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Church and World at the Second Vatican Council: The Significance of *Gaudium et Spes*

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Abstract: In its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* the Second Vatican Council put behind it the rejection of modernity that characterised the Roman Catholic Church's relationship with the world in the previous 150 years. Forty years after the publication of *Gaudium et Spes*, this article seeks to articulate the theological understanding of the church-world relationship contained in the final text of the document by examining the sequence of schemas which led to it.

IT IS ALMOST UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED that the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* brought about a fundamental change in the Roman Catholic Church's relationship with the world. The nature of that change is a contentious matter. Analyses of this issue often identify particular aspects of the change and evaluate the impact of those aspects on the church since the Council. For example, Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger among other commentators draw attention to what in their judgement is an excessive optimism in *Gaudium et Spes* about both modernity and what the church can achieve in modernity.¹ They locate the origin of that optimism in the heady days of the 1960s and argue that since we are now more keenly aware of humanity's radical brokenness, the document's optimism needs to be

1. Rahner says: "Although I took part in the elaboration of *Gaudium et Spes* at the Council, I would not deny that its undertone is too euphoric in its evaluation of humanity and the human condition. What it says may be true, but it produces the overall impression that it is enough to observe its norms, and everything will more or less turn out well." Rahner, "Christian Pessimism", *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1991) 22:158. Ratzinger takes a very similar stance: "The text and, even more, the deliberations from which it evolved breathe an astonishing optimism. Nothing seems impossible if humanity and the Church work together." Ratzinger, "Church and World: An Inquiry into the Reception of Vatican Council II", *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987) 380. I will discuss these evaluations later in this paper.

tempered. Whether *Gaudium et Spes* is excessively optimistic is not as immediately obvious as is claimed: the second half of the document addresses a series of urgent problems, strongly criticising modern approaches to economics, marriage and family, and war and peace among others.

However the optimism of *Gaudium et Spes* (and it is a deal more optimistic than the church's dismissal of modernity prior to the Council) is only one aspect of a fundamental shift in the church's understanding of its relationship with the world, and that aspect needs to be understood within the context of the overall shift. The church's pessimistic evaluation of modernity during the nineteenth century and until the eve of Vatican II was intimately related to its understanding of its role in the world. The breakdown of the worldview of Christendom through the rise of new understandings of the individual in society and the separation of church and state meant that the church no longer had a directive role in the world and as a result saw the world as lost from God.² What is seen as the optimism of *Gaudium et Spes* also emerges from the view that it presents of the church's place in the world.

I want to show that the fundamental change brought about by *Gaudium et Spes* is best understood as what Thomas Kuhn has called a "paradigm shift" in his groundbreaking work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.³ One of the transitions examined by Kuhn is the move from an Aristotelian understanding of science to the science of Galileo and Newton. He argues that this transition is best understood as a transition from one worldview to another, in which the post-Galilean scientific outlook gives a better account of the workings of the natural world than the Aristotelian perspective and therefore emerges as superior. There are no independent criteria to which both perspectives can appeal for superiority;⁴ yet one account can be clearly seen to be better than the other. Kuhn's conclusion about the superiority of the modern scientific outlook seems indisputable today – nobody could seriously suggest that we return to Aristotle's theory of Forms as the basis of scientific research.

2. At a future time I hope to trace the connection between the worldview of Christendom and the church's pessimistic approach to modernity during the nineteenth century. Joseph Komonchak addresses these issues in an illuminating article: "Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism", *Christianesimo Nella Storia* 18 (1997) 353-85.

3. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

4. Taylor points out that "criteria" in this setting means: providing some externally defined standard against which each theory can be weighted independently. See Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason", *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 42.

Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor argue that this understanding of change in scientific paradigms can help us to reason about social, cultural and moral transitions.⁵ They argue that in a similar way it is possible to recognise transitions in worldviews in the cultural realm and be able to indicate rationally that one perspective is superior to another. As Taylor puts it:

We are able to show that the *passage* from one to the other represents a gain in understanding. In other words, we can give a convincing narrative account of the passage from the first to the second as an advance in knowledge, a step from a less good to a better understanding of the phenomena in question.⁶

I will endeavour to show that *Gaudium et Spes* represents a gain in our understanding of the church's relationship with the world not simply because of the authoritative weight placed upon it in the Roman Catholic tradition as the most significant document promulgated on this matter in at least the last half of the second millennium. It represents a gain in understanding because it offers: (a) a better, richer theological description of the church's role in the world than the Christendom model that it replaces; (b) a more accurate account of the strengths and limitations of modernity than the previous model; and (c) it provides a standpoint from which the Christendom perspective can be understood and evaluated.

INITIAL SIGNS OF TRANSITION

The theological vision of the church's relationship with the world articulated in *Gaudium et Spes* was arrived at by way of a long and tortuous path. Key understandings had to be hammered out between bishops and experts in the commissions responsible for drafting the document as well as in the sessions of the Council itself. The major steps in this process – a sequence of drafts working toward a clear, developed view of this relationship – will be described below. However, prior to the Council's articulation of the new perspective, there were several important signs that the church was no longer well served by the

5. MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science", *The Monist* 60 (1977) 453-72; Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason", 34-60; Taylor, "Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition", in Alan Malachowski (ed.), *Reading Rorty*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 257-75. See also Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 169-72; and Terry Pinkard, "'History' and the History of Philosophy", in Ruth Abbey (ed.), *Charles Taylor* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 187-213.

6. Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason", 42.

perspective of Christendom and that a new paradigm was required. John XXIII's convocation of the Council, *Humanae Salutis* (December 25, 1961), his opening speech at the Council (October 11, 1962), and the first days of the first debate on a schema of the document which took place in the third session of the Council (October 20-23, 1963) were three significant moments toward this paradigm.

John XXIII discussed the place of the church in the modern world in his address convoking the Council. This was no belated embrace of modernity. While he recognised great advances in science as well as closer collaboration between nations, he spoke of modernity as a difficult, even tragic period of history, particularly because some moderns wished to exclude God from the temporal order. However, the stance taken in this address regarding the church's role in the world signalled the leaving of Christendom. John XXIII saw the immense task awaiting the church on the edge of the new era as: "a question of bringing the modern world into contact with the vivifying and perennial energies of the gospel".⁷ Whatever about modernity's limitations, this is an "engaged" stance. It sets aside the stance of utter pessimism about and rejection of modernity and seeks a way forward, believing that the church can find a way for the Gospel to transform modernity rather than placing its hope in the return to a previous age.

John XXIII developed this "engaged" stance further in his opening address to the Council. In discussing the purpose of the Council, he rejected the stance of the "prophets of doom" frequently encountered in his ministry, those who "in these modern times...can see nothing but prevarication and ruin". What they missed, he believed, was the action of divine providence in the present order of things, "leading us to a new order of human relations".⁸ Again, this was not a blanket acceptance of modernity; alongside the political and economic forces working for good he pointed out the lamentable neglect of the spiritual life. But the pope's address is a recognition of the presence and action of God in the modern social movement. In Andrea Riccardi's view, the pope's approach in this speech provided "the basis that would liberate the work of the Council", moving it out of the culture of fear and suspicion that had dominated the church for the previous 150 years.⁹ John XXIII was neither a booster nor a knocker of modernity. He believed that the

7. Pope John XXIII, "Humanae Salutis", in Walter M. Abbott (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966) 703.

8. Pope John XXIII, "Opening Speech to the Council", in *The Documents of Vatican II*, 712.

9. Andrea Riccardi, "The Tumultuous Opening Days of the Council", in Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak (eds.), *History of Vatican II* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1997) 2:1-67, at 14.

Council must work toward the church finding its voice in modernity. His view of the Gospel and church doctrine penetrating modern consciousness is the key to understanding his desire for a council that was “predominantly pastoral in character”.¹⁰

Another moment signalling that significant change was underway was the initial debate on the schema on the church in the world during the third session of the Council (October 20-23, 1964). What is most remarkable about these first discussions of the schema in the council hall is the interest and passion that they generated. Although a great deal of work was required on the schema before the Council would finally approve it, there was general acceptance of the importance of the issues being addressed and no significant opposition to what the schema was proposing.¹¹ Only three speakers judged the schema as beyond redemption. Norman Tanner points out that even though much of the debate still took place from within the perspective of Christendom, the council fathers, with a combination of theory and practice, were searching for a way to understand the possibility of the church’s active presence in the modern world. Edward Schillebeeckx’s summary of these discussions at the Council captures both the tone of the debate and the “engaged” perspective that the bishops were searching for a means to express:

The slightly agitated tone that could be felt in various speeches of the bishops seems to have its origins in the fathers’ realistic sense of concrete humanity and in the fact that the fathers of the Council are preoccupied with what is happening in the world today and are asking themselves how the Church, as a Church with a messianic mission, ought be engaged in the contemporary event. I could say, this Council is not thinking in the categories of abstract truth;... the episcopate – the great majority – is preoccupied with the question of how the Christian truth ought to be done, ought to be fulfilled.¹²

Schillebeeckx’s picture of the bishops engaged with the world is a far cry from the rejection of modernity: a new paradigm was on its way.

THE ROAD TO A NEW PARADIGM

The final text of *Gaudium et Spes* emerged out of a complex redactional process over three years. Following the first session of the

10. Pope John XXIII, “Opening Speech to the Council”, 715.

11. See Norman Tanner, “The Church in the World” in Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak (eds.), *History of Vatican II* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2003) 4:270-386, at 281-2.

12. Schillebeeckx, “The Third Session of Vatican II”, cited in Tanner, “The Church in the World”, 328.

Council, the Doctrinal Commission and the Commission for the Lay Apostolate formed a mixed commission which took responsibility for the progress of the document. Skilful leaders and editors guided it through spectacular conflicts, down blind alleys and into occasional dead ends. Grave doubts hung over the document's viability and status until a couple of months before its promulgation. Rather than exploring the labyrinthine politics of its redaction, I want to argue below that the significance of *Gaudium et Spes* can most readily be grasped by attending to the sequence of understandings of the church's relationship with the world expressed in the major drafts of the document.¹³

