

IN CELEBRATION OF THE YEAR OF FAITH
October 11, 2012 – November 24, 2013

AT THE CATHEDRAL PARISH OF SAINT RAPHAEL
in Madison, Wisconsin

DOCUMENTS OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

LUMEN GENTIUM II – THE PEOPLE OF GOD

A. THE COMMUNAL SPIRIT OF CATHOLISM

The title of the second chapter of *Lumen Gentium* is “The People of God.”

Since the Council, this phrase has become a popular title for the Church (taking its place alongside older ones: the Mystical Body of Christ, Holy Mother Church, and so on)

While newly popular, this phrase has very ancient roots (as *Lumen Gentium* points out) – most importantly in the Old Testament.

... it pleased [God] to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness. He therefore chose the race of Israel as a people unto Himself. (LG 9)

God did not make the Covenant (the “Old Testament”) with scattered individuals who were each going his and her own way. He made the Covenant with the People of Israel – all the descendants of Abraham, who had a common life together.

This is reflected in the First Reading of today’s Mass where the priest-scribe Ezra reads out the Law of the Covenant to all the people assembled, who reaffirm their allegiance to the Covenant together.

Each Israelite participated personally in the Covenant, but the relationship each person had to God was mediated through their membership in the nation of Israel. They had a common destiny.

God sometimes dealt personally with particular people – with the prophets when he called them, and with David when he sinned, for example – but when God dealt with individuals, their function within the whole people was always part of the issue.

And so, *Lumen Gentium* says:

God . . . does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. (LG 9)

Although the previous sentence does begin with the acknowledgment that God has a direct relationship with each person who seeks Him:

At all times and in every race God has given welcome to whosoever fears Him and does what is right. (ibid)

To call the Church “the People of God” highlights the fact that God works in a similar way in the time of the New Covenant. He relates to the people of the New Covenant as part of “a People” – the Church. This is a very Catholic insight.

There is, of course, variation among different Protestant denominations, but at least one classic Protestant vision of salvation is this:

A lone individual,
reading and interpreting the Bible for himself (with the help of the
Holy Spirit speaking directly to his heart),
making in his heart a personal acceptance of Jesus as His Lord and
Savior.

In that picture, a community is in no way necessary.

In fact, introducing other people into that picture kind of smudges it a little, makes it a little imperfect, because it threatens the purity of the relationship of the individual soul with God.

Protestants do have churches, of course, but they form them by choosing to come together with one another, and they come and go as they please.

Protestants certainly acknowledge that it can be helpful to pray together and to encourage one another . . . but for a Protestant, a church isn't really a necessary and indispensable part of living as a Christian.

The Catholic approach is completely different.

A Catholic says:

“I didn't receive the Faith by reading the Bible and interpreting it for myself. The Faith was proclaimed to me by the Church, and I said, ‘Yes, I believe that!’”

As Catholics, we definitely entered a new relationship with Christ through a Sacrament celebrated in the community of the Church – Baptism.

Most of us were baptized by a priest, perhaps younger people by a deacon, maybe you were baptized by a nurse in a emergency situation at your birth, or even by your grandmother . . .

. . . but whoever baptized you, that person represented the Church. Do you know the one person who could not have validly baptized you? Yourself.

Two pagans stranded on a desert island could validly baptize each other, but you cannot baptize yourself.

Our relationship with God is personal, but it is not individual. It is mediated through the Church. And that is expressed by the requirement that there must be another person, representing the Church, who baptizes.

So this image we find in *Lumen Gentium* Chapter 2, “the People of God,” is a very Catholic one.

Just parenthetically, that is a challenge for us as Catholics in this country. Individualism is a great part of the American character. “Rugged individualism” we sometimes call it. In our national life, that spirit of individualism has borne a lot of good fruit. It is not bad in itself, but like all things in this world, it needs to be corrected by other perspectives. Religiously, however, our American individualism is a little dangerous. It gives the American psyche a little bias toward Protestantism.

So this newly popular title for the Church, “the People of God,”

- (1) has ancient roots (in the Old Testament), and
- (2) is thoroughly Catholic.

And, thinking back to Chapter 1 of *Lumen Gentium* (which we saw last week), it is an image that is completely consistent with what was said there – where the mission of the Church was described as *communio*.

The work of redemption is not accomplished if we are not brought into a communion of love, not only with God but others as well. The work of redemption cannot be accomplished in the individual as solitary. By being joined to the People of God, we are brought into practical *communio* with others.

B. THE CHURCH AND THE NATIONS

The title of this document is “*Lumen Gentium*” = “Light of the Nations.”

