

*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.

**PASTORAL CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH
IN THE MODERN WORLD (*GAUDIUM ET SPES*)**

GAUDIUM ET SPES* III – LIMITATIONS OF *GAUDIUM ET SPES

A. “The World”

Beginning in Sacred Scripture, “the world” is used in two senses:

- (1) a positive sense – the natural order created by God, and the persons in it:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. (Jn 3:16-17)

- (2) a completely negative sense – the forces of evil:

I gave them your word, and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world. (Jn 17:14)

The two senses are not only found together in Sacred Scripture, but (here) in the same book – the Gospel of John!

This duality has played out in subsequent theology, notably in the two greatest theologians of the Latin tradition:

St. Augustine emphasizes the fallen-ness of the world, its radical need for redemption, and the Christian kerygma as standing against the wisdom of the world.

St. Thomas Aquinas emphasizes the beauty and order of creation, the parallels between the natural and supernatural, and the compatibility of faith and reason.

Gaudium et Spes, regularly uses “the world” in the positive sense. The Christian has solicitude for the world (in this sense) and wants to serve the world, without being “of the world.”

It goes without saying that St. Augustine, in his pessimism, was an excellent Catholic; in fact, he was a saint. And equally St. Thomas Aquinas, in his optimism, was an excellent Catholic; and also a saint.

It is possible to be with St. Augustine, or with St. Thomas Aquinas, or anywhere along the spectrum between them, and to be an excellent Catholic.

But it is possible to be more pessimistic than St. Augustine, and be in danger of falling off the edge of the table and being John Calvin, with his entirely dark view of things human.

And it’s possible to be more optimistic than St. Thomas, and then be in danger of falling off the other edge of the table. That might be said of Teilhard de Chardin.

He was a Jesuit, very renowned in the 1960’s. His notion was that the world was travelling toward an “omega point” where everything would be reconciled. He identified that point with Christ, but it could seem that things were inexorably headed in that direction with or without explicit reference to the Lord.

It is excessive optimism that would be the danger in *Gaudium et Spes*.

Though, in the course of the document, the negative meaning of “the world” is briefly acknowledged:

... Christ's Church, trusting in the design of the Creator, acknowledges that human progress can serve man's true happiness, yet she cannot help echoing the Apostle's warning: "Be not conformed to this world." (Rom. 12:2) Here by the world is meant that spirit of vanity and malice which transforms into an instrument of sin those human energies intended for the service of God and man. (GS 37)

Evaluations of *Gaudium et Spes* fall on one side or another of this very old theological divide:

- the Augustinian suspicion of the world,
with its emphasis on the unique kerygma of the Faith
and on the constant need for conversion;
- the Thomistic appreciation of the continuity between grace and nature
with its emphasis on the harmony of reason and faith
and in its recognition of our natural appetite for the good.

Theologians in the Thomistic tradition appreciate *Gaudium et Spes*:

Yves Congar, OP, called *GS* “the promised land of the Council.”

Theologians of a more Augustinian bent were cautious from the first:

Henri de Lubac, SJ, saw the post-Vatican II period as a time in which the theological balance between nature and grace had been disrupted in favor of a naïve confidence in nature and the world - against the need of grace and faith and against the idea of transcendence:

Today we are witnesses of an endeavour that wants to dissolve the Church into the world [...] the tide of immanentism is growing irresistibly.

“Immanentism” would be familiar to us as “New Age” thinking. There is some interest in the divine as “a force” within visible things, but no believe in a transcendent, personal, independently existing Divine Being.

Joseph Ratzinger said that the statements in *Gaudium et Spes* “breathe an astonishing optimism,” resulting in nothing more than “a revision of the *Syllabus* of Pius IX [1864], a kind of counter-syllabus.”

Something of the Kennedy era pervaded the Council, something of the naïve optimism of the concept of the great society. It was precisely the break in historical consciousness, the self-tormenting rejection of the past, that produced the concept of a zero hour in which everything would begin again and all those things that had formerly been done badly would now be done well.

The “Syllabus of Errors” offered a relentlessly negative critique of modernity. Ratzinger suggests that rather than a prudent

modification of that view, *Gaudium et Spes* was as uncritically positive as Pius IX had been unrelentingly negative.

The naively optimistic elements of *Gaudium et Spes* (especially in its second part) seem to bear out this criticism.

B. Naïve Optimism in the chapters of Part II

This second part of the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* treats “Some Problems of Special Urgency.” There are five chapters in this second part – the issues start on the smallest scale and get progressively larger in scope.

The first chapter is about the smallest, most local social setting: that of marriage and family.

1. Marriage and Family

This first chapter is quite good. The Church has been thinking about marriage and the family for a long time – since the wedding at Cana. The Council had a great wisdom on these topic from which to draw.

Gaudium et Spes talks about:

- a. God being the author of marriage.
- b. The indissolubility of marriage once entered being for the good of the parties, their children and society.
- c. Marriage being ordered toward procreation
- d. The love of spouses being a rich communion, and certainly much more than erotic attraction.

