

## □ CHAPTER TWELVE □

*Reading the Signs of the Times:  
An Ongoing Task of the Church in the World*

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**I**N CALLING THE Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII invited the Church not only to renew herself but also to renew her relationship to the world so as to be of better service to the entire human family on its journey to God. The Council was to do this by understanding better the great events occurring in history and by listening to the voice of the Lord in these signs of the times. In so doing, the Council gave the Church a continuing way to assess its mission in the world. The primary purpose of this chapter will be to examine how the bishops at the Vatican Council read the signs of the times in their historical context. It will also briefly describe several other examples of how this method of theological reflection has been used since the Council and will draw some conclusions for the ongoing work of the Church in the world.

What did the bishops mean when they used the term “signs of the times”? It seems to me that what they meant were those significant events, phenomena, or movements that characterize an era and that bring about or reveal new awareness and, therefore, call forth new action in human history.

### **Pope John XXIII’s Reading of the Signs of the Times**

Although John XXIII did not live to see the completion of the Council, he left his mark on its work in many ways. One of the

significant contributions that he made was to call the Church and the world to mutual dialogue and learning. Since this way of engaging the world was to find fruition in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, it seems appropriate to review briefly the way Pope John came to read the signs of the times.

### *Humanae Salutis*

Shortly after his election as pope, John XXIII surprised the Church and the world by calling an ecumenical Council for the Church Universal.<sup>1</sup> He formally convened this Council for October 11, 1962, in the apostolic constitution *Humanae Salutis*, which was issued on December 25, 1961. In this often neglected document, John XXIII placed the convocation of the Council in the context of the global crisis facing humanity.<sup>2</sup> Within the crisis in society, John XXIII also found reasons for confidence. While this confidence is rooted fundamentally in the Living Christ, the major events of contemporary history, “the signs of the times,” also contain within them some reasons for hope as well as a call to the Church. I quote the following passage at length because it is the first time that Pope John used the phrase “signs of the times” in his pontificate:

These painful considerations are a reminder of the duty to be vigilant and to keep the sense of responsibility awake. Distrustful souls see only darkness burdening the face of the earth. We, instead, like to reaffirm all our confidence in Our Saviour, Who has not left the world which He redeemed.

Indeed, we make ours the recommendation of Jesus that one should know how to distinguish the “signs of the times” (Matt. 16.4), and we seem to see now, in the midst of so much darkness, a few indications which augur well for the fate of the Church and of humanity. The bloody wars that have followed one on the other in our times, the spiritual ruins caused by many ideologies and

the fruits of so many bitter experiences have not been without useful teachings. Scientific progress itself, which gave man the possibility of creating catastrophic instruments for his destruction, has raised questions. It has obliged human beings to become thoughtful, more conscious of their own limitations, desirous of peace and attentive to the importance of spiritual values. And it has accelerated that progress of closer collaboration and of mutual integration toward which, even though in the midst of a thousand uncertainties, the human family seems to be moving. All this facilitates, no doubt, the apostolate of the Church, since many people who did not realize the importance of its mission in the past are, taught by experience, today more disposed to welcome its warnings.<sup>3</sup>

This is a remarkable passage which deserves a moment of analysis and reflection. While the signs of the times identified above are ones of grave concern, Pope John called our attention to how even these negative or dangerous events in humanity's contemporary experience can teach lessons in truth and lead to humanity's renewal. They also facilitate the ministry of the Church because they bring people to the point of being receptive to the Church's message.<sup>4</sup>

Then turning his attention immediately to the Church, Pope John wrote that she "has not remained a life spectator in the face of these events."<sup>5</sup> Rather, the Church "has followed step by step the evolution of peoples, scientific progress and social revolution."<sup>6</sup> This has led the Church to oppose those materialistic ideologies that deny faith and to witness to the growth of the immense energies of the apostolate of prayer and of action. He concluded by remarking that "though the Church may appear profoundly changed, the Christian community is also in great part transformed and renewed."<sup>7</sup> For Pope John, the Church is clearly part of history and is caught up in the historical process.

These statements are noteworthy for us because they show that Pope John was deeply aware of the intimate relationship

between the Church and the signs of the times. Not only was there a message in the great events of the times, there was also a call for the Church to follow these events step by step. In the process the Church herself will be transformed and renewed.