1. Preparatory Schemas

The first step in the sequence was taken prior to the formation of the mixed commission. The texts produced by the Theological Commission in preparation for the Council did not explicitly tackle the question of the church's relationship with the world but they do contain a view of that relationship that had prevailed in the church since the nineteenth century. The preparatory schemas dealing with issues addressed in *Gaudium et Spes* – *De Ordine Morali*, *De Ordine Sociali*, *De Communitate Gentium*, and *De Deposito Fide Pure Custodiendo* – envisage the modern world as an enemy against which the Council must defend Christian life. The schema on defending the deposit of faith makes no effort at a systematic presentation of Catholic doctrine; the logic of the document is entirely defensive. It condemns evolution, polygenism and nineteen other errors. It presents a propositional view of revelation, warning against understanding faith in terms of experience, a view explored by some theologians at the time. The only criterion for the selection of doctrines treated in the second half of the schema, in Joseph Komonchak's judgement, was "the perceived need to defend them from contemporary threats".¹⁴ Many respondents to a draft of this schema

13. The discussion in this section owes a great deal to Giovanni Turbanti, *Un Concilio per il Mondo Moderno: La Redazione della Costituzione Pastorale "Gaudium et Spes" del Vaticano II* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000) especially 802-9. Turbanti's work examines the redactional process of *Gaudium et Spes* but in the final pages he discusses the understandings of the church-world relationship inherent in each of the schemas. In "Towards the Definition of the Term 'World' in 'Gaudium et Spes'", *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 48 (1972) 89-126, Antony Nirappel traces the use of the term "world" in drafts of what became *Gaudium et Spes*, during the last two sessions of the Council. He argues that the Council eventually arrived at a satisfactory definition in n. 2 of the final document, stressing "the anthropological, cosmological and historical dimensions of the world and proposed the Christian interpretation" (110). My study explores the broader theological view of the church-world relationship within which the concept of "world" sits.

14. Komonchak, "The Struggle for the Council during the Preparation of Vatican II (1960-1962)", in Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak (eds.), *History of Vatican II* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1995) 1:167-356, at 245.

criticised strongly its defensive orientation and asked for a more systematic presentation. Their responses had no result. The same defensive orientation characterises the other preparatory schemas including the schema on the moral order. The Theological Commission proposed that this schema should condemn what it understood as the principal contemporary errors: “naturalism, materialism, communism and laicism”.¹⁵ Komonchak points out that *De Ordine Morali* is overwhelmingly concerned with “the objective and universal character of the moral order”, and that it treats suspiciously any attempt to value the subjective dimension of Christian life.¹⁶ Again, respondents to a draft of this schema criticised it as too negative and proposed that the moral life be understood from the perspectives of the life of discipleship, participation in the mystical life, and the role of charity in Christian life, but again these criticisms and proposals had no result. The authors of *De Ordine Morali* believed that the positive proposals confused moral theology with asceticism.¹⁷

In my discussion of the final text of *Gaudium et Spes* below, I hope that it will be clear that the major differences between the preparatory schemas and the final text are not most perceptively understood in terms of degree, for example as more or less optimistic, more subjective or objective. Rather, these differences are best understood in terms of differing worldviews. The preparatory schemas fit firmly into the view of the church-world relationship developed in the nineteenth century, when the church saw itself as a counter-society, engaged in an adversarial relationship with modernity. The authors of *De Ordine Morali*, like Pius IX in *Quanta Cura*, were suspicious of the role of conscience in Christian life since (from the Christendom perspective of the nineteenth century) if the role of conscience were emphasised, the church’s salutary influence on the individual and society would be impeded or even removed.¹⁸ They were unable to see individual conscience as the means of grasping the Christian truth.

Although never explicitly rejected, neither were the preparatory schemas adopted as drafts at any point in the redaction of *Gaudium et Spes*, even though several times during that process the relevant sections of the schemas were indexed against current working drafts.

15. Komonchak, “The Struggle for the Council”, 246.

16. Komonchak, “The Struggle for the Council”, 251.

17. See Komonchak, “The Struggle for the Council”, 249-51.

18. See Pius IX, *Quanta Cura*, n. 3, in Claudia Carlen (ed.), *The Papal Encyclicals 1740-1878* (Wilmington NC: McGrath, 1981).

2. Roman Schema

The second major step in the developing understanding of the church-world relationship at Vatican II took place between February and May 1963. The mixed commission and its subgroups as well as experts and lay representatives worked toward what became known as the "Roman schema". Chapters one and two of the last draft of this schema addressed the vocation of the human person and the human person in society; chapters three to five considered marriage and family, culture, and the community of nations. This schema offered a markedly different understanding of the church-world relationship, since there were now no paragraphs condemning modernity. Yet the worldview of Christendom remained in much the same way as it did in the later encyclicals of Leo XIII, distinguishing between the ideal situation where Catholicism is recognised as the established true religion and the pragmatic compromise necessary in a pluralistic context. In Giovanni Turbanti's words, this schema "kept all the prerequisites of an uncompromising culture that, as a 'thesis', saw in Christendom the rightful form of society, even if in 'hypothesis' different forms were admitted and the commitment of the church and its faithful were legitimised in order to modify the social order in temporarily adapting to the structures in force".¹⁹

3. Malines Schema

Frustrated by the limitations of the final draft of the Roman schema – a perception shared by many other members of the Coordinating Commission – Cardinal Suenens proposed that a special commission write a text outlining the general principles governing the church's relationship with the world, taking particular account of biblical and patristic perspectives.²⁰ The task of drafting the sections on specific issues such as culture, marriage and peace would be given to commissions of specialists at a later date. The Coordinating Commission adopted this proposal and entrusted the development of the text to Suenens. This move resulted in the Malines schema – the third major step in the articulation of the church-world relationship at Vatican II. Although, like the Roman schema, the text written at Malines was never presented at a Council session, it was an important step in the development of *Gaudium et Spes*.

