

## Light of the nations

**Who is the Church? Why does the Church exist? Of what benefit is the Church to believers and to the world at large?**

**Foundational questions like these were taken up in a major document of the Second Vatican Council. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (titled *Lumen Gentium*, 'Light of the Nations') was written to describe more clearly the Church's nature and mission 'for the benefit of the faithful and of the entire world' (LG,1).**

**Drawing on rich biblical imagery and the best scholarship of its day, *Lumen Gentium* presented the Church not as a static structure but as the 'People of God,' a community of faith on a journey through history under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.**

**Written in the 1960s, it was a document that reflected a spirit of radical renewal sweeping through the Church. The vision held out continues to inspire and remains a touchstone of church renewal in our own day.**

**This edition of Landmarks presents a simple overview of this groundbreaking document.**

### Images of church

*A man showed up at a parish enquiring as to how he could become a Christian. A parishioner welcomed him and began to ask him about himself. "Last year I was in jail," said the young man. "Some of the guys were involved in a program run by Christians who spoke about their faith and explained things about Christianity. I didn't do the program, but I saw such a positive change in those guys that I said to myself: 'When I get out of this place, I'm going to become a Christian.'" (TN)*

### Chapter 1: The mystery of the Church

The Church, says *Lumen Gentium* in its opening chapter, is a **sacrament**. Christ came to unite people in a salvific relationship with God. The Church is a sign and instrument of this union. Christ is the 'light of the nations' and so does the Church bear this light to others.

The Church is both a visible society and a spiritual relationship. It has a definite organizational structure, but it is more than a structure. The Church is a community of love and faith, and such realities cannot be contained by earthly demarcations nor the constraints of time and space. Wherever humanity is drawn into loving embrace of Christ, there exists the kingdom of God to which the Church points.

The Church, as a society that takes its place in the world amidst other human societies, is uniquely expressed in the Catholic Church whose continuous heritage can be traced back to the witness of the first apostles. Even so, many elements of the Church exist outside its visible boundaries. Wherever people love and serve in truth, the same Spirit which animates the Church is present.

### The Church exists as:

- Part of God's mysterious plan to show human persons how deeply they are loved.
- A people who share in the death and resurrection of Jesus, remembered in each eucharistic celebration.
- One body in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- A communion of believers: one, holy, catholic and apostolic.
- Sign and sacrament of the Good News.
- Witness to the revelation of the Father and the promise of the eternal kingdom to come.

# The **people** of God

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## Chapter 2: The people of God

God wants to save humanity, not as isolated individuals but as **a people**, a community. Out of all the ancient religions the tiny nation of Israel emerged with this understanding of itself as a people called by God into a unique relationship of fidelity, a **covenant**.

For the early Christians, the laws and teachings of ancient Israel were seen to find ultimate expression in the person of Jesus Christ. Those who believed Jesus to be the Savior, the 'New Covenant' foretold by the Jewish scriptures, came to understand themselves as the 'New Israel', the beginnings of what we today call the Christian Church.

This 'new' people of God, the Church, witnesses to the love of God as revealed through the person of Jesus Christ to whom Christians are united through the power of the Holy Spirit.

There is a life of freedom, a liberation that comes through following the way of truth and love. Their radical communal lifestyle unfolds as a journey towards a clear destiny: on the 'last day' Christ will be revealed in glory and all things will be completed and renewed. The people of God look forward to this great day and witness to this promise through their way of life. Together they are a visible sign or

**sacrament** of the unity, freedom and joy to which the whole of humanity is called.

## Chapter 3: The Church is hierarchical

In the footsteps of the apostles the Church has a hierarchical leadership comprised of bishops, priests, deacons. The hierarchy is a focal point for unity and order in the areas of teaching, worship and the overall leadership of the community. The mission of the hierarchy is to exercise a particular charism of the Spirit: that of bringing loving harmony to the interplay of diverse gifts in the community and ensuring the Church's fidelity to its vocation. It is a call to be shepherds of the Lord's flock, to be representatives and servants of Christ.

The role of the bishops is to be exercised in collegiate unity, that is, in communion with the whole body of bishops including its head, the Pope, who is Bishop of Rome and successor of Peter.

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation..."

(2 Peter 2:9-10)

## Priest, Prophet, King (LG,11-13)

***Lumen Gentium* emphasizes the common vocation and dignity of all members of the Church. In Christianity Christ is spoken of as high priest, prophet and king. Similarly, the Church community is described as:**

***Priestly:* Through a life of prayer and sacramental celebration the Church worships God and is transformed into the body of Christ.**

***Prophetic:* By proclaiming the Word of God through speech and action, the Church points to God's plan for the renewal of the world.**

***Kingly:* The Church announces the kingdom of God and gathers all peoples into one community of love.**

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## The Church is a communion

Since the Second Vatican Council much has been made of 'koinonia' as the central concept of *Lumen Gentium* and the key to its interpretation. 'Koinonia' is a Greek word used to refer to the Church as communion, as a love relationship. It refers to a profound sharing of mind, heart and lifestyle; a union which finds powerful expression in the eucharistic celebration.

The scriptural image of the 'body of Christ' resonates with this theme of communion. By communicating his Spirit, Christ draws isolated human persons into one united body—his own. Christ is the head of the body and the faithful are its members, each building up the body through a unique role, gift and function. The Spirit animates the body, giving it its 'soul!'