*Pope John XXIII's Radio Address of September 11, 1962*

One month before the formal opening of the Council, Pope John gave a significant radio address regarding the Council. In this papal allocution of September 11, 1962, the Pope underlined the importance of the Council being directed both outward (*ad extra*) toward the world as well as inward (*ad intra*) toward the Church. However, the emphasis was on the outward relationship with the world. According to Pope John,

We must also consider the Church from the viewpoint of her relations with the world outside — *ad extra*; confronted with the needs and demands of peoples who are tempted to turn in upon themselves and enjoy the goods of this world, she must carry out her mission and teach them “to use material goods in such a way that they do not lose the goods of eternity.”<sup>8</sup>

After acknowledging that the world “has its own problems,” he went on to say that

the Church always has these acutely serious problems very much at heart. For this reason she has made them the object of careful study, and the ecumenical Council will be able to offer, in clear language, solutions demanded by man's dignity and that of his Christian vocation.<sup>9</sup>

For Pope John, the gospel can help interpret the signs of the times and offer solutions to the problems facing the human community.

John XXIII mentioned some of these problems by name: equality among nations, the dignity of marriage, social justice and

the problem of underdevelopment, freedom to seek peace and the desire for authentic peace. These were the major issues facing the human community at that time. The Church had to address them if she was to be faithful to her mission. He then went on to commit the Council to an important task:

The Council will formally and solemnly work out the practical applications of brotherhood and love. They are dictated by human nature itself, and for the Christian they are the guiding norm in relations between individuals and nations.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Speech at the Opening of the Council*

Pope John XXIII gave the most important address of his life on October 11, 1962 at the solemn opening of the Second Vatican Council. This address represented a further development in Pope John's thinking about the relationship of the Church and the world. It also underscored his growing appreciation of the signs of the times as containing a message or word from God to the world and the Church.

Early in the speech, the Pope challenged those persons in the Church's central administration and others in the Church who see only evil in the world:

In the daily exercise of our pastoral office, we sometimes have to listen, much to our regret, to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. In these modern times they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin. They say that our era, in comparison with past eras, is getting worse and they behave as though they had learned nothing from history, which is, none the less, the teacher of life. They behave as though at the time of former councils everything was a full triumph for the Christian idea and life and for proper religious liberty.

We feel we must disagree with those prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world was at hand.<sup>11</sup>

The next two paragraphs of his speech show clearly how John XXIII's stance toward the world had changed and the direction in which he was moving. He went beyond his previous papal statements by speaking of Divine Providence operating in the world and leading humanity to a better tomorrow:

In the present order of things, Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by men's own efforts and even beyond their very expectations, are directed toward the fulfillment of God's superior and inscrutable designs. And everything, even human differences, leads to the greater good of the Church.<sup>12</sup>

Pope John thus saw Divine Providence operating in all of history. In his view of human history, Pope John looked for the advantages in the developments within history. He was not willing to look back on the past as if it contained some glorious history of the Church, which in the present age, the Church could only long for or remember nostalgically. He was realistic about the Church's history: Furthermore, his realism sought to find out what God was doing in the historical events.<sup>13</sup>

It seems clear that Pope John XXIII was calling the Church to read the signs of the times and to discern in them the presence and activity of God. In his opening speech, he further laid the groundwork for the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. That groundwork would be completed with the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, issued on April 11, 1963, fewer than two months before John's death.

### *Pacem in Terris*

Before turning our attention to the emergence of the theological category "signs of the times" and its refinement through

the drafts that led to the final version of the Pastoral Constitution in the Modern World, a word is in order regarding Pope John's last major statement to the world, *Pacem in Terris*. Along with the *ad intra/ad extra* distinction discussed above, this encyclical had important methodological and thematic influences on the development of *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) and other conciliar documents.<sup>14</sup>

*Pacem in Terris* displays a remarkable understanding of the modern world. Although the encyclical does not use the phrase "reading the signs of the times," this is one of the primary methods used in analyzing the world.<sup>15</sup> In each of the first four sections of the letter, Pope John discussed explicitly the signs of the times or the "distinctive characteristics" of the age. Thus, in Part I of the encyclical on the "Order Among Men," Pope John discerned three principal characteristics in this area: 1) the working classes have gradually gained ground in economic and public affairs; 2) women are now taking a part in public life; and 3) people either have or are on the way to achieving political independence.

Part II of the encyclical centered around a discussion of the relations between individuals and public authorities within given countries. Pope John XXIII acknowledged three distinct characteristics in this area. They are: 1) the inclusion of fundamental human rights in the nation's constitution; 2) the procedures through which the governing powers are to be defined and related to one another; and 3) the delineation of the rights and duties of the government and the people.

In the third section on the relations between states, Pope John noted one major characteristic of the age: people are becoming more and more convinced that war is a futile way to resolve conflicts and, therefore, nations must seek to negotiate their differences.

