

Joy & Hope

In this issue of Landmarks we explore one of the major documents of Vatican II: the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. *Gaudium et Spes* ('Joy and hope') is its Latin title.

This document addresses not only members of the Church but the whole human family and sets out to explain how the Church sees its presence and role in the world.

Part One of *Gaudium et Spes* outlines basic principles. Part Two applies these principles to some of the urgent problems of its day. These challenges include marriage and family life, culture, economic and social life, politics, the solidarity of peoples, and peace.

Introduction

"The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well."

With these words *Gaudium et Spes* introduces the central theme of its reflections: the Good News proclaimed by Christianity is good news for all people of the world, for it addresses the deepest yearnings of every human heart, the yearning for love, for peace, for joy and freedom, for a sense of purpose and meaning.

The modern world experiences a certain dichotomy as it celebrates great advances and yet struggles under the burden of great evil, leaving people to oscillate between hope and anxiety. There is great wealth, but also great poverty. There is a new sense of freedom but also new forms of slavery. There is a keen sense of global unity and mutual interdependence, but also deep and bitter factions, even the spectre of a war of total destruction.

This is the vast and fast-changing world in which Christians proclaim their hope: that Christ, who died and rose for the sake of all, can show people the true meaning of their existence and lead them into a life of communion with God.

The experience of salvation in Christ and liberation in the Spirit is an experience which God offers to every human being, and it is up to Christians to make this invitation clear by their

words and actions. Far from being a private little conclave for 'religious types', the Church is a bearer of hope for the whole world.

*"In speaking with senior Catholics, mention of this document, *Gaudium et Spes*, often evokes a lively response as they recall what it was like to be a Catholic in the 1960s and to witness the renewal of Church life at so many levels.*

For me, born the year the Second Vatican Council began, what a gift it is to be able to converse with people who lived through and remember this great Council. They bring to life a Spirit-led time of 'rebirth' in Church history. They offer a window to the soul of the church as a people of faith.

They remind me that the documents of the Church are 'living documents'. Behind the texts is a community of people wrestling with the great questions of their age." (TP)

Joy in Humanity

The dignity of the human person

Most people agree that human beings hold a central place in the world. But what is humanity? As people struggle to grasp the highs and lows of their existence, opinions range from a glorification of human beings beyond all else to giving up on humanity in despair.

The Church puts forward a view of humanity that accounts for both its strengths and its weaknesses. Christians believe that human beings are created 'in the image of God', the God whom we are able to know and love. We are created not as isolated beings, but as beings-in-communion. 'Male and female God created them' (Gen 1:27). The partnership between man and woman is the most basic form of community between people and reveals us as social beings, made-for-the-other.

Tragically, humanity has not lived up to the fullness of its vocation to be good and loving. Dazzled by the empty promises of the evil one, people have chosen to live life apart from God and

the ways of love. Thus throughout human history people have been caught up in a dramatic struggle between good and evil. It was from this struggle that Christ came to free us. In the mystery of the Word-made-flesh the mystery of humanity becomes clear. Created in love, we are destined to live in love. To acknowledge our Creator who is Love, is to affirm the essence of being fully human.

The human person is a unity of body and soul. We are destined not to shun our bodily life but to embrace it and to regard the body as good and treat it with honour since God created us.

Our bodily existence is entwined and lifted up by a spiritual life that allows us to know ourselves in the depths of our being and to recognise God as the very life-source of our being. In fact, as human beings we bear within ourselves the seed of eternity. Death is not the end of our existence; we are destined to a life with God that transcends the boundaries of our earthly struggle.

Based on this understanding of the human person, the Church upholds

the dignity of the human intellect and the human search for truth. It upholds the dignity of moral conscience (the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong) and the capacity to attain wisdom and freedom. Through all these dimensions the human person contemplates, savours and participates in the mystery of God's design of the universe.

Memories of Vatican II

The idea of the Church being in dialogue with the world and standing in solidarity with humanity may not seem radical today, however in the 1960s it was a breath of fresh air as Catholics struggled to shed certain insular attitudes that were undermining their capacity to live and share the Good News.

Says one woman: "We had been brought up to be suspicious of non-Catholics. Now we were being taught to respect them and work alongside them!"

A man in his seventies recalls the joy of first hearing that all people—and not just Catholics—were gathered together in Christ and saved by his death and resurrection. "You can't imagine what comfort this brought to so many people who had erroneously believed that a loved one could not possibly be saved because he or she was not a church-going Catholic," he said.

Of course, life in a post-Vatican II Church is not without its problems. A ground-breaking period in church history will always have its share of misinterpretations and distortions, which is all the more reason why we should keep going back to the documents of Vatican II so as to discover afresh the spirit and teaching of this great council.

Marriage and family (GS, 47-52)

If you are concerned about the wellbeing of an individual person, of society or the church, then your concern will at some point come back to the wellbeing of marriage and family life.

The Church is deeply concerned to call people to an awareness of the dignity of marriage, as both a human institution and as a sacrament of the Church.

If we are to strive to bring about a world which is loving and lifegiving, it is essential that we protect and foster the intimate love and lifegivingness which is the core of marriage and family life.

Hope for the **World**

Development of culture (GS, 53-62)

“Culture” refers to all those things which refine and develop humanity’s mental and physical endowments. For example, we assume responsibility for the earth through our knowledge and labour, we humanize social life through our customs and institutions, we communicate our insights through art and writing.