19. Turbanti, *Un Concilio per il Mondo Moderno*, 803.

20. Grootaers, "The Drama Continues Between the Acts: The 'Second Preparation' and its Opponents", in *The History of Vatican II*, 2:359-514, at 421.

In contrast to the Roman schema, the text written at Malines was more strongly ecclesiological. Drafted by an international group of theologians including Congar, Rahner and Philips, the text was heavily influenced by Congar's threefold understanding of the church's role in the world as witness, service and communion. From the perspective of mission adopted here, the condemnatory language of the preparatory schemas is set aside, as is the notion found in the Roman schema that Christendom is the rightful form of society. Yet, in this new schema, according to Turbanti's analysis, the world is still perceived as "the external object of an action directed at its own transformation in a Christian sense".²¹ The presupposition is that there is a deep gulf between the church and modern society, and the purpose of Christian witness is to reduce the gap. For a series of political and procedural reasons, predominantly the lack of good communication, the Malines schema was turned down by the mixed commission and never saw the light of day at the Council.²²

5. From the Zurich Schema to the Final Text

The period from the preparation for the third session of the Council in December 1963 until the end of the fourth session in December 1965 was the most significant for the development of *Gaudium et Spes*. During this time two concepts emerged which are fundamental to the church-world relationship articulated in the final document. The relationship was conceived of in terms both of dialogue and of the church reading the "signs of the times". The notion of the signs of the times had appeared earlier in 1963 in John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. Both concepts are found in the Zurich schema written from January 1964 and the Ariccia schema written from February 1965. Yet the theme of the signs of the times plays a larger role in the later draft, while the theme of dialogue has a stronger place in the first. Although these concepts have the capacity to elicit quite different images of the church's action in the world, I want to show that they neatly cohere in *Gaudium et Spes* to form a single model of the church's relationship with the world. In the final document, the concept of the signs of the times overcomes a critical limitation of the understanding of the church-world relationship as a dialogue.

Paul VI introduced the concept of dialogue to the Council as a means of the church understanding its relationship with modernity. He was committed to this concept, first putting it to the bishops in his opening

21. Turbanti, *Un Concilio per il Mondo Moderno*, 804.

22. See Grootaers, "The Drama Continues", 426-9.

address for the Council's second session on 19 September 1963, urging them to conduct an open dialogue with the world.²³ The following year he developed a more comprehensive understanding of dialogue in the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*.²⁴ And in an audience in February 1965 with Hauptmann, the last editor-in-chief of *Gaudium et Spes*, the pope sought to learn how the final editorial work was proceeding and made it clear that: "the inspiring principle should be dialogue, and the entire document ought to be almost a continuation of the dialogue with the world that had begun in his encyclical".²⁵

The Zurich schema marks the most significant moment in the church's leaving the worldview of Christendom. From this point onwards there are no blanket condemnations of modernity common in nineteenth century papal encyclicals and there is no attempt at a pragmatic compromise with modernity while holding on to Christendom as the rightful form of society. Certainly the limitations of modernity are addressed unhesitatingly but modernity's strengths are also valued. The understanding of the church's role in the world that took hold in the middle of the eleventh century – of the church shaping the structures and institutions of society in the image of the Gospel and canon law – is set aside. The new paradigm of dialogue finds expression in the Zurich draft,²⁶ and is most fully elaborated in *Ecclesiam Suam*. In this new understanding, those who come to the message of salvation do so through the engagement of their hearts and minds rather than through the shaping of society.

Discussion of "dialogue and its requirements" in chapter three of the Zurich schema focuses on two matters: the attitude of Christians to dialogue with the world, and Christian participation with others in the formation of organisations for the good of the world. In discussing Christians' attitude to dialogue, the schema counsels them to converse with others as friends, being sincere and honest, wise and prudent. This attitude is founded on the understanding that

the dignity of the other and above all the honour to be given to the God who is active in them, demand that Christians in these times

23. Paul VI, "Pope Paul VI to the Council", *Doctrine and Life* 13 (December 1963) 641-54, at 651.

24. Paul VI, "Ecclesiam Suam", in Claudia Carlen (ed.), *The Papal Encyclicals 1958-1981* (Wilmington NC: McGrath, 1981).

25. This is a summary of Hauptmann's notes of the audience in Ricardo Burigana and Giovanni Turbanti, "The Intersession: Preparing the Conclusion of the Council", *History of Vatican II* 4:453-615, at 527.

26. *Acta Synodalia* III/5, 116-42. In early July, 1964, Paul VI decided in audience that the Zurich draft would be discussed by the Council. "Ecclesiam Suam" was published in August and the Council began discussion of the Zurich draft on 20 October.

learn to know them better, by listening without pretence and being aware of their life conditions and culture, willingly acknowledging whatever may be true, whatever is good and just.²⁷

And, secondly, the schema urges Christians to avoid duplication and to work together with other people of good will to solve contemporary problems, particularly at the international level. This view of the church working together with secular organisations is a world away from the adversarial stance of the preconciliar period, in which great effort was expended to develop a counter-society.