The relationship between people in political communities and the world community is the subject of the fourth section of *Pacem in Terris*. Here Pope John pointed to the United Nations as a sign of hope for the human community. According to Pope John, the United Nations has as its essential purpose:

the maintenance and consolidation of peace  
between peoples, fostering between them friendly

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relations based on the principles of equality, mutual respect and varied forms of cooperation in every sector of human endeavor.<sup>16</sup>

Of particular interest to us is that after reading these signs of the times in the first four parts of the encyclical, Pope John then went on to give his pastoral exhortations on the involvement of the Church in working to establish peace on earth:

Once again we deem it opportune to remind our children of their duty to take an active part in public life and to contribute toward the attainment of the common good of the entire human family as well as to that of their own political community. They should endeavor, therefore, in the light of their Christian faith and led by love, to insure that the various institutions — whether economic, social, cultural or political in purpose — should be such as not to create obstacles, but rather to facilitate or render less arduous man's perfecting of himself in both the natural order and the supernatural.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, because of the technical and scientific developments that have occurred, it is not enough to be merely “illuminated with the gift of faith and enkindled with the desire of forwarding a good cause.”<sup>18</sup> The situation in the world today requires Catholics “to take an active part in the various organizations and influence them from within.”<sup>19</sup> However, “one cannot enter these organizations and work effectively from within unless one is scientifically competent, technically capable and skilled in the practice of his own profession.”<sup>20</sup>

It should be clear that in *Pacem in Terris* Pope John provided the Council and Catholic theology with a theological method that takes seriously the signs of the times as a source of, and point of departure for, theological reflection. As Cardinal Roy noted, “John XXIII is content to enunciate this approach to reality by practicing it, in all simplicity. It is *Gaudium et Spes* that worked

out the theory of it, as well as its own proper methodology.”<sup>21</sup> We now turn our attention to the theological category “signs of the times” as it is used in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*.

*The Pastoral Constitution on the Church  
in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes*

The promulgation of the *Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World* on December 7, 1965 was the culmination of a long process of development. This pastoral constitution is unique in conciliar history for two reasons. First, it represented the first time that the Church addressed formally her relationship with the world in a conciliar document. Second, it proposed a new way of theologizing about the role of the Church in the world.

The bishops began their reflection on the role of the Church in the modern world by reading the signs of the times. It was on this basis that they went on to express a theology of human existence and consequently develop a theology of the role of the Church in the modern world. This was a great methodological breakthrough for contemporary Catholic theology. The bishops provided subsequent Catholic theological reflection with the possibility of starting with the signs of the times.

*Contemporary Signs of the Times*

Having linked the Church with the “joys and hopes and the griefs and anxieties” (GS 1) of all people of this age, the bishops of the Second Vatican Council affirmed the Church’s “solidarity with the human family with which it is bound up” (GS 3).<sup>22</sup> In order to “carry forward the work of Christ Himself under the lead of the befriending Spirit” (GS 3), the Church has the responsibility of “scrutinizing the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (GS 4). Inspired by no earthly ambition, the Church seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ Himself under the lead of the befriending Spirit. To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting

them in the light of the gospel (GS 3 & 4). In order to do this, the Church must “recognize and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics” (GS 4). This was a different way of undertaking theological reflection.<sup>23</sup>

In the promulgated version of *Gaudium et Spes*, the bishops called attention to a number of dramatic characteristics of the times in which they lived.

### *Profoundly Changing Times*

The most significant sign of the times, according to *Gaudium et Spes*, is the rapidly changing conditions of the modern world, seen as part of “a broader and deeper revolution” (GS 5). As such, it is the principal characteristic of this age, having brought about new consciousness, and having called forth new action from within the human community. This judgment affected the entire analysis that the bishops made regarding the modern world in which the Church must carry out her mission. According to the bishops, the human race is entering a new period in its development:

Today the human race is passing through a new stage of its history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world. Triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of man, these changes recoil upon him, upon his decisions and desires, both individual and collective and upon his manner of thinking and acting with respect to things and to people. Hence we can already speak of a true social and cultural transformation, one which has repercussions on man’s religious life as well. (GS 4)

Moreover, these profound changes are occurring rapidly and affect everyone:

History itself speeds along on so rapid a course that an individual person can scarcely keep abreast

of it. The destiny of the human community has become all of a piece, where once the various groups of men had a kind of private history of their own. Thus, the human race has passed from a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one. (GS 5)

The changing conditions that the Council identified were: the vast migration of people from rural areas; increasing urbanization throughout the world; the expansion of industrial society to all parts of the earth; the development of new and more efficient media of communication; decolonization and the emergence of new nations; the challenging of accepted values by young people; and the changing role of women.