Because the Good News of Jesus Christ is sent to all ages and nations the Church who proclaims this Good News must enter into communion with different forms of culture, enriching both itself and the cultures themselves, while also critiquing those elements of culture which do not resonate with the gospel.

The Church urges people to ensure that culture reflects a genuine quest for truth, love and beauty; and that it is subordinated to the integral development of the human person, the local community and the whole human family.

A response to atheism

Human dignity rests, above all, on humanity’s call to live in communion with God. However there are many people in this world who reject this fundamental claim and adopt an atheistic stance.

Atheism can mean different things to different people, from an ideological assertion to a casual indifference to religion. Because Christians believe that awareness of God is fundamental to the fullness of human dignity, they cannot ignore atheism. To do so would be to ignore the wellbeing of the human family.

Some people think that to acknowledge God is to somehow undermine the dignity of human beings. But the Church holds that to believe in God is to affirm humanity. Likewise the Christian hope in an after-life does not deny the importance of earthly duties but rather gives earthly responsibilities their proper context and meaning.

The Church urges its members to present the Christian perspective intelligently, boldly but lovingly,

seeking to understand the deeper reasons that lead people to reject God and to recognize that, where the Gospel has not been adequately lived and articulated by Christ’s followers, Christians must bear some responsibility for the rise of atheism in the modern world.

The human community

With rapid technological progress there has been an increasing interdependence among peoples of the world. Human beings are social by nature. The good of the person and the good of society are dependent on each other.

The Church rejects an individualistic morality which says ‘I’m all right’ while ignoring the sufferings of one’s neighbor. The concerns of the human family must be the concerns of every group and nation.

The Church upholds the equality of all human beings and their fundamental rights and responsibilities such as the right to life, to food, clothing, housing, education and work, their right to freedom, respect and knowledge. In every age the Spirit of God calls us on

to improve society for the benefit of all. Indeed there is much to improve when one thinks of the abundance of crimes against humanity in the modern world: murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia and wilful suicide, slavery and prostitution, torture, arbitrary imprisonment, sub-human living conditions and degrading working conditions.

Believers or not, all people have a responsibility to establish right order in this world so as to live together in peace.

Just as God created us as beings-in-communion, so did God save us in a communitarian manner. The Spirit-filled life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is characterized from beginning to end by a concern for relationships. Our eternal salvation is vitally linked with human solidarity on earth.

Economic and social life (GS, 63-72)

In the world there exists great social and economic imbalances. Millions of people are deprived of the bare necessities of life while others live in riches and even squander their wealth. Such grave injustices urgently require Christians and all people of goodwill to pool their knowledge, gifts and resources to remedy this tragic situation.

No matter how property and economy is structured in different countries, we must never lose sight of the fact that God destined the earth and its resources for all. To share the earth’s goods with justice and genuine concern for others is not just a ‘Christian’ imperative but an expression of an authentically human lifestyle.

A **sign** of salvation

Looking back...and forward

The teaching of Gaudium et Spes stands as a great compass or landmark in history by which the Church can chart its future direction. Take time to read and ponder this important document of the Church.

Human activity

The world is filled with human activity. Through their work and achievements, people grow as human beings and transcend themselves. Christians view human activity in the world as a sign of God's greatness and the fulfilment of God's design. There is no conflict between sound scientific research and faith in God, between autonomy of thought and respect for God's laws. The Church deplores any suggestion that science is opposed to faith.

The autonomy of earthly affairs does not mean that people can simply 'do as they like' as if they had no relation to the Creator. As history has shown, great steps in human progress bring grave temptations to misuse human activity for evil ends. In the midst of such evil, Christ died and rose to reveal to us the depths of God's love, and the transformation of the world must be guided by his commandment of love.

The Church in the world

The Church has one sole purpose: that the kingdom of God may come and salvation of the human race be brought to completion. As it applies itself to this

mission, the Church recognizes that it has essential gifts to offer the world as well as gifts to receive from it.

Through the power of God's Spirit the Church is a sign of salvation in the world. As the bearer of the gospel it discloses to people the mystery of God and the meaning of their own existence. It calls them to consider central questions about their origin and destiny and helps them to 'name' the true goal of their searchings.

At the same time, the Church profits from the experience and questions of each culture and age in which it lives. It draws on the philosophies, language and concepts of the social milieu to express and clarify the gospel message. This kind of adaptation is key to the spread of the gospel.

While the Church is not allied with any specific political, economic or social system, it is committed to building up the human family in truth, goodness and justice. The Church urges its members to faithfully participate in their civic duties, always seeking a unity between their spiritual values and their day to day conduct.

With the human family, and for the sake of the human family, the Church presses forward on a Spirit-led pilgrimage towards the consummation of history and the unity of all things in Christ.

Politics, solidarity and peace (GS, 73-90)

The political community exists for the common good, enabling individuals, families and organizations to achieve a truly human life, a life marked by peace.

Peace is more than the absence of the war. It involves mutual trust between individuals and nations, a love which has its origin in the love of God and which goes beyond what justice can achieve.

Peace-making efforts involve a complexity of factors, from governments to public opinion, from international agreements to personal conversion, from the curbing of arms stockpiling to solutions for eradicating poverty. Christians yearn for nothing more than to serve the people of this age in finding a true and lasting peace.