# Sign and **sacrament**

## Chapter 4: The laity

The Church transforms the world by bearing Christ-like witness to every person and in every place and situation. Such a task can only be accomplished through the daily activities of Christians which take them into the nooks and crannies of human society.

The mission to transform one's surrounds is, of course, essential to the vocation of every baptized Christian, including bishops, priests and deacons. *Lumen Gentium* devotes a particular section, however, to the task of the 'laity' (non-ordained faithful) in the evangelization of cultures.

The normative focus of the Christian mission is not the parish office or the diocesan office block but rather the homes, workplaces and neighborhoods of the faithful. Whether it be teaching a child to share toys or negotiating an international peace treaty, the renewal of the world in Christ depends predominantly on the active faith of non-ordained Christians. By living their gospel values and using their Spirit-filled gifts at the coal-face of human society, the world is transformed.

## Chapter 5: Called to Holiness (LG, 41)

**The fundamental calling of every member of the Church is the call to holiness. Signs of holiness include:**

- **A willingness to be led by the Spirit**
- **A responsiveness to God's voice**
- **Adoration of God in spirit and truth**
- **Readiness to embrace the cross of Jesus**
- **Trust in the promise of eternal life**
- **Directing one's gifts towards a life of faith**
- **Perseverance in hope**
- **Acts of love**

"Live as is fitting among the saints."

(Ephesians 5:3)

## Images of church

*When Kevin had a falling out with his company over what he believed to be poor ethics on the part of the company, he chose to leave and set up his own. He believed that he could make his business work, and do so with all the integrity that his Christian values demanded.*

*Within a year his success was attracting the attention of the media and the entire industry. Says Kevin, "In leaving my previous job the agreement was such that I wasn't permitted to take clients with me; nor could I seek their business for one year. **We honored that agreement every step of the way.***

*"Incredibly, there were people who refused to believe that anyone could be that honest! A guy came up to me at a conference and said, 'Do you mean to say that if one of your previous clients approached you and he was worth a million dollars you would just say No?!' I said simply and truthfully, 'That's right.' He spat in my face, 'You're a liar!' and walked off. He couldn't cope with the truth!"*

## The Holy Spirit draws all peoples (LG, 15-16)

**While the Church calls its members to boldly witness to their beliefs, it recognizes that the Holy Spirit also works through people of other faiths and seeks a cooperative relationship with them. Specifically mentioned are:**

- **Christians who are joined to the Church through baptism but who do not profess the faith in its entirety or who have not remained in full communion.**
- **The Jews, the people of God who first received God's Word and who are the spiritual ancestors of Christians.**
- **Muslims, and all who worship the Creator.**
- **All who seek 'the unknown God' in sincerity and truth.**

# Pilgrims on a journey

## Chapter 6: Religious

Over the centuries, like a wonderful and wide-spreading tree, various forms of religious life have sprung up in the life of the Church. Through religious life, groups of single and ordained Christians undertake specific vows (the 'evangelical counsels') of chastity, poverty and obedience and commit themselves to supporting one another in faith and mission. The choice for religious life in no way alienates religious from society. Rather, it enables them to highlight gospel values which have essential application to a truly loving and just society.

## Chapter 7: The pilgrim church

The Church lives with a sense of being on a Spirit-led journey toward a future glory in which all creation will be renewed and God will be seen in a perfect way. Until then, the Church lives the 'in-between time': the kingdom of God is *here now* but *not yet*; God's presence in the world is tangibly felt and yet partially obscured by sin; the Church is assured of victory in Christ while being called to renewal and repentance.

By praying for the faithful who have left this world, the Church expresses

its hope in eternal life, is inspired by the faithful witness of its ancestors and shows the strength of its communion across heaven and earth.

The Eucharist is the greatest expression of Christian hope. Every time the Church celebrates the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, it anticipates its future glory in Christ and the joy that is already known to the saints of heaven.

## Chapter 8: Mary and the Church

**The final chapter of *Lumen Gentium* is devoted to Mary, Mother of God. By situating this chapter within a document on the Church, the Council has given a very clear message: Mary is a member of the Church; she does not stand outside the communion of faith.**

**The role of Mary in salvation history speaks to the Church of its nature and destiny. The grace that has come to fruition in Mary points to the promise made to all believers. The Church is in the process of becoming who Mary already is: perfectly redeemed and liberated humanity. Mary's absolute fidelity as a disciple of Christ challenges all Christians to persevere and grow in a life of faithfulness.**

"Seek the city which is to come."  
(Hebrews 13:14)

## Images of church

*We were walking back to the van. Between us we supported an elderly man as he struggled to walk. He was weak, cold, and we were taking him to the Saint Vincent de Paul Hostel. It was all part of being a volunteer with Night Patrol.*

*As we reached the van the man stopped and looked me in the eye. "Why do you do this?" he asked. I was caught by surprise. "To help you," I stuttered.*

*"You do good so that someone else will believe in good," declared the elderly man. Then he began to mutter incoherently.*

*Later, as I walked home in the early hours of the morning, I thought about the elderly man's question. Why did I do this? Why did I spend one night of my week with people who had no food or shelter?*

*I thought of my friends who came with me. I thought of the prayer we had prayed under our special tree before we set out on the night's rounds. 'When you do this for the least...you do it for me.' (Vic)*

Talking point:

"We are the Church" is a recurring theme in *Lumen Gentium*.

Share an experience of 'being church'

i) at home

ii) at work

iii) in your parish

iv) in your neighborhood