The Council Fathers recognized the importance of culture in every age, for the changing conditions listed above are all taking place within cultures:

It is a fact bearing on the very person of man that he can come to an authentic and full humanity only through culture, that is, through the cultivation of natural goods and values. Wherever human life is involved, therefore, nature and culture are quite intimately connected. (GS 53)

However, in this age, culture is even more important because contemporary culture has changed substantially from classical times. The reason for this is the enormous growth of natural, human, and social sciences, progress in technology, and advances in the development and organization of communication (GS 54). Because of these changes, contemporary culture possesses particular characteristics. Some of the characteristics seem to be of great importance:

The so-called exact sciences sharpen critical judgment to a very fine edge. Recent psychological research explains human activity more profoundly. Historical studies make a signal contribution to

bringing men to see things in their changeable and evolutionary aspects. Customs and usages are becoming increasingly uniform. Industrialization, urbanization, and other causes of community living create new forms of culture (mass-culture), from which arise new ways of thinking, acting, and making use of leisure. The growth of communication between the various nations and social groups opens more widely to all the treasures of different cultures. (GS 54)

Because of the development of these characteristics, “a more universal form of culture is developing, one which will promote and express the unity of the human race” (GS 54). As a result of this contemporary cultural phenomenon, a growing number of men and women throughout the world are becoming aware of themselves as “the artisans and authors of the culture of their community” (GS 55).

Developing the notion that radical change is one of the most significant signs of these times, the Council fathers also recognized the dramatic upheavals occurring within the political dimensions of life:

Our times have witnessed profound changes too in the institutions of peoples and in the ways that peoples are joined together. These changes are resulting from the cultural, economic, and social evolution of these same peoples. The changes are having a great impact on the life of the political community, especially with regard to universal rights and duties both in the exercise of civil liberty and in the attainment of the common good, and with regard to the regulation of the relations of citizens among themselves, and with public authority. (GS 73)

In this age, many people are more conscious of their personal rights and are looking to establish political structures which will foster those rights:

From a keener awareness of human dignity there arises in many parts of the world a desire to establish a political-world-order in which personal rights can gain better protection. These include the rights of free assembly, of common action, of expressing personal opinions and of professing a religion both privately and publicly. For the protection of personal rights is a necessary condition for the active participation of citizens, whether as individuals or collectively, in the life and government of the state. (GS 73)

These changes have caused serious difficulties for many people:

As happens in any crisis of growth, this transformation has brought serious difficulties in its wake. Thus while man extends his power in every direction, he does not always succeed in subjecting it to his own welfare. Striving to penetrate farther into the deeper recesses of his own mind, he frequently appears more unsure of himself. Gradually and more precisely he lays bare the laws of society, only to be paralyzed by uncertainty about the direction to give it. (GS 4)

This is a startling insight which merits further analysis. What the bishops were suggesting is that change itself had become a fundamental characteristic of the age. The reality of change was affecting every aspect of life on earth. Stability and traditional patterns of organization and behavior could no longer be taken for granted. The phenomenon of change would raise a new set of questions, fears and hopes. It would also challenge many traditional philosophical and theological categories that were no longer viable.

While recognizing the significant effect these changing times were having on human beings and society as a whole, the bishops in *Gaudium et Spes* also affirmed the universal longings and questions of the human person that exist in every historical age.

“The Church maintains that beneath all changes there are many realities which do not change” (GS 10).

Furthermore, in the face of the modern development of the world, an ever-increasing number of people are raising the most basic questions or recognizing them with a new sharpness: What is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress? What is the purpose of these victories, purchased at so high a cost? What can man offer to society? What can he expect from it? What follows this earthly life? (GS 10)

In a thorough analysis of the signs of the times, there is a recognition that the human person is both finite and called and oriented towards a limitless, higher destiny.

### *Imbalance in Economic and Social Life*

Another important sign of the times, according to *Gaudium et Spes*, is the tremendous imbalance between the rich and the poor:<sup>24</sup>

While an enormous mass of people still lack the absolute necessities of life, some even in less advanced countries, live sumptuously or squander wealth. Luxury and misery rub shoulders. While the few enjoy very great freedom of choice, the many are deprived of almost all possibility of acting on their own initiative and responsibility, and often subsist in living and working conditions unworthy of human beings. (GS 63)

Thus, while acknowledging the fact that the human race has never enjoyed so great an abundance of wealth, resources, and economic power as today, the Council was also quick to point out that a “high proportion of the world’s citizens is still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total



illiteracy" (GS 4). As the Council repeatedly noted, economic and social development is ambiguous:

Again, we are at a moment in history when the development of economic life could diminish social inequalities if that development were guided and coordinated in a reasonable and human way. Yet all too often it serves only to intensify the inequalities. In some places it even results in a decline in the social status of the weak and in contempt for the poor. (GS 63)

This is true not only for economic and social development but for all human activity.