2. Culture

Culture is here defined as “*the cultivation of the goods and values of nature.*” (GS 53)

As mentioned in an earlier homily, *Gaudium et Spes* recognizes that we do see progress in our culture during this modern age, but that the developments are somewhat ambiguous.

Gaudium et Spes recognizes that earthly things have a certain autonomy – not every question is theological, not every question can be answered by a verse of Sacred Scripture; but, it pleads for an authentic humanism, which recognizes the spiritual dimension of the human person.

Finally how is the autonomy which culture claims for itself to be recognized as legitimate without generating a notion of humanism which is merely terrestrial, and even contrary to religion itself. (GS 56)

In this chapter, *Gaudium et Spes* expresses the hope that the social sciences will be of help to the Church. The extreme – probably naïve – optimism of the attitude is reflected in texts like this:

In pastoral care, sufficient use must be made not only of theological principles, but also of the findings of the secular sciences, especially of psychology and sociology, so that the faithful may be brought to a more adequate and mature life of faith. (GS 62)

Many took this as an invitation to subordinate the truth of the Gospel to “social sciences” that were deeply flawed in themselves.

A notorious case was the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters of Los Angeles. They put themselves in the hands of psychologist Carl Rogers (associated with the nearby Esalen Institute) who was promoting “encounter groups.” In such encounter groups, under the direction of a facilitator, participants were encouraged to unmask their real feelings as they interacted with the other group participants. The first trial was held in 1966, and was implemented *en masse* in 1967. In short order, the community had been destroyed.

3. Economic and Social Life

Very good motives underlay this chapter.

There are reservations expressed – very rightly so – about a modern temptation to reduce the human person to an economic unit. And the point is made that this mistake is made on both sides of the “Iron Curtain” (in both capitalism and socialism):

Reasons for anxiety, however, are not lacking. Many people, especially in economically advanced areas, seem, as it were, to be ruled by economics, so that almost their entire personal and social life is permeated with a certain economic way of thinking. Such is true both of nations that favor a collective economy and of others. (GS 63)

As mentioned in an earlier homily, *Gaudium et Spes* insists that the global good of the human person must be the guiding principle for economic life. And this is a very important point.

In the economic and social realms, too, the dignity and complete vocation of the human person and the welfare of society as a whole are to be respected and promoted. For man is the source, the center, and the purpose of all economic and social life. (GS 63)

The fundamental finality of this production is not the mere increase of products nor profit or control but rather the service of man, and indeed of the whole man with regard for the full range of his material needs and the demands of his intellectual, moral, spiritual, and religious life; this applies to every man whatsoever and to every group of men, of every race and of every part of the world. Consequently, economic activity is to be carried on according to its own methods and laws within the limits of the moral order," so that God's plan for mankind may be realized. (GS 64)

But there are some parts of this chapter that can sound a little chilling.

For example, while acknowledging the value of private property, the expropriation of large estates is seen as a legitimate option, when this is in the interest of the common good. This is justified under the traditional Catholic doctrine of the “universal destination of goods.”

Private property or some ownership of external goods confers on everyone a sphere wholly necessary for the autonomy of the person and the family, and it should be regarded as an extension of human freedom. Lastly, since it adds incentives for carrying on one's function and charge, it constitutes one of the conditions for civil liberties. (GS 71)

In many underdeveloped regions there are large or even extensive rural estates which are only slightly cultivated or lie completely idle for the sake of profit, while the majority of the people either are without land or have only very small fields, and, on the other hand, it is evidently urgent to increase the productivity of the fields. . . . Indeed, insufficiently cultivated estates should be distributed to those who can make these lands fruitful Whenever, nevertheless, the common good requires expropriation, compensation must be reckoned in equity after all the circumstances have been weighed. (GS 71)

Gaudium et Spes tries to be careful about the manner in which this is said (. . . compensation must be reckoned in equity after all the circumstances have been weighed), but ask a Cuban-American whose family came here in 1960 how he or she feels about that paragraph, and I suspect the reaction will be pretty negative.

It sounds a little chilling to us too Would we trust the government to do that with complete equity?

4. Political Community

Again, the intention of this section is very commendable.

And it does include the endorsement of some principles that are rightly revered in our American system: “limited government” and the importance of intermediate (social, non-governmental) institutions, the “rule of law,” the “separation of powers,” and the “right of redress of grievances” (to use American terms).

But what *Gaudium et Spes* expects of politicians is highly idealistic:

Those who are suited or can become suited should prepare themselves for the difficult, but at the same time, the very noble art of politics, and should seek to practice this art without regard for their own interests or for material advantages. With integrity and wisdom, they must take action against any form of injustice and tyranny, against arbitrary domination by an individual or a political party and any intolerance. They should dedicate themselves to the service of all with sincerity and fairness, indeed, with the charity and fortitude demanded by political life. (GS 75)

This is a beautiful ideal, but seems very far from reality. Maybe to encourage this attitude in believers would be more realistic.

