

THE PASTORAL CONSTITUTION *GAUDIUM ET SPES* AND POPE FRANCIS' CONTRIBUTION TO CATHOLIC SOCIAL DISCERNMENT

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Despite what some commentators contend, Gaudium et spes is not a secondary text of the Second Vatican Council, but a turning point in the Catholic Church's commitment to the world.¹ In what follows I will articulate in what regards this pastoral constitution can be read as a key document for the development of official Catholic social teaching, and how Pope Francis radicalizes the perspectives opened by it. I will point out in what aspects Gaudium et spes has had direct impact on the development of Catholic social thought. It is evident that the pastoral constitution was in more regards crucial for the further development of theological ethics in general: it deepened Pope John XXIII's personalist turn in Mater et Magistra and Pacem in Terris, and endorsed his positive attitude towards human freedom and the role of conscience as "most secret core and sanctuary of men" (GS 16). For his part, Francis draws upon the teaching of Gaudium et spes and makes central the theme of solidarity with the poor as a way of imitating Jesus.

¹ There is still a tendency among conservative scholars to minimize the fundamental shift that *Gaudium et spes* meant to the Catholic Church. See for example: Christian D. Washburg, *Interpreting Vatican II*, *The Thomist*, 78 (2014), 125-134: "Three important facts must be recalled about this 'pastoral constitution' which speak to its theological limits...GS hardly provides the basis for a theological reading of the other constitutions, even if it remains the basis for a pastoral approach to engagement with our times."

GAUDIUM ET SPES AND ITS APPROACH
TO CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

With the first words of this pastoral constitution, the Second Vatican Council clearly abandoned the concept of the Church as “fortress set apart from the city,”² or a “perfect society” radically distinguished from the outside world. It opted for a Church inserted in the real history of the humankind, a Church sharing “the hopes and joys, the griefs and anxieties” of our contemporaries” (GS 1). Its immersion in the *common* history of the humankind is a continuing learning process at the point of intersection of “the gospel and human experience” (GS 46).³ The consequence is that, without compromising the distinctiveness of its message, the Catholic Church has “to learn from the world, and not always teach the world unilaterally.”⁴

Secondly, the pastoral constitution shifted the focus from social *doctrine* to social *discernment*, in view of the Church’s participation in the creation of a society in which every citizen can live a dignified life. This discernment approach is described in terms of “scrutinizing the signs of the times” and “interpreting them in the light of the gospel” (GS 4).

The concept ‘signs of the times’ do not simply refer to facts or events that are known via social analysis. It is about a theological hermeneutic, which *Gaudium et spes* articulates in

² Oscar Romero, “The Political Dimension of Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor,” in *Archbishop Oscar Romero, Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements, Introductory Essays by Ignacio Martin-Baró and Jon Sobrino, Translated from the Spanish by Michael J. Walsh* (New York, Orbis Books, 2003), 178.

³ This is, unfortunately, not mentioned in the Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church, see Sahayadas Fernando, *The Church in the World. The Reception of Gaudium et Spes in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2015), 58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, his contention is based on GS 44.

terms of deciphering “authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires” which the people of God shares with its contemporaries (GS 11). Such a “deciphering” presupposes, as Erik Borgman highlights that “God’s transcendence cannot be discovered in the exaltation and distance with respect to the concrete and laborious life, but precisely in connection with it.”⁵

However, this discovery is a difficult process, since it confronts the Church with the real ambivalences of history and the structures of evil that pervert the process of humanization. There are both life-giving developments and destructive tendencies, processes leading to human flourishing and events that lead to a violation of human dignity. Both have theological significance. The positive events can be theologically interpreted as signs of the times, or as steps towards the realization of the reign of God. *Gaudium et spes* expresses the conviction that God’s kingdom is already present “in mystery” on earth, and that all what contributes to the humanization of the world, more precisely “the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise,” have eschatological meaning. The pastoral constitution highlights that we will find these values “again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured, when Christ hands over to the Father ‘a kingdom eternal and universal, a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace’” (GS 39).

In this perspective, one can notice that negative experiences can likewise be ‘signs of the times,’ namely as negative contrast experiences, or, what Erik Borgman describes as “traces of longing for wholesomeness [salvation, liberation] that are hidden in the resistance against all that

⁵ Erik Borgman, *Metamorfosen: Over religie en moderne cultuur*, Kampen, Klement, 2006, as quoted by Christophe Brabant, *Tertion*, 397 (September 19, 2007), 14.

imprisons and humiliates human persons, and which influences their experience of God as such that they experience him often as absent.”⁶

The qualification of “scrutinizing the signs of the times” approach as theological does not imply that social analysis would be redundant. On the contrary, judgments on social, political, and economic realities cannot be made merely on the basis of faith propositions.⁷ Without social and ethical analysis, the faith perspective loses touch with reality. A theological interpretation must “track the contours of reality; it has to have accuracy, and not simply imagination or appeal.”⁸

Thus, imagination plays a crucial role in theological reflection, because *Gaudium et spes* proposes to interpret the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel. Analyzing reality in the light of the Gospel is neither a matter of supplementing the world with additional truths nor of using the Bible as a reservoir of citations to be used for the illustration of ethical arguments. What matters is the reciprocity between Gospel and life.