A new development in today's world is that many people, particularly the poor, "are coming to feel these inequalities with an ever sharper awareness" (GS 63). Indeed a growing number of people are "thoroughly convinced that the wider technical and economic potential which the modern world enjoys can and should correct this unhappy state of affairs" (GS 63).

The bishops perceived correctly that the tremendous imbalances in the socio-economic order and the desires of many people, particularly the poor, to change this situation were signs of the times to which the Church must respond. This was an important judgment on the part of the bishops because in so doing, they aligned themselves with some of the dominant forces in this historical era, forces whose influence was being felt throughout the world.

### *Peace and the Threat of Total War*

No scrutiny of the signs of the times would be complete without a word about the quest for peace and the threat of war, which becomes all the more significant in our own age because nations now possess the possibility of nuclear annihilation:

The horror and perversity of war are immensely magnified by the multiplication of scientific

weapons. For acts of war involving these weapons can inflict massive and indiscriminate destruction far exceeding the bounds of legitimate defense. Indeed, if the kinds of instruments which can now be found in the armories of the great nations were to be employed to their fullest, an almost total and altogether reciprocal slaughter of each side by the other would follow, not to mention the widespread devastation which would take place in the world and the deadly aftereffects which would be spawned by the use of such weapons. (GS 80)

The human enterprise is now challenged in a way that it has not been challenged before.<sup>25</sup>

### *Religious Changes*

In article 7 of *Gaudium et Spes* the bishops recognized the significant changes that have occurred in the area of religion. On the one hand, the new conditions of contemporary culture have helped people distinguish religion from a magical view of the world and from superstitions. This has resulted in many people “achieving a more vivid sense of God” (GS 7).

On the other hand, however, a growing number of people are abandoning religion in practice. In the contemporary world, this is no longer an unusual or isolated occurrence:

For today it is not rare for such decisions to be presented as requirements of scientific progress or of a certain new humanism. In numerous places these views are voiced not only in the teachings of philosophers, but on every side they influence literature, the arts, and interpretation of the humanities and of history, and civil laws themselves. As a consequence, many people are shaken. (GS 7)

Any attentive reading of the signs of the times by the church in the last third of the twentieth century would have to include a recognition of these religious developments in contemporary life.

### A New Way of Doing Theology

In the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, the Council Fathers introduced an important methodological development for Catholic theology. In *Gaudium et Spes* the bishops began their theological reflection on the role of the Church in the modern world by reading the signs of the times, discerning in these events the presence and activity of God. It was on the basis of this analysis and discernment that they went on to develop a theology of human existence and of the role of the Church in the world. This represented a significant departure from the traditional classicist approach in dogmatic and moral theology, which was essentially ahistorical, starting from established principles and applying them to the question at hand.

The questions that the signs of the times raise pose two challenges for the Church, according to *Gaudium et Spes*. First, the Church can and indeed must answer those questions from the biblical tradition (GS 3, 10, 22, 40, 42). The theological anthropology developed in this document draws heavily on the scriptural tradition.

The second challenge to which the Church must respond is to appreciate the hermeneutic or interpretive role which the contemporary questions can play in clarifying the meaning of the Gospel (GS 40, 44, 62). For example, the Church is “firmly convinced that she can be abundantly and variously helped by the world in the matter of preparing the ground for the gospel” (GS 40). Just as it is in the world’s interest to acknowledge the Church as a historical reality and to recognize her good influence, so “the Church herself knows how richly she has profited by the history and development of humanity” (GS 44).

The bishops went on to acknowledge that

the progress of the sciences, and the treasures hidden in the various forms of human culture,

the nature of man himself is more clearly revealed and new roads to truth are opened. These benefits profit the Church too, for from the beginning of her history, she has learned to express the message of Christ with the help of the ideas and terminology of various peoples, and has tried to clarify it with the wisdom of philosophers too. (GS 44).

Furthermore, the Church has always had as her purpose to adapt the gospel “to the grasp of all as well as to the needs of the learned, insofar as such was appropriate” (GS 44). Indeed, this accommodated preaching of the revealed Word ought to remain the law of all evangelization. Each nation must develop the ability to express Christ’s message in its own way. This allows a living exchange to be fostered between the Church and the diverse cultures of people.

For this to happen,

the Church requires special help, particularly in our day, when things are changing very rapidly and the ways of thinking are exceedingly various. She must rely on those who live in the world, are versed in different institutions and specialties, and grasp their innermost significance in the eyes of both believers and unbelievers. With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word. In this way, revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and set forth to greater advantage. (GS 44)

The Council Fathers also recognized that since the Church has a visible and social structure, “she can and ought to be enriched by the development of human social life” (GS 44). In addition, she

gratefully understands that in her community life no less than in her individual children, she receives help from people of every rank and condition. For whoever promotes the human community at the family level, culturally, in its economic, social, and political dimensions, both nationally and internationally, such a one, according to God's design, is contributing greatly to the Church community as well. Indeed, the Church admits that she has greatly profited and still profits from the antagonism of those who oppose or persecute her (GS 44).

