

GAUDIUM ET SPES: CHURCH PRESENCE AND ACTION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

As the last and longest document of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), sets forth an ambitious agenda for the late 20th century Church. “The Council yearns to explain to everyone how it conceives of the presence and the activity of the Church in the world of today.” (GS 2) To explain “the presence and the activity of the church” in our complex and rapidly changing modern world is challenging. To do this calls for the removal of barriers of separation built over years among nations, cultures, religions and organizations within the human community. The Church must embrace “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted.” (GS 1) Thus, “the Church seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ.... Christ entered this world to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not to be served.” (3) The document also admits that it has not been effective in communicating Christ’s message of justice.

Images of Church

Very often images capture meaning more effectively than words especially when we deal with multivalent words such as “church” and “world”. In the pre-Vatican II period, the military image of “fortress” was often used to describe the role of the Church in the world. A fortress is a strong, secure, and safe refuge defending against external invasions or attacks. This new “presence and activity” called for new relationships, dialogue with persons of different cultures and religions, and collaboration in serving the world. Thus the “fortress” image was replaced by that of “leaven” which suggests the

power to penetrate and pervade a complex substance to effect transformation. “The Church serves as a *leaven* and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God’s family.” (GS 40) Another image found in the document is that of “the servant Jesus” who chose to be with and to serve the poor.

Structure of the Document

The dual purpose of the document (Church presence and activity in the world) dictated the structure just as reading “the signs of the times” through the Gospel drove its method. The document is constructed in two related parts. The first, “The Church and Man’s Calling,” speaks of the vast range of pastoral situations in our complex, contemporary world with stress on situations and ideologies which militate against truth-seeking, justice and peace.” The second part, “Some Problems of Special Urgency,” demonstrates how social, economic and political issues are viewed through Church teaching, through the prism of the dignity of the human person and the common good. The document is also prophetic in raising the issues of environment and the need for a system of world governance.

Tone and Conclusion

The tone of the document is optimistic with a final message of encouragement. “For the bonds which unite the faithful are mightier than anything dividing them. Therefore if we have been summoned to the same destiny, human and divine, we can and we should work together without violence and deceit in order to build up the world in genuine peace.” (GS92)

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For additional reading:

Thomas Massaro, S. J., *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008.

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