5. Peace and the Community of Nations

This most universal section is where the position of *Gaudium et Spes* is most problematic.

Of course, the Church is always in favor of peace. That is what we expect the Church to say; and that is what we want the Church to say.

And *Gaudium et Spes* wants to be solidly in the Catholic theological tradition, which is “realistic” in regard to war, not insisting on absolute pacifism. The Church has long recognized that just as the individual has a right to self-defense, so a nation has the right to resist unjust aggression. *Gaudium et Spes* endorses the traditional “Just War Theory.”

But here is how the document describes the “ultimate solution to war.”

It is our clear duty, therefore, to strain every muscle in working for the time when all war can be completely outlawed by international consent. This goal undoubtedly requires the establishment of some universal public authority acknowledged as such by all and endowed with the power to safeguard on the behalf of all, security, regard for justice, and respect for rights. (GS 81)

The first problem with this passage is that there is nothing in the Gospels that should lead us to think that we can be successful in eliminating all war before the Last Day, when the Lord comes again in glory.

St. Augustine (and St. Thomas too) would have seen war as a tragic but inescapable consequence of the greed and self-seeking that is part of our fallen condition.

The second, and perhaps greater, problem is the means that *Gaudium et Spes* advocates. Many would find a universal authority powerful enough to prevent war a horrifying solution. Any universal power strong enough to do that would also be strong enough to impose anything

else it chose. In attempting to secure universal peace, the door is opened to universal tyranny.

Hearing this call for a universal authority, one might also wonder what happened to the principle of subsidiarity – so important in Catholic social teaching since Leo XIII and so notably absent from *Gaudium et Spes*.

I am very sure that there was nothing sinister in the call for a “universal authority.” At that euphoric moment in 1965, the Council Fathers just couldn’t imagine such power being used for a malicious purpose.

Another aspect of the optimism of *Gaudium et Spes*: the document expresses a great enthusiasm for “an effective organization of nations” – in effect, the United Nations. Such optimism was not unusual in the 1960’s. We were all “trick-or-treating” for UNICEF, and enjoying movies like *Gidget Goes to the UN*.

Optimism about the UN was common in the 1960’s. But in following the news, I sometimes have the impression that the Vatican has retained more confidence in the UN than anyone else in the world – as we have seen many governments in the developing world run by “dictators for life,” and using their votes in the UN with a shameless cynicism

The most notorious example of this was the UN Commission on Human Rights. It was criticized over the years because some of the member nations were notorious abusers of human rights. The “final straw” came in 2004 when Sudan was elected to chair the Commission at the time it was engaged in ethnic cleansing in its Darfur region. The UNHCR was disbanded in 2006.

Likewise, the attitude of foreign aid:

The development of a nation depends on human and financial aids. . . . Developing nations will not be able to procure material assistance unless radical changes are made in the established procedures of modern world commerce. Other aid should be provided as well by advanced nations in the form of gifts, loans or financial investments. Such help should be accorded with generosity and without greed on the one side, and received with complete honesty on the other side. If an authentic economic order is to be established on a world-wide basis, an end will have to be put to

profiteering, to national ambitions, to the appetite for political supremacy, to militaristic calculations, and to machinations for the sake of spreading and imposing ideologies. (GS 85)

Once more, highly utopian. Developed nations are expected to be able to free themselves of their national interests. There is no hint of an awareness that corrupt politicians might steal aid given to their countries, enriching only their own families while leaving their people with massive foreign debt – which is, of course, precisely what has actually happened.

C. A Critique of *Gaudium et Spes*

So . . . what does this have to do with that double meaning of “the world” . . . the debate between the pessimism of St. Augustine and the optimism of St. Thomas Aquinas?

Gaudium et Spes comes down very hard on the side of optimism about “the world.”

Certainly, in *Gaudium et Spes* we find the conviction Christian moral convictions have a precision that is given by the Gospels, and that we enjoy the help of divine grace to live those ideals.

But the general attitude of the document is that the vast majority of people have great good will. Most people are oriented toward doing what is best for all. Everyone really wants to do what’s right . . . sometimes, they just need a little clarification, which can be supplied by the teaching of the Church.

In *Gaudium et Spes*, the effects of Original Sin are mentioned in several places. But it does not seem to be regarded as a very serious problem.

I must confess . . . from my own temperament and education, I fall on the Thomist/optimist side of the spectrum myself. But it seems to me that our contemporary experience – our experience since 1965 – shows us that *Gaudium et Spes* just goes too far.

This is a criticism that Pope Benedict himself has made.

In all honesty, Pope Francis would probably make the criticism a little less pointedly. But I think that even Pope Francis would say that *Gaudium et Spes* was a little naïve. I don't think that Pope Francis is naïve.

This does not mean that *Gaudium et Spes* has no value. It contains many excellent principles and beautiful ideals. Perhaps we should just say that it leaves a lot of work to be done in discerning how to move from the reality of the present moment toward those ideals.