The bishops thus recognized the important hermeneutic role that the signs of the times play for the elaboration of the gospel in the contemporary world. The Church is firmly rooted in history. As such she is both teacher and one who can learn from the world.

### Reading the Signs of the Times After Vatican II

The process of reading the signs of the times as it was developed in *Gaudium et Spes* recognized that this method of theological reflection would necessarily be ongoing. It was not a once and for all process but rather one that the Church would need to engage in during every historical period. The times would change, new movements would emerge, and thus the Church would need to read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel so as to better understand her mission in the world at that particular time. For example, twice in the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops' Final Report, the bishops recognized that the signs of the times were somewhat different than they were in the days of the Second Vatican Council. Under the heading "The Mystery of the Church," they affirmed that "The brief twenty-year period that separates us from the conclusion of the Council has brought with it accelerated changes in history. In this sense, the signs of our times do not exactly coincide, in some points, with those of the period of the Council.<sup>26</sup> Later on, under the heading "Importance of the Constitution 'Gaudium et Spes,' " they wrote:

We perceive that the signs of our time are, in part, different from those of the time of the

Council, with greater problems and anguish. Today, in fact, everywhere in the world we witness an increase in hunger, oppression, injustice and war, sufferings, terrorism and other forms of violence of every sort. This requires a new and more profound theological reflection in order to interpret these signs in the light of the gospel.<sup>27</sup>

Reading the signs of the times since Vatican II as a starting point for theological reflection has had enormous influence on the life of the Church since the Council. Not only has it guided the Universal Church in articulating her work in the world, it has also been of enormous use to many regional and national churches throughout the world.

Within the North American context, the two best examples of the Catholic Church using the methodology of reading the signs of the times are the pastoral letters on peace and on the American economy. Issued by the U.S. Catholic bishops, each document was developed through a process of listening and dialogue with many individuals and groups before the final version was approved by the bishops.

In "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response," the bishops acknowledged three signs of the times that had particularly influenced the writing of this pastoral letter. The first sign was that the world wants peace and needs it. The second sign was that the arms race is one of the greatest curses on the human race and the harm it inflicts on the poor is more than can be endured. "The third is the way in which the unique dangers and dynamics of the nuclear arms race present qualitatively new problems which must be addressed by fresh applications of traditional moral principles." Of particular interest for us is the next sentence: "In the light of these three characteristics, we wish to examine Catholic teaching on peace and war."<sup>28</sup> The bishops recognized that this is a new historical situation which required a reexamination of the Church's teaching on peace and war. The traditional teaching would have to be applied in a fresh way and would also involve new development in the teaching. For

example, in this pastoral letter, there is a positive presentation of a theology of nonviolence.<sup>29</sup>

In "Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teachings and the U.S. Economy," the bishops began their pastoral letter with an analysis of the signs of hope and the failures in U.S. economic life. Having read the signs of the times, the bishops then went on to reflect on the Christian vision of economic life. It is only then that they applied the vision and its principles and norms to specific issues, engaging in detailed analysis of the urgent problems of the day.

In addition, countless theologians, religious congregations, parish communities, church movements, and individuals have adopted this theological method in their scholarly work and in their pastoral and personal ministries. In Latin America in the late 1960s, Gustavo Gutierrez led the way in the development of liberation theology. This dynamic theological movement grew out of the critical reading of the signs of the times within events and circumstances of that continent. Gutierrez and other theologians in Latin America took seriously the idea of discerning the activity of God not only in the pastoral activity of the Church but also in the events of history as they were unfolding.

In Africa, the German born theologian Walbert Buehlmann recognized the emergence of the world church in the major developments occurring in the rapid growth of churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In the dramatic demographic shift of the center of Christianity from Europe and North America to these continents, Buehlmann identified the work of the Holy Spirit in the signs of the times. The task of theologians and pastors was to articulate a theology and pastoral plans of action that took seriously this new circumstance for the Church in the world. A new missionary era was beginning, different from anything that preceded it.

In surveying the way many religious communities and parishes have undertaken pastoral planning, it is clear that reading the signs of the times in order to discern what God may be calling these Christian communities to do has become the prevalent *modus operandi*. While the work of the Jesuits in this regard is the most well known expression, one is quick to find this method being used by campus ministry groups, congregations of men and

women religious, and pastoral care programs throughout the country.