In *Ecclesiam Suam*, Paul VI articulates this dialogical model of the church-world relationship more fully. It has its roots in an understanding of the way in which God acts in the world. God has initiated a dialogue with humanity, the pope says, “through Christ in the Holy Spirit”, and in this dialogue humanity encounters salvation.²⁸ The incarnation opens a dialogue between God and humanity and the church fulfils its role in the world by continuing the mission of Christ. Further, Paul VI points out that the manner of God’s dialogue with the world in the incarnation – the way of loving engagement – must be the primary characteristic of the church’s dialogue with the world: “No physical pressure was brought on anyone to accept the dialogue of salvation; far from it. It was an appeal of love.... Hence although the truth we have to proclaim is certain and the salvation necessary, we dare not entertain any thoughts of external coercion.”²⁹ In the pope’s view, this understanding of the church-world relationship is demanded by the rise of modernity and the pluralist nature of contemporary society.³⁰

During the preparation for the fourth session of the Council and at the session itself, the concept of the signs of the times assumed a greater prominence than that of dialogue. In the final text the word dialogue appears only a few times, most notably in the beginning of the chapter four (n 40) and in the document’s conclusion (n 92). This diminution leads commentators like Turbanti to conclude that the relegation of the idea of dialogue to the final paragraphs of the document was “a matter of expediency and that it [dialogue] had become nearly totally marginal with respect to the total set up of the schema”.³¹ While it is clear that the word dialogue is only found a few times in the final text, synonyms such as *address*, *conversation* and *communication* also appear in critical passages. Yet the most significant reality that judgements such as

27. AS III/5, 129.

28. Paul VI, “*Ecclesiam Suam*”, 71.

29. Paul VI, “*Ecclesiam Suam*”, 75.

30. Paul VI, “*Ecclesiam Suam*”, 78.

31. Turbanti, *Un Concilio per il Mondo Moderno*, 806.

Turbanti's disregard is that the first half of the text, and particularly chapter four, entitled "The church's task in today's world", is structured around the concept of dialogue. For this reason, I believe that dialogue is the document's fundamental metaphor in interpreting the church-world relationship and that the concept of the signs of the times develops this paradigm.

The theme of dialogue is introduced in the preface to *Gaudium et Spes* where the Council addresses "people everywhere, in its desire to explain to all how it understands the church's presence and activity in today's world" (n 2). This address, it hopes, will be of service to humanity:

The council, in witnessing and giving expression to the faith of the whole of God's people brought together by Christ, cannot give more striking evidence of this people's feelings of oneness, concern and love towards the whole human family, of which it is a part, than by *entering into conversation with it* on these various problems, contributing enlightenment derived from the gospel and supplying the human race with the saving resources which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church receives from its founder. (n 3)³²

Evocative of the theology of *Ecclesiam Suam*, this passage sees the church as continuing the mission of its founder. Inspired by the message of the gospel, the church engages in loving conversation with the whole human family. With the theme of conversation firmly in place, *Gaudium et Spes* briefly surveys the aspirations of modernity before exploring contemporary understandings of the human person, community and human activity in greater depth (chapters one to three). Chapter four addresses the key issue of the document: the church's task in today's world. Here it is pointed out that aspects of modern existence have been explored in the prior chapters in order that the church might enter into dialogue with modernity. In the words of the document: "Everything that we have said about the dignity of the human person, the community of women and men and the significance of human activity provides ground for the relationship between the church and the world and a basis for mutual dialogue." (n 40)

The structure of chapter four is governed by the concept of dialogue, even though, as I will indicate below, the theme of the signs of the times also plays an important role. The dialogue between the church and modernity is spelled out in four steps. The first takes up the church's

32. Emphasis added.

contribution to a dialogue with each individual person. Recognising that today people are searching to make sense of existence, the Council sees the church as “entrusted with making manifest the mystery of God, who is our ultimate goal, at the same time it discloses to us the meaning of our existence, or the intimate truth about ourselves” (n 41). In the second step, the Council sees the church making a substantial contribution to a dialogue with society. Here, the Council believes that the church’s “mission of a religious nature produces a function, enlightenment and resources which can be of service in constructing and strengthening the human community” (n 42). Thirdly, the Council believes that the dialogue, which it sees as the hallmark of the church in the world, should shape the life of every believer: “Christians as citizens of both cities...[should] be attentive in faithfully discharging their earthly duties, led by the spirit of the gospel” (n 43). A believer’s failure to engage in this dialogue can only be injurious to both church and world: “The split between the faith which they profess and the daily lives of many people is to be counted as among the more serious misconceptions of our day” (n 43). And fourthly, the Council recognises that the dialogue between church and world is two way. The church has received much from the world, particularly “from the history and development of the human race” (n 44). Since the church has learned much from every age, the believing community today must constantly keep itself open to the world in order that it may hear to what it is called. In the Council’s words:

It is for God’s people as a whole, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and especially for pastors and theologians, to listen to the various voices of our day, discerning them and interpreting them, and to evaluate them in the light of the divine word, so that the revealed truth can be increasingly appropriated, better understood and more suitably expressed. (n 44)

Such openness to the various languages of the day will enable the church to faithfully proclaim the message of the Gospel in each culture. “This adaptation in preaching the revealed word”, the Council says, “should remain the law of all evangelisation.” (n 44)