Nations is used here in the old sense of “Gentiles” – the various peoples and cultures of the world.

In several ways, Chapter 2 of *Lumen Gentium* addresses the question of how the Church is related to “the nations” – to those who are not yet in communion with us.

1. The Church and the Cultures of the Nations

What is the relationship between the Church and all the cultures of the world?

In our traditional Christian image of missionary work, we often saw the pagans as living in ignorance, superstition and vice until we brought them the truth of the Faith.

There was some truth in that – the Aztecs, e.g., practiced human sacrifice on a massive scale, and that had to stop. But other Native Americans here in North America, for example, were quite peaceful.

Lumen Gentium takes a new attitude toward the missionary activity of the Church. Unlike the old picture we had of a decadent paganism that needed to be destroyed in order to make way for Christianity, *Lumen Gentium* says:

Since the kingdom of Christ is not of this world, the Church or people of God in establishing that kingdom takes nothing away from the temporal welfare of any people. On the contrary it fosters and takes to itself, insofar as they are good, the ability, riches and customs in which the genius of each people expresses itself. Taking them to itself it purifies, strengthens, elevates and ennobles them. . . (LG 13)

The thought is: a culture that has proved durable and lasted for some time must have gotten many things right, even though every culture has its blind spots. The Church wants to affirm all that is good in indigenous cultures, recognizing that some correction and purification will be necessary.

Cf. what was said above about American individualism – it is a heritage that requires some correction and purification.

Pope John Paul II was a great model of this attitude. In his missionary trips around the world, he kissed the soil of each country and was eager to speak about the noble traditions of each culture.

In taking this approach, *Lumen Gentium* anticipated and answered the “politically correct” criticism of Christianity that has developed since – i.e. the charge that the spread of the Gospel was cultural imperialism!

That charge, as you probably know, goes like this:

“Indigenous people were living noble, peaceful, organic lives until the European Christians came with their patriarchy and their muskets and wrecked everything.”

Well certainly in the age of exploration, there were opportunistic and greedy people who acted badly, but that is not the story of evangelization.

Both our older Catholic picture of evangelization and the new “politically correct” critique of it, portray the relationship between the Gospel and indigenous cultures as a “fight to the death.” This is not the perspective of *Lumen Gentium*.

In fact, the position of *Lumen Gentium* is not just that the cultural heritage of various peoples “can be salvaged,” but something much more positive than that – namely, that the strength of each culture is a gift that is meant to be shared with the whole world, through the communion of the Church.

The Church in this is mindful that she must bring together the nations for that king to whom they were given as an inheritance, and to whose city they bring gifts and offerings. This characteristic of universality which adorns the people of God is a gift from the Lord Himself. By reason of it, the Catholic Church strives constantly and with due effect to bring all humanity and all its possessions back to its source In Christ, with Him as its head and united in His Spirit. (LG 13)

This is very much in accord with the Second Reading of today’s Mass – St. Paul’s description of the Church as a body in which the diversity of parts is an advantage to all.

2. The Church as Messianic

In all honesty, this is an aspect of *Lumen Gentium* that has not received much attention (so far as I've noticed) in the last 50 years.

But *Lumen Gentium* does refer to the Church as a “messianic people.”

In the Gospel of today's Mass, the Lord Jesus uses the words of the Prophet Isaiah to identify Himself as the One who has been “anointed” to bring deliverance to those who are suffering.

The Jewish people were waiting for the Messiah, the “Anointed One.” When the Messiah came, he would be the King of Israel . . . and we would be the ideal king. He would establish justice, he would put things right. As we might say today, “All our problems will be solved when the Messiah comes.”

By saying that the Church is a messianic people, *Lumen Gentium* is saying that the People of God – by living the new life that Christ has given us (a life in communion with God and with one another) – is meant to be the place where the world can see that all the problems caused by sin do not need to be the final word.

Here is the way *Lumen Gentium* describes our life as a messianic people:

That messianic people has Christ for its head . . . The state of this people is that of the dignity and freedom of the [children] of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple. Its law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us. Its end is the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God Himself on earth, and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by Him at the end of time, when Christ, our life, shall appear, and "creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God." (LG 9)

And the passage goes on to describe how this People of God is messianic – a sign of hope for the whole world:

So it is that that messianic people, although it does not actually include all men, and at times may look like a small flock, is nonetheless a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race. Established by Christ as a communion of life, charity and truth, it is . . . sent forth into the whole world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth. (ibid)

The life of the Church – our life – is meant to be a sign to the world that all people have been invited to something better than the sad, sick, lonely, dead-end existence that we suffer on account of sin.