### Conclusion

As is evident from the material in this chapter, Pope John XXIII's decision to call together the bishops of the Catholic Church for the purpose of a general council has had a profound effect on the Church. It inaugurated a movement of renewal and transformation that continues to affect every area of Church life. This is particularly true for Catholic theology, which has, as a principal task, the responsibility of assisting the Church in fulfilling her mission in the world.

The Second Vatican Council, more than any other event in the twentieth century, was the Church's public recognition of her solidarity with the human family, especially the poor, and of her integral involvement, as servant, in the world. Furthermore, the Council affirmed the Church's rootedness in history and her eschatological nature as a reality in the making, a promise as yet unfulfilled. These affirmations were rooted in, as well as led to, a realization that there was a source or locus for Catholic theology that had not been appreciated fully in the past, that of human experience, particularly the signs of the times.

In *Gaudium et Spes*, the bishops introduced an important methodological development that would have far-reaching implications for future theological reflection. They started their theological reflection on the role of the Church in the world by first reading the signs of the times. Subsequent Catholic theology has come to recognize some major events, phenomena, or movements in history as special indicators of the presence and activity of God in the world, indeed, of His word to the Church. As such, they point toward and may even mediate His presence, activity, and word. Thus, the signs of the times necessarily become an integral part of the starting point of theological reflection. They are *loci theologici*. Since this is the case, the task of scrutinizing or discerning the signs of the times so as to hear the word of God being addressed to the Church is an essential part of doing theology.



The recognition of the signs of the times as an integral part of the starting point for theology represented a significant departure from the traditional classicist approaches in dogmatic theology.<sup>30</sup> In the methodology of the earlier dogmatic theology, three steps were involved, namely: 1) presentation of the Church's teaching; 2) appeal to Scripture and tradition to prove or support the teaching; and 3) speculative support and exploration of it.<sup>31</sup> The methodology employed in *Gaudium et Spes* recognized that the Church's theological reflection could not remain separate from the events of history and from what God is doing in these events. Theology is necessarily rooted in and related to history. It can both provide an answer to the questions raised by the events of history and be interpreted in light of those events.

Thus the rediscovery of the "signs of the times" as a principal source for theological reflection is one of the most important developments occurring in Catholic life and theology as a result of the Council. Historical events, phenomena, or movements are "signs of the times" and not merely raw empirical human data because they are interpreted by prophets, pastors, ecclesial communities within the Church, and the Church as a whole in the light of the Gospel. Recognizing the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel are critical functions for the Church if she is to exercise her pastoral ministry in a given culture, since the signs of the times provide key insights into the human condition at a particular time.

Equally important for the Church is that in these signs of the times God is also addressing a word to the Church. With this recognition comes the task of scrutinizing the signs of the times so as to hear the word of God being addressed to the Church today. The totality of discourse addressed by God to humankind includes, therefore, the word of God being addressed to the Church in the signs of the times.

The emergence of the "signs of the times" as an integral part of the starting point for theological reflection requires the recognition that God's word is not exhausted in the Scriptures or even in the living tradition of the Church. Rather, it challenges theology to search for the word of God in contemporary history as well.

In addition, an important dimension of this discovery is the conviction that scrutinizing the “signs of the times” is not solely an intellectual activity. It requires active engagement therein. Thus, the word of God can also be manifested in the praxis called forth by the “signs of the times.” By responding to that word, the Church is able to carry out faithfully her fundamental yet evolving mission in the world.

Once the “signs of the times” are seen as vehicles through which God can address His word to the Church, it becomes incumbent upon the Church to read carefully and continually the “signs of the times.”

#### Notes

1. Pope John XXIII made his first announcement of his intention of convoking an ecumenical Council in an address delivered to seventeen Cardinals in the Basilica of St. Paul-Outside-the-Walls on January 25, 1959.

2. He wrote in *Humanae Salutis*, “Today the Church is witnessing a crisis underway within society, while humanity is on the edge of a new era, tasks of immense gravity and amplitude await the Church as in the most tragic periods of its history. It is a question in fact of bringing the modern world into contact with the vivifying and perennial energies of the Gospel.” In Floyd Anderson, ed., *Council Daybook: Sessions in I and II* (Washington: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1965), 6.

3. *Humanae Salutis*, 6.

4. Some writers have argued that Pope John was too focused on merely the positive developments or events in history. See, for example, Peter Hebblethwaite, *Synod Extraordinary* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 114.

5. *Humanae Salutis*, 6.

6. *Humanae Salutis*, 6.

7. *Humanae Salutis*, 70.

8. *Lumen Gentium*, in *Council Daybook*, 19.

9. *Lumen Gentium*, 19.

10. *Lumen Gentium*, 19.