Further reflection will be necessary to account for the full dimensions of the concept of dialogue contained in *Gaudium et Spes*, but it is already clear that both the church and the world have a contribution to make and that the church sees itself speaking to both individuals and society as a whole, revealing the mystery of God, which alone can enlighten human existence. It is also clear that without attention to the “various voices of our day”, the church will not be able to express adequately the

full message of the gospel. But what takes place in the dialogue of salvation? When church and world converse, what actually happens? Sections of *Ecclesiam Suam* and of Paul VI's opening speech at the second session of the Council highlight the differences between the church and the world and conceive of the task of dialogue primarily in terms of the church building bridges toward society or closing the gap.³³ The pope adds that in recognising itself as different from the world, the church is not indifferent, afraid or contemptuous of the world.³⁴ In the dialogue of salvation, therefore, the church does not pass a negative judgement on the world in principle, yet the task of dialogue is understood in terms of a gap being closed. However, conceiving dialogue in this way misses a vital aspect of the dialogue between the church and the world envisaged in *Gaudium et Spes*, or at least so I want to argue immediately. The concept of the signs of the times can help us to grasp the nature of this dialogue more fully. But it is instructive to note that Turbanti believes that it is because dialogue was understood primarily as closing the gap that it was put aside in the final draft of *Gaudium et Spes*.³⁵

Alongside the notion of dialogue, the concept of the church reading the signs of the times also emerged during the preparation for the third session as a means of interpreting the church's relationship with the world. John XXIII had used it in his convocation of the Council and had referred succinctly to it earlier in *Pacem in Terris*. During the preparation of an entirely new draft of the document on the church's relationship with the world, Bernard Häring proposed to the commission that every section of the document begin with a description of the signs of the times.³⁶ His proposal was not adopted but from that point onward the concept held an important place in the document. Roughly half the preface to the Zurich schema discussed the church's relationship with the world in these terms. The significance of the concept in the final text is reflected in the judgement of Marie-Dominique Chenu, admittedly one of the concept's principal advocates, that it forms "the basis of the schema on the church in the modern world".³⁷ Yet while the words "reading the signs of the times" suggest an accessible image of the church engaged with the world, the many layers of meaning contained in the concept as it is found in *Gaudium et Spes* make it richer and more

33. Pope Paul VI, "Ecclesiam Suam", nn 59-62; "Pope Paul VI to the Council", 651.

34. Pope Paul VI, "Ecclesiam Suam", n 63.

35. Turbanti, *Un Concilio per il Mondo Moderno*, 806.

36. See Evangelista Vilanova, "The Intersession (1963-1964)" in Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak (eds.), *History of Vatican II* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2000) 3:347-490, at 406.

37. Chenu, "The Signs of the Times", in *The Church Today: Commentaries on the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (New York: Newman Press, 1968) 43-59, at 46.

complex than it might first appear. The paragraphs below aim to elucidate these layers of meaning.

Like the dialogical view of the church-world relationship, that of the signs of the times is also founded on an incarnational understanding of the church's role in the world. In reading the signs of the times, the church sees itself as continuing the mission of Christ. Introducing the most explicit passage on the signs of the times in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council says that the church has in mind only "to continue the work of Christ who came into the world to give witness to the truth" (n 3). The task of reading the signs of the times arises from this mission. As the Council puts it:

To discharge this function, the church has the duty in every age of examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel, so that it can offer in a manner appropriate to each generation replies to the continual questionings on the meaning of this life and the life to come and on how they are related. There is a need, then, to be aware of, and to understand, the world in which we live, together with its expectations, its desires and its frequently dramatic character. (n 4)

In the Council's terms, then, in order to continue the mission of Christ the church must be attentive to the passage of history. This approach is vastly different from the Christendom worldview of the middle ages, which was also inspired by the logic of the incarnation, seeing the church as called to the structural task of applying the principles of the gospel and canon law to social institutions and practices. The transition from seeing the church's mission in structural terms to seeing it in terms of being receptive of and responsive to history is obviously connected to the demise of the powerful church-state alliance. But an assessment of the transition primarily in these terms would fail to account for the view of the church-world relationship developed at Vatican II. *Gaudium et Spes* indicates an important theological reason for the transition from the worldview of Christendom to that of the signs of the times: the way in which God acts in history. From the perspective of Christendom, the incarnational aspect of the church's task is conceived in extrinsic terms: the church making over society in the image of the gospel and canon law. From the Council's perspective, historicity is an intrinsic dimension of the way God acts in the world.

Gaudium et Spes reflects the view of history developed in twentieth century Thomistic theology.³⁸ Because God chooses to reveal Godself in history, and most particularly in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, history has intrinsic significance for humanity's salvation. History does not consist in a series of examples that correspond to an ideal, eternal world or to its opposite. Rather, history is the place where God makes Godself present. The history of salvation, therefore, does not occur in a separate realm but within "profane" history. Since the church sees its task as continuing the mission of Christ, this understanding of history requires the church to be attentive to "the events, needs and desires which it [God's people] shares with the rest of modern humanity", in order that it could "discern the true signs of God's presence and purpose" (n 11). Chenu points out that in *Gaudium et Spes* not only do individuals possess an openness or capacity to receive the Word of God, but there is also "a social dimension to obediential potency".³⁹ Shifts in history – cultural, economic or technological – are open to the gospel and present the church with new opportunities to give witness to the life-giving power of the Word. The lengthy introduction to *Gaudium et Spes* surveys the changes in the modern world that give rise both to considerable promise and to great concern as well as to much in between. Summarising these wide-ranging changes the Council says:

