

LUMEN GENTIUM AND THE CHURCH

Introduction

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, is one of the main documents of the Second Vatican Council. During the first and second session of the historic meeting, the council's deliberations focused upon the nature and mission of the Church.

Today, the ideas explored in *Lumen Gentium* continue to inspire theological reflection and renewal. Now, almost fifty years later, the contemporary concern with family life, the developing idea of the domestic church, the re-establishment of the permanent diaconate, the growth of lay ecclesial ministry, the desire for greater collaboration across all ministries in the Church, and the new evangelization are some of the fruits of the document. Because these have become so much a part of our experience, it is easy to forget how foundational *Lumen Gentium* is for our understanding of who we are as the "People of God."

Historical Development

How the Church viewed itself before the council was conditioned by two major influences. First was the Reformation, and second was Modernity's focus on the political nature of social institutions. The Church's response to the Protestant reform was to define itself in opposition to these new ecclesial realities. Joseph Ratzinger, in *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, points out that being "in opposition to the reformers' idea of an invisible Church, placed great stress on its [the Church's] institutional character" (p.73). This focus on the visible church led to an institutional definition of the Church's structure. *Lumen Gentium* stresses the positive attributes of community and clearly articulates salvation and holiness as the aim of the Church's mission.

Major Themes

There are three important themes in the document that help to demonstrate the movement towards a renewed understanding of Church. First, the Church is seen as the sacrament of Christ; second, it is the people of God who continue the ministry of Christ; and finally, all are called to holiness.

The use of the term "sacrament" to describe the Church in the opening paragraph of *Lumen Gentium* changes the focus from the visible attributes to the way the whole ecclesial structure participates in and communicates God's grace. Just as the seven sacraments confer the grace they signify and are efficacious because in them Christ himself is at work, so the Church instituted by Christ reveals the Father's will and moves the kingdom of heaven on earth toward redemption (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1127 and *Lumen Gentium* #3.). Operating in this way the Church itself becomes a sign, a light to the world, pointing beyond itself to God's presence with us.

In chapter two, the council stressed how the people of God continue the ministry of Christ. It is the communion of believers who are called to witness to Christ and the Gospel. Flowing from the sacraments, especially those of initiation, the Church experiences itself as a community of disciples. Every baptized member participates in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly roles of ministry.

However, the most important element treated in the document is the universal call to holiness. The council, by identifying sanctity as the singular goal of everyone, gave the definitive Christian answer to the question of the meaning of human life. By defining holiness as the end to human existence, *Lumen Gentium*, articulates in a powerful way the mission of the Church.

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For additional information:

Ratzinger, Joseph. *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1966, 2009).

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