

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

*AT THE CATHEDRAL PARISH OF SAINT RAPHAEL
in Madison, Wisconsin*

This Year of Faith occurs on the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. The Year of Faith commemorates that Council, and comes with an invitation to revisit the documents produced by Vatican II so we may better understand the authentic teaching of that Council and put it into practice.

DOGMATIC CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH (*LUMEN GENTIUM*)

This is a Dogmatic Constitution about the Church. – This document sets forth dogma or doctrine, describing the essential nature of the Church. Another document of the Council is the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. – This will deal with the particular mission of the Church in our time.

Like all Roman documents, the title is the first words in the Latin text:
Lumen Gentium = “the Light of the Nations”

The full first sentence of this Dogmatic Constitution is:
“Christ is the Light of nations.”

This is a document about the Church, but the first word is about Christ. This already reflects the first fundamental point about the Church:

The Church is important because it is the place where the presence of Jesus Christ can be seen.

This Light of the Nations, who is Christ, is “brightly visible on the countenance of the Church.” (LG 1)

This is a very interesting sentence. It does not convey that when one looks at the Church, that person can see Jesus Christ; but rather, that when one looks at the Church, that person can see the “light” (presence, effect) of Christ illuminating the Church.

It has been observed that the central theme of the Second Vatican Council is the Church . . .

Two of the four Constitutions produced by the Council are about the Church:

Lumen Gentium – the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church

Gaudium et Spes – the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World

Many other documents of the Council treat in great detail topics that are included in these two Constitutions.

e.g. *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 3 treats the hierarchical organization of the Church; among the 16 documents of Vatican II, there are separate documents on bishops (*Christus Dominus*), on priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) and on seminarians (*Optatam Totius*).

. . . but we are not interested in the Church for her own sake. The Church is important because she gives us access to Jesus Christ.

So why aren't the majority of the Vatican II documents about Christ directly?

It makes perfect sense that the documents speak about the Church:

the life of the Church is visible and knowable to us in great detail;

the life of the Church can always be purified to manifest Christ more adequately, and we have a responsibility for that.

LUMEN GENTIUM I – NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH

A. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

1. The Church as Mystery *[This section was not included in the preached version of the homily.]*

The title of the first chapter of *Lumen Gentium* is “The Mystery of the Church.”

To use the word “mystery” is not an evasion. To say that something is a mystery is not to say that we can't know anything about it or that we can't ask questions about it.

To say that something “is a mystery” means that “there is more going on here than meets the eye.” While we can know a lot about this thing that is a mystery, we cannot understand it exhaustively. And there may be some questions about it that we cannot answer very well right now.

Pope John Paul II had a great interest in a philosophical method called phenomenology. A very interesting thing about this method is that it offers a very fruitful perspective on mystery.

To put it in the shortest way possible, phenomenology would say, “From one perspective, I can say something true about this complex and subtle reality I see (this “mystery”), but what I say won’t be complete, exhaustive, final. There will be things about the mystery that I have left unsaid.

If I look at the mystery from a different angle, I will be able to say something further that is true. It won’t be complete, exhaustive and final, any more that my first view was. But by putting the two together, I will be able to grasp a little more of that complex and subtle mystery that is in front of me.

Now the combination of the two perspectives still will not exhaust the mystery . . . nor will 10 or 20. But by appreciating how the thing reveals itself from various perspectives, I will understand it better.

Recognizing the Church as a mystery, *Lumen Gentium* does not try to offer a succinct, precise definition of the Church.

Instead, *Lumen Gentium* returns to the Biblical tradition to speak about the Church through images.

In various parables of the Lord and elsewhere in Sacred Scripture, we see many images used to describe the Church; each of which can give us a richer appreciation of the reality of the Mystery that is the Church.

These images are very familiar to us from Scripture:

a sheepfold, a piece of cultivated land, a building, a city, the spouse of the Lamb, our Mother.

Each of these helps to illuminate some aspect of the Church’s identity, but none can say everything that should be said.

