also situates the Church in the world. We are all engaged in a common enterprise. And this

¹¹ #19

¹² Speech at the Opening of the Council

enterprise is raised beyond common bonds of nature by the bonds of love: through Christ we have become God's adopted children. The Christ event has changed everything. Solidarity in *Gaudium et spes* then is not merely the members of the Church as human beings sharing in the joy, hope, grief and anguish of other human beings, though this is indeed what we do. The Church's social action is not simply humanism or caring and sharing. Rather the Church, composed as it is of human beings who are united in Christ, led by the Spirit, presses towards building up the Kingdom of God that is here and not here yet.

Solidarity may have become a particularly resonant word of the twentieth century. Nevertheless we may well ask ourselves about solidarity now. On the one hand in the political field people are more aware of the needs of others across the world. Media reports show people in far flung places who are just like us even if we, sinful as we are, are neglectful in our duties towards our brothers and sisters and fail in our common action. In the ecological field people are becoming more and more aware of how we all rely on the different elements in the world. However certainly in bioethics there is a real problem: many bioethicists simply do not see a human family, they see only isolated individual entities who may or may not exhibit the characteristics of persons, and the category of 'person' no longer includes all human beings. Although *Gaudium et spes* did not anticipate this move the call to solidarity is a reminder that all human beings belong in a common brotherhood, that what happens in the smallest arena, the family, the domestic Church, has ramifications for everyone.

However, what about our common salvation? Today spirituality is often expressed as a personal voyage of faith which of course it partly is. As Newman says, "true religion is a life hidden in the heart"¹³. But this does not mean it is merely interior. It is not just that. My personal faith journey carries with it the danger of individualism and egoism and pride. I do not need to temper my personal faith with the inconveniences and demands of a Church. My personal salvation is all that matters. Through the anchor of solidarity *Gaudium et spes* remind us that we are all in the same boat, as it were. And of course in its service of solidarity *Gaudium et spes* reminds us of one crucial insight: that "man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself".

Conclusion

So, *Gaudium et spes* does point us in the right direction and it offers anchor points that can stand the stress of change. It recognises that human experience and history matters. But this is not just description of experiences of the moment, it is the perennial human experience that unites us with all human beings and history that leads to the end times. It encourages dialogue. But this is not simply a trading of opinions where each view is as valid as any other. It is instead openness to the truth. It calls for solidarity. But this is not simply the recognition of a common human bond. Rather it is the conviction that we are all, Church and world, on the same pilgrimage. And it gives the answer: that it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear.

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¹³ John Henry Newman, *Heart Speaks to Heart: Selected Spiritual Writings*, New York: New City Press, 2004, p.104