Underlying all these demands there is a deeper and more widespread wish: people and groups are thirsting for a life which is full and free and worthy of human beings, by applying to their own advantage all that today's world can provide for them in such abundance. Nations are continually aiming to bring about a universal community. (n 9)

The church accomplishes its mission in satisfying this thirst. In the Council's words: "It is the church's belief that Christ, who died and was raised for everyone, offers to the human race through his Spirit the light and strength to respond to its highest calling" (n 10). Because God has entered into history, the church fulfils its role in the world by being open to the activity of God in history and leading humanity to recognise that all of history finds its fullest meaning in Christ. So, there is a vital connection between the events of history and the church's witness to the

38. See Chenu, "The History of Salvation and the Historicity of Man in the Renewal of Theology", in L. K. Shook (ed.), *Renewal of Religious Thought* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 153-66; Christophe Potworowski, "Christianity and History", *Contemplation and Incarnation: The Theology of Marie-Dominique Chenu* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001) 83-115.

39. Chenu, "The Signs of the Times", 57.

gospel.⁴⁰ Historical developments are not extrinsic to the life of the church but contribute to its inner growth – in Chenu’s words, “The Church is not an epiphenomenon laid over a heterogeneous humanity, any more than grace is. It defines itself in defining its relation to the world.”⁴¹

There is a further layer of meaning to the concept of the signs of the times. The Council’s analysis of various dimensions of modern life in *Gaudium et Spes* also acknowledges the action of the Holy Spirit in the world. In the chapter on the church’s task in the world, the Council discusses the church’s relationship with both individuals and society as a whole. In its discussion of the first of these, and while holding that the revelation of God in Christ alone has the power to fulfil the deepest hunger of each human heart, the Council affirms that it “is also aware that humanity is being continually stirred by the Spirit of God and can therefore never be completely indifferent to the problems of religion” (n 41). So the church’s task of enabling a person to come to faith in Christ begins with the recognition that the Spirit is at work in that person and that the gospel articulates the action of God that they already know, although perhaps only implicitly. And in its discussion about the enlightenment that the church can bring to society as a whole, the Council recognises the good brought about by the Spirit of God at work in modern society even prior to the preaching of the word. In the Council’s words:

The church also recognises whatever good is to be found in the modern social movement, especially in the development of unity and the progress of healthy socialisation and of civil and economic association. The encouraging of unity...demonstrates to the world that genuine exterior social union has its origin in the union of minds and hearts, in the faith and love on which its unity is indissolubly founded in the Holy Spirit. (n 42)

Earlier in the document the Council acknowledged the increasing interdependence of the world today as the work of the Holy Spirit: “the Spirit of God, who with marvellous foresight directs the course of the ages and renews the face of the earth, is present in this evolution” (n 26). From the perspective of *Gaudium et Spes*, then, if the church is to continue the mission of Christ by reading the signs of the times, this can only be achieved by being alert to the action of Holy Spirit in the modern world, who is bringing about what is new. Modernity cannot be

40. See Chenu, “The Signs of the Times”, 55.

41. Chenu, “Pour une Lecture Théologique du Syllabus”, cited in Potworowski, *Contemplation and Incarnation*, 162.

regarded as a place from which God is absent and which is therefore either condemnable or standing ready to be made over. The Spirit of God is present and active in modernity.

In summary, charged with the task of reading the signs of the times, the church finds itself engaged on three levels. First, in order that it might continue the mission of Christ, the church must immerse itself in the word of God. Secondly, it must be keenly attentive to the movement of history so that it might recognise “seeds of the creating Word as pledge of the incarnate Word”, to use Chenu’s image.⁴² Such attentiveness is intrinsic to it being able to make the word present in history. And thirdly, the church must be attentive to the Holy Spirit at work in the hearts of individuals, some of whom may never have heard the gospel, as well as in the movement of history.

The above analysis of the church reading the signs of the times has similar lines to the dialogical view of the church-world relationship. Both contain an incarnational understanding of the church continuing the mission of Christ; both see the church engaged in the world, listening as well as proclaiming. The signs of the times perspective makes an important contribution by emphasising both the openness of history to the Word of God and the action of the Spirit in history. These emphases give fuller theological expression to what is articulated in the dialogical perspective in terms of the church “listening to the various voices of the day” (n 44). If these emphases are incorporated into the dialogical view, it could be put in these terms: in the dialogue of salvation, the church can understand itself as founded in the gospel, responding to the desires and struggles of this particular period of history, while listening for the voice of the Spirit in the world.

LEAVING CHRISTENDOM FOR GOOD

Gaudium et Spes brought about a fundamental change in the church’s relationship with the world. The hope of re-establishing the church-state alliance on which the worldview of Christendom depended was finally and officially set aside with the Council’s words, “the particular mission which Christ entrusted to his church is not in the political, economic or social order” (n 42). While setting aside the worldview of Christendom, the Council still envisaged a significant role for the engagement of both Christians and the church in the social and political spheres – a role which I am arguing is best understood in terms of dialogue and reading the signs of the times. Also set aside was the blanket condemnation that