(All these are mentioned in LG 6.)

In *Lumen Gentium*, special prominence is given to the image of the Church as the Body of Christ.

(This image takes up the whole of LG 7.)

The Church as the Mystical Body of Christ was a theme given new emphasis by Pope Pius XII (Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, June 29, 1943).

2. Divine Origin of the Church

As a mystery, the Church did not originate from human design, but in the work of God.

The classic Catholic account of the Church's origin would be to say: the Church was founded by Jesus Christ.

Lumen Gentium is entirely in accord with that answer, but expands it to describe the Church as being the work of the whole Trinity.

(i) The Father planned it.

From the creation and fall of the human race, the Father intended our redemption and salvation through Jesus Christ. And likewise the Father "planned to assemble in the holy Church all those who would believe in Christ. Already from the beginning of the world the foreshadowing of the Church took place. It was prepared in a remarkable way throughout the history of the people of Israel and by means of the Old Covenant." (LG 2)

This is an insight that is highlighted by the lectionary we use for Mass. We read passages from the Old Testament in which events of the New Testament are foreshadowed.

So:

- In the 12 Tribes of Israel, we are given an indication of the plan of God to found the Church, the New Israel, on the Twelve Apostles.
- When God leads the Children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea, the birth of the Church – freed from the slavery of sin through the waters of Baptism – is foreshadowed.
- And so on. There are many, many parallels.

(ii) The Son established it.

To carry out the will of the Father, Christ inaugurated the Kingdom of heaven on earth and revealed to us the mystery of that kingdom. . . . The Church, or, in other words, the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery, grows visibly through the power of God in the world. (LG 3)

As Catholics, we are strong in our conviction that Christ founded the Church. We hold dear Lord's statement to Simon Peter: *You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church . . .* (Mt 16:18)

(iii) The Holy Spirit gives it life.

. . . [T]he Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that He might continually sanctify the Church . . . The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple. . . . The Church, which the Spirit guides in way of all truth and which He unified in communion and in works of ministry, He both equips and directs with hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns with His fruits. By the power of the Gospel He makes the Church keep the freshness of youth. Uninterruptedly He renews it and leads it to perfect union with its Spouse. . . . (LG 4)

Again, we are very familiar with the critical role the Holy Spirit played at Pentecost – transforming 11 frightened and confused individuals (the Apostles) into the Body that would begin the evangelization of the whole world.

3. Union of Divine and Human Elements of the Church

Lumen Gentium insists that this Church that is the work of God is not something different from the visible Church that we can see in the world:

But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element. (LG 8)

Lumen Gentium compares this union (of the ideal Church and the visible Church) as analogous to Christ having a divine and a human nature that were truly united in a single Person.

For this reason, by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature inseparably united to Him, serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the visible social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it, in the building up of the body. (ibid)

Living as we do in a historically Protestant country, we are very familiar with the attitude that dismisses any visible church as a human enterprise that cannot match the purity of the faith in the heart of a true believer.

This attitude is not unknown in Catholic circles either. Alfred Loisy, whose name came up in the sermons on *Dei Verbum*, wrote in 1902: “Jesus announced the Kingdom, and what we got was the Church.” (from *L'évangile et l'église: "Jésus annonçait le royaume, et c'est l'Église qui est venue"*)

And, all the more, this would be the attitude of agnostics, for whom all religion is a human construct that attempts to speak about unseen things that we cannot really know.

Against this attitude, *Lumen Gentium* insists that there is a unity between the Church in her divine origin (as we understand her in principle), and the visible community (which we meet in the world).

B. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

1. *Communio*

The word that is central in the description *Lumen Gentium* gives of the mission of the Church is “*communio*” – “communion,” by which is meant a personal, rich, living union in love.

The importance of *communio* in the life of the Church has been anticipated in the prior point – where the Church was described as rooted in the action of the Holy Trinity.

God Himself, the Holy Trinity, is the first, most perfect and most fundamental instance of *communio*.