Not too much pressure!

I really find that beautiful, and (as I said) something in *Lumen Gentium* that has not been much highlighted.

3. Degrees of Relationship to the Church

The foregoing passage from *Lumen Gentium* talks about the Church “not actually including all” people right now. But this Chapter 2 does go on to describe degrees of belonging to the People of God in a way that is very expansive.

The picture you might have in your mind here (though *Lumen Gentium* doesn't really suggest this picture) is one of concentric circles – like a bullseye – a series of circles centered on the same point that get progressively larger.

First – the “inner circle,” if you will – are those we would commonly call “Catholics.” As *Lumen Gentium* puts it:

They are fully incorporated in the society of the Church who, possessing the Spirit of Christ accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and are united with her as part of her visible bodily structure and through her with Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. The bonds which bind men to the Church in a visible way are profession of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical government and communion. (LG 14)

Having said this, *Lumen Gentium* immediately warns us (who are fully incorporated into the Church) against arrogance, reminding us that we are where we are by a gift of grace, not by our own merits. And further warns:

If they fail moreover to respond to that grace in thought, word and deed, not only shall they not be saved but they will be the more severely judged. (ibid)

Next circle out, very close: *Catechumens who, moved by the Holy Spirit, seek with explicit intention to be incorporated into the Church are by that very intention joined with her. (LG 14)*

In a circle beyond that, echoing what we saw in Chapter 1 last week:

The Church recognizes that in many ways she is linked with those who, being baptized, are honored with the name of Christian, though they do not profess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the successor of Peter. (LG 15)

So that would be the Orthodox, who profess the True Faith and possess seven valid Sacraments, but have not preserved communion with the successor of Peter; and then the Protestants who preserve parts of the faith and some elements of sanctification.

But *Lumen Gentium* does not stop there, saying that even “*those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God.*” (LG 16 – here and in sub-points below)

These are listed in an order from those more closely to those more distantly related, as follows:

- First, the Jewish people, *to whom the testament and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh.*
- Then *the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind.*
- Then, those who *seek the unknown God* (i.e. those who believe in some god or gods, but who do not know the One True God, who revealed Himself to Abraham).

Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.

- Then, *those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life.*

Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel.

C. THE SPIRIT OF VATICAN II

1. Emphasis on What Unites Us

The picture just drawn – concentric circles, illustrating that all people of faith and all people of good will are in some way related to the Church – does represent a new emphasis in the teaching of the Council.

To put it very simply: there is an emphasis on what we have in common with other – not so as to say that the differences don't matter (– that would be a false understanding of the “Spirit of Vatican II”), but to say that what we have in common is a promise that there is already a start toward the perfect unity Christ intends.

1. “Power to the People”?

Just one more word on a possible misunderstanding of this Chapter 2, entitled, “The People of God.”

When those of us who lived through the 1960's hear that Vatican II promotes “People of God” as a new name for the Church, we might flash back to a phrase of the 60's: “Power to the people!”

That was a phrase that represented the rejection of authority. The thinking would be that *Lumen Gentium* rejects a vision of the Church as hierarchically ordered, in favor of a vision of the Church as an egalitarian mass movement, or something like that.

This would be a gross misunderstanding of *Lumen Gentium*, which includes no spirit of “Us” (the People of God) vs. “Them” (the hierarchy).

In fact, just as *Lumen Gentium* says that the diversity of different cultures gives the life of the Church a greater richness, so it also says that the diversity of roles and offices in the Church is part of her strength.

Not only, then, is the people of God made up of different peoples but in its inner structure also it is composed of various ranks. This diversity among its members arises either by reason of their duties, as is the case with those who exercise the sacred ministry for the good of their brethren, or by reason of their condition and state of life, as is the case with those many who enter the religious state and, tending toward holiness by a narrower path, stimulate their brethren by their example. (LG 13)

All of Chapter 3 of *Lumen Gentium* (which we will not look at in detail) concerns the office of bishops.

It is often observed that Vatican II gave a great deal of attention to the office of bishops in order to supplement the teaching of the First Vatican Council [1870-71], which gave almost exclusive emphasis to the office of the pope.

So there is no opposition between the Church as hierarchical and the Church as the People of God, but *Lumen Gentium* does certainly teach us that the faithful are not just clients whose job it is to receive the grace of the Sacraments dispensed by the clergy.

Lumen Gentium offers a very beautiful vision of the mission that all the People of God have to be real witnesses to Christ, and a sign of hope for the world.