42. Chenu, “Orthodoxie-orthopraxie”, cited in Potworowski, *Contemplation and Incarnation*, 171-2.

characterised the church's attitude to modernity from the nineteenth century until the 1950s: "the church also recognises whatever good is to be found in the modern social movement" (n 42). Yet the change effected was more fundamental than the church simply setting aside the mechanisms which facilitated that relationship for the greatest part of the second millennium. In *Gaudium et Spes* the Council articulated a better, richer theological description of the church's role in the world. For this reason, I believe that the fundamental change brought about in *Gaudium et Spes* can best be understood in terms of a paradigm shift. I have argued immediately above that this new relationship is built upon two key insights. First, the Council recognises that history has intrinsic significance for the way in which God acts in the world, and therefore the church is charged with the task of remaining open to the presence and purpose of God in history. And secondly, the Council recognises that the Spirit of God is at work in the modern world, both in individuals and in social movements. These two insights contribute to a view of the church-world relationship which is clearly a gain over the Christendom or nineteenth-century versions: the church in dialogue with the word, or reading the signs of the times. An understanding of the church-world relationship which takes account both of the historical nature of God's action in the world and also of the role of the Holy Spirit in the world certainly represents a gain over a view which either rejects the world or sees it as there to be dominated.

The view of the church-world relationship articulated in *Gaudium et Spes* also represents a gain in understanding because it gives a more accurate account of the strengths and limitations of modernity. The nineteenth-century papal condemnations of modernity arose from the popes' attachment to the vision of Christendom and the belief that without the church-state alliance the church's role in the world would be destroyed. Yet although the condemnations of such things as human rights, democracy and equality might make some sense from the perspective of Christendom, those condemnations could hardly reflect accurately the transformation that was occurring in modernity. Many of these changes, particularly those just mentioned, could be seen to be the fruit of the gospel's emphasis on the dignity of every human life. *Gaudium et Spes* discusses some strengths and limitations of modernity, especially in the second half of the document, but it primarily provides a means for discerning the aspects of modernity which have the capacity to lead toward God and those which lead the other way. In one of its many descriptions of the task of discernment, the Council says:

Impelled by the belief that it is being led by the Spirit of the Lord who fills the whole earth, God's people works to discern the true

signs of God's presence and purpose in the events, needs and desires which it shares with the rest of modern humanity. It is faith which shows everything in a new light and clarifies God's purpose in his complete calling of the human race thus pointing the mind toward solutions which are fully human. The council's first aim is to subject the values most highly regarded today to this light and relate them to their divine source. (n 11)

The Council's vision of the openness of history to God's revealing presence and of the presence and action of the Spirit in the world also provides us with a standpoint from which to evaluate the limitations of both the Christendom project and the church's adversarial stance in the nineteenth century. In discussing the limitations of the Christendom project Charles Taylor points out that the fusion of faith and culture inevitably committed the church to repressive mechanisms, in which individuals and whole classes of people are treated as means to an end.⁴³ In this view of the church-world relationship there is no explicit recognition of the Spirit's active presence in persons and society as a whole and therefore of their inherent dignity. Similarly, the papal condemnations of the nineteenth century fail to take account of the Spirit poured out over the whole earth.

What of the charge that *Gaudium et Spes* is excessively optimistic either about modernity or about what the church can achieve in modernity? In contrast to the rejection of modernity prior to the Council, *Gaudium et Spes* is certainly more optimistic – but that must be considered a gain, at least initially, since the Council calls the church to be open to the action of the Spirit in the world. I take Rahner and Ratzinger's criticisms of the document being "too euphoric" and breathing "an astonishing optimism" as not denying one of the Council's fundamental premises that the Spirit is at work in the modern world.⁴⁴ Since they would not deny this premise, Rahner and Ratzinger must be assessing the degree of optimism or pessimism in the document. But from my reading, the Council does not make a judgement about whether optimism or pessimism is a wiser stance. *Gaudium et Spes* does not offer a global evaluation of modernity. And to

43. Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?", in James L. Heft (ed.), *A Catholic Modernity?: Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 17. Taylor argues that "Human society in history inevitably involves coercion (as political society, at least, but also in other ways); it involves the pressure to conformity; it involves inescapably some confiscation of the highest ideals for narrow interests, and a host of other imperfections." Taylor goes on to emphasise that it is not Christian faith that makes people intolerant, but the project of Christendom itself – the attempt to marry faith and any particular form of culture and mode of society.

44. See footnote 1.

read the Council as doing so mistakes the articulation of a new view of the church-world relationship as an evaluation of modernity. *Gaudium et Spes* articulates a fundamentally new understanding of the church-world relationship as a dialogue. It recognises that history is open to the action of God and that the Spirit is at work in the world. The main lines of the first half of the document attempt to spell out the dynamics of this relationship. The second half of the document examines a series of current issues such as economics, war, marriage and family – and strongly criticises modern approaches to them.

The approach taken here to the fundamental change in the church-world relationship at Vatican II provides a fruitful way of responding to a question receiving much attention today: in what way does Vatican II constitute an “event” in history?⁴⁵ My discussion of the church in dialogue with the world suggests that for Roman Catholics, for whom the Council is authoritative, it is hardly possible to think of the church-world relationship after the Council in the way that they did before without denying the theological truths arrived at in *Gaudium et Spes*. In that way, the Council has brought about a fundamental change in the church’s understanding of its place in the world, yet one that is more faithful to the tradition of faith because it accounts for the action of the Holy Spirit in the world and the openness of history to the work of God.

45. For discussion of this issue see: Komonchak, “Vatican II as an “Event””, *Theology Digest* 46 (Winter 1999) 337-52; Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004) 69-85.