- From all eternity, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit have lived in a perfect union of love.
- When God, from His goodness, created the human race, He did so in order that other beings (created in His image) might enjoy the fundamental good of being (existence) and the joy of living in communion – with Himself and with each other.
- Jesus Christ came as our Redeemer and Savior to restore us to the communion with God and others that had been destroyed by sin.

Christ founded the Church to be the “place” on earth that we might be able to experience *communio* with God and with all who belong to Him:

[T]he Church is . . . a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race . . . (LG 1)

Thus, the Church has been seen as "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." (LG 4, quoting St. Cyprian and others)

In describing the mission of the Church in this way, *Lumen Gentium* offers a very, very strong answer to the question:

“What is the Church for?”

or, “Why do we need the Church?”

The precise problem of human existence is the experience of estrangement from God and from others.

- This is the problem that is felt so keenly in our contemporary world. Even atheists make this observation – that the contemporary person experiences a deep alienation.
- The “garden variety” way that people experience this estrangement is as “loneliness.”
- When anyone sees a person who is obviously and bitterly alienated (– and they are not few in number!), no matter what moral convictions the observer might have or not have – that observer knows spontaneously, “That is not what human life should be.”

This is, in effect, the invitation that *Lumen Gentium* makes to the contemporary person:

“Look, you experience loneliness and alienation. The Church is the place where that will be overcome. In the communion of the Church, you will experience the loving union with God and others for which you were created.”

2. The Church as “like a Sacrament” [*This section was not included in the preached version of the homily.*]

The fuller version of the text of *LG 1* quoted just above is:

Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission.

One very concise definition of a sacrament is “*signum efficax*” – an outward sign that makes happen (“effects”) what it signifies.

Lumen Gentium is not “inventing” an eighth Sacrament, but is saying that the Church is “like a Sacrament” in being both a sign and instrument of unity.

The fact that the Church gathers people from every race, culture and language each Sunday, having them worship the Father “through, with and in” the Son, “in the unity of the Holy Spirit” is a remarkable sign that there is already in the world a place where “those who had been estranged” have been brought into unity with one another and with God. (Sign of unity)

And, through the preaching of the Faith and the celebration of the Sacraments, the union of all these persons with God and with one another is progressively strengthened and purified. (Instrument of unity)

This description of the Church as a (quasi-)sacrament is a beautiful development in our understanding of the Church.

C. THE SPIRIT OF VATICAN II

1. Continuity

In its very first paragraph, *Lumen Gentium* directly asserts that it wants to “follow faithfully the teaching of previous councils.”

[This Sacred Synod] desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission. This it intends to do following faithfully the teaching of previous councils. (*LG, 1*)

The points made in *Lumen Gentium* that echo traditional Catholic teaching about the Church are too numerous to mention.

As mentioned briefly just above, the special attention to the image of the Church as the Body of Christ reflects continuity with the teaching of Pius XII.

There is every indication of a “hermeneutic of continuity.”
But *Lumen Gentium* does approach the subject of the Church in a fresh way.

2. Newness of Presentation

a. Rationale

A traditional treatment of the Church would usually begin with the Creed: “I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.”

In that approach, the existence and significance of the Church is presumed, and the effort is to use the “four marks of the Church” (one, holy, catholic, apostolic) to vindicate the claim of the Catholic Church to be the true Church.

Lumen Gentium says nothing contrary to that, (and, in fact, cites the four marks of the Church); but *Lumen Gentium* backs up (one might say) and takes a wider view; it asks more fundamental questions.

It doesn't take the existence of the Church for granted, and then try to show that the Catholic Church is the True Church by using the “four marks.”

Rather, *Lumen Gentium* describes the Church is the place where we can find the communion for which every human person longs. The Church is the great antidote to the alienation to which the whole human race has been subject since the Fall. In describing the Church in that way, *Lumen Gentium* makes an appeal to the contemporary person.

There is a certain novelty in describing the Church as the work of the whole Trinity – and that is important because the Trinity is the first and perfect *communio*.