11. Pope John XIII, in *Council Daybook*, 26.

12. Pope John XIII, in *Council Daybook*, 26.

13. Pope John XIII, in *Council Daybook*, 26.

14. The influence of *Pacem in Terris* on *Gaudium et Spes* can be seen in the Subject Index of *Commentary*, volume 5, 405. As Cardinal Roy

pointed out in his "Reflections on the Tenth Anniversary of *Pacem in Terris*," "It is on *Gaudium et Spes* that the Encyclical exercised an undeniable influence. This is evident in the chapter devoted to war and peace (part II, chapter 5); but is equally clear in the very inspiration and structure of this pastoral constitution." In Joseph Gremillion, ed., *The Gospel of Peace and Justice: Catholic Social Teaching Since Pope John* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1976), 537, cited hereafter as *GPJ*.

15. Again, Cardinal Roy on the tenth anniversary of *Pacem in Terris* made a similar point: "The most widely noted novelty of its method is the recourse to the idea of the "signs of the times" ("Reflections," 561).

16. *Pacem in Terris*, in *GPJ*, 232.

17. *Pacem in Terris*, 232.

18. *Pacem in Terris*, 233.

19. *Pacem in Terris*, 233.

20. *Pacem in Terris*, 233.

21. Cardinal Roy, "Reflections," 561.

22. This theme of solidarity with the human family is a recurring one in subsequent church documents. Pope Paul VI, in *On the Development of Peoples* (March 27, 1967), wrote, "A renewed consciousness of the demands of the Gospel make it the Church's duty to put herself at the service of all men, to help them grasp their serious problem in all its dimensions, and to convince them that solidarity in action at this turning point in human history is a matter of urgency" (*GPJ*, 387-88). In the documents from the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín, solidarity is an important theme. For example, in the document "Peace," the Latin American bishops see one of their responsibilities to be "to awaken in individuals and communities, principally through mass media, a living awareness of justice, infusing in them a dynamic sense of responsibility and solidarity" (*GPJ*, 462). Speaking of their own responsibility as bishops, they said, "We ought to sharpen the awareness of our duty of solidarity with the poor, to which charity leads us. This solidarity means that we make ours their problems and struggles, that we know how to speak with them. This has to be concretized in criticism of injustice and oppression, in the struggle against the intolerable situation which a poor person often has to tolerate, in the willingness to dialogue with the groups responsible for the situation in order to make them understand their obligations" (*GPJ*, 474).

The bishops of the United States have spoken on several occasions about their solidarity with other bishops in countries where there have been violations of human rights. For example, on February 14, 1974, in a statement issued by the Administrative Board of the United States

Catholic Conference, the bishops associated themselves with "solidarity with the Church in Chile during these troubled times" and "in solidarity with the Brazilian bishops in their call for greater respect for human rights." Hugh Nolan, ed., *Pastoral Letters of the U.S. Catholic Bishops*, vol. III, 1962-1974 (Washington: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1983), 453-545, cited hereafter as *Letters*. In their closing exhortation in *Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington: U.S.C.C., 1986), the bishops wrote, "We have to move from our devotion to independence, through an understanding of interdependence, to a commitment to human solidarity" (183).

23. The pastoral letters on peace and on the economy issued by the U.S. Catholic bishops show the strong influence of the methodology developed in *Gaudium et Spes*.

24. A complete listing of all the references in ecclesial documents on this theme of the imbalances in economic and social life would be too long. It is sufficient to note the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, the documents of the Latin American Bishops at Medellín, and the numerous addresses of Pope John Paul II in his travels. The U.S. Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on the Economy continues this tradition: "Beyond our own shores, the reality of 800 million people living in absolute poverty and 450 million malnourished or facing starvation casts an ominous shadow over all these hopes and problems at home."

25. As noted in note 14, the Pastoral Letter of the U.S. Bishops on War and Peace issued in 1983 recognized this very fact among the reasons for their being obliged to write this letter.

26. Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, "Final Report," in Xavier Rynne, *John Paul's Extraordinary Synod* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1986), 117.

27. Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, "Final Report," 128.

28. *Letters*, 4:496.

29. *Letters*, 4:523-25.

30. Walter Kasper, *The Methods of Dogmatic Theology*, trans. John Drury (New York: Paulist Press, 1969), 11.

31. Praising the work of Adolphe Tanquerey in dogmatic and moral theology, Archbishop Michael Curley of Baltimore wrote in 1930 that "Father Tanquerey had many models; the general outline, the questions treated and the method of procedure had been determined long before. Among our many excellent textbooks there can be now but accidental differences." Foreword to Adolphe Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* (Tournai, Belgium: Desclée and Company, 1930), v.

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