And there is likewise a novelty in describing the Church as being like a Sacrament – and that is important because it says, “Look, you can already see this unity realized now; and the life of the Church is the instrument through which this unity becomes more perfect.”

b. Ecumenical attitude

Lumen Gentium reaffirms the identification of the visible Church with the true Church (as shown above). And this visible Church is the one we know as the Catholic Church:

This . . . one Church of Christ which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic . . . , constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him . . . (LG 8)

For many years, commentators on Vatican II have made a great point over the fact that *Lumen Gentium* uses there “subsists” rather than “is.”

The temptation has been to “over-interpret” this word – to mean that the One Church subsists in the Catholic Church, but subsists in other bodies as well.

In 2007, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a document entitled *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church*. One of the responses clarified that “to subsist” means “to exist in a stable, continuing way.”

In number 8 of the Dogmatic Constitution Lumen gentium ‘subsistence’ means this perduring, historical continuity and the permanence of all the elements instituted by Christ in the Catholic Church, in which the Church of Christ is concretely found on this earth. . . . the word “subsists” can only be attributed to the Catholic Church alone precisely because it refers to the mark of unity that we profess in the symbols of the faith (I believe... in the “one” Church); and this “one” Church subsists in the Catholic Church. (2nd Question)

The 2007 clarification does affirm that the authentic meaning of *Lumen Gentium* is that the One Church of Christ is not co-extensive with visible membership in the Catholic Church:

It is possible, according to Catholic doctrine, to affirm correctly that the Church of Christ is present and operative in the churches and ecclesial Communities not yet fully in communion with the Catholic Church. (ibid)

There is a very sound, and necessary, reason for saying this. A person becomes a member of the Church by virtue of the Sacrament of Baptism.

. . . Through Baptism we are formed in the likeness of Christ: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" . . . (LG 7)

Any person who is validly baptized has been united to Jesus Christ and made a temple of the Holy Spirit, and has been brought into the Church . . . even if the (valid) Baptism took place outside the full communion of the Catholic Church.

Someone who has been validly baptized in a Lutheran Church has been made a member of the One Church, even though his or her communion with that One Church is impaired.

In the same vein, *Lumen Gentium* says

... many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of [the] visible structure [of the Catholic Church]. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity. (LG 8)

Again, this is manifestly true. Elements of sanctification exist outside the Catholic Church.

- A Protestant denomination that practices Baptism, (1) with water, (2) in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, (3) administered by someone intending to confer a Sacrament, possesses true Baptism, which is a tremendous element (means) of sanctification.
- A body in which members are taught to pray the Lord's Prayer with devotion possess an element of sanctification.
- A body in which people are exhorted to practice deeds of charity possess an element of sanctification.

The value of these things is not destroyed because they are practiced outside the visible communion of the Catholic Church. On the contrary, these good things should impel us toward unity.

Likewise, elements of truth exist outside the Catholic Church.

- A Protestant denomination that says "Jesus is the True Son of God" is making a true (and very important) assertion.
- A body that teaches that Christ died for the remission of sins is giving witness to the truth.

These do not become false statements because they are made outside the visible communion of the Catholic Church.

The Second Vatican Council continues to assert that the fullness of the means of sanctification and the fullness of the truth of the Faith are uniquely available in the communion of the Catholic Church, And that Christ desires all people to be one in possessing the fullness of those gifts;
But Protestant denominations would not be called "false religions."

This does represent a new spirit in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. And it makes perfect historical sense.

Now that 400 years have passed since the Reformation, the vast majority of people living in the Protestant denominations did not decide to leave the communion of the Catholic Church. The rupture had taken place many, many generations before.

And so, with the heat of that moment of the Reformation past, we can see other Christians as “separated brethren” rather than as “schismatics and heretics.”

The attitude of the Council is to look at what we have in common – not with a spirit of indifferentism (“the differences don’t matter”), but as a foundation on which to seek the full communion that is Christ’s will.

This is a theme that will be developed further elsewhere in the documents of Vatican II. It is a good place to end as we now find ourselves in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.