When we read the Gospel from the context in which we live, and when grassroots movements, Bishops, the Pope and his advisers read the Gospel from the perspective of their different historical and local or global contexts, something fundamental happens in the interplay between the readers and the text; between historical-contextual experience, and the abundance of meaning generated by the biblical metaphors and stories. In and through a contextual-hermeneutical relation with the biblical text they are enabled

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For a reflection on this problem see Johan De Tavernier, “Eschatology and Social Ethics,” in Louis Janssens, Joseph A. Selling, and Franz Böckle, *Personalist Morals: Essays in Honor of Professor Louis Janssens* (Leuven: Peeters/University Press, 1988), 279–300.

⁸ See Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 24.

to see the world in a new light and to discover new ways of being and acting. A hermeneutic relation with the living text of the Gospel gives them what Jon Sobrino articulates as “new eyes for seeing the ultimate truth of things and new energies for exploring unknown and dangerous paths.”⁹

Third, the epistemological shift in *Gaudium et spes* coincided with a concrete option for the poor by a significant group of council Fathers. It was symbolically expressed a few weeks before the official promulgation of *Gaudium et spes* in the *Pact of the Catacombs* (November 16, 1965), in which the participating bishops promised “a life of poverty” and to realize “a servant and poor church.”¹⁰ Paving the way to Medellin and the development of liberation theology, the Pact of the Catacombs expressed the conviction that the Church must be a transformative power in the history of the world. This is at least implicit in *Gaudium et spes*, but it does not mean that it would be a liberationist document: “it contained, in embryo the fundamental ideas and foundations for the liberationist themes that emerged immediately after the council.”¹¹ Donal Dorr highlights that although the pastoral constitution still paid tribute to the liberal agenda, it must be read as “a major achievement” because it “provided the foundation on which was built, three years later at Medellin, the Latin American Church’s formal commitment to taking an option for the poor.”¹² This

⁹ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (New York, Orbis Books, 1994), 151.

¹⁰ Jon Sobrino, *Wij moeten dringend terugkeren naar de kerk van de armen*, in *Profeten zwijgen niet. Omtrent José Comblin en de bevrijdingstheologie*, ed. Jan Soetewey (Antwerp/Apeldoorn, Garant, 2013), 143.

¹¹ Sahayadas Fernando, *The Church and the World...*, 379; see also Manuel Velasquez, *Gaudium et spes and the Development of Catholic Social-Economic Teaching*, in *Questions of Special Urgency: The Church in the Modern World Two Decades after Vatican II*, ed. J.A. Dwyer (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1986), 187-192.

¹² Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor and for the Earth. Catholic Social Teaching* (New York, Orbis Books, 2012), 143-145.

option resonates particularly in the chapter on economic and social life (part 2, chapter 3), and most outspokenly in the text on private property and the universal destination of the goods, which culminates in a critique of large land ownership (GS 71).

Fourth, *Gaudium et spes* was also a conciliar endorsement of the shift from just war theory to integral peace-building in *Pacem in terris*: “peace is not merely the absence of war; nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies; nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called *an enterprise of justice*” (GS 78).

The strong affirmation of justice throughout the text of the pastoral constitution was more than a reference to the device of Pius XII: “*opus iustitiae pax*,” because it was the explicit request of a significant group of bishops of the South to put the justice agenda at the center of the Church’s social teaching. The “call to justice” has continued to resonate after *Gaudium et spes* and it culminated in the final text of the Synod of Bishops on justice in 1971, in which the bishops interpreted “action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world” as “a constitutive dimension of the evangelization, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation” (JW 6).

However, after the pontificate of Pope Paul VI this unambiguous commitment to justice and hence the duty to take into account the implications of structural analysis and social sin became subordinated to a more individual and intersubjective discourse on charity, or on solidarity defined as “social charity,” a subordination of which the lack of any reference to *Justice in the World* (1971) in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church* is a symptom. But since *Caritas in veritate* and more clearly the pontificate of

Pope Francis, a more balanced, nuanced, and radical vision restored the link with the aftermath of *Gaudium et spes*.

**POPE FRANCIS' INTERPRETATION OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL
TEACHING AS DISCERNMENT AND HIS RADICAL
OPTION FOR AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE POOR**

In *Evangelii gaudium*, Francis reasserts the fundamental solicitude expressed in the first words of *Gaudium et spes*: “we want to enter fully into the fabric of society, sharing the lives of all...; arm in arm with others, we are committed to building a new world” (EG 269). Simultaneously he re-confirms in his own words the message of the synod on justice (1971) on participation in the transformation of the world: “An authentic faith- which is never comfortable or completely personal- always implies a deep desire to change the world” (EG 183).

Francis links this transformative commitment with the idea already present in the Pact of the Catacombs, of a ‘church that is poor and for the poor’;¹³ he said, “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out of the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security” (EG 49). In more than one address he emphasizes that the poor are not simply the object of charity, but also subjects of history and of evangelization “we need to let ourselves to be evangelized by them” (EG 198). In this light Francis does not hesitate to use again the language of liberation, “each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor” (EG 187). He also highlights that it is the calling of the Church to “properly *accompany* the poor

¹³ Ruben C. Mendoza, “The Field Hospital of Pope Francis,” *MST Review* 16, no. 2 (2014): 17.

on *their* path of liberation” (EG 199). Such an accompaniment requires not an abstract doctrine, but social discernment. Hence his repeated reaffirmation of “reading the signs of the times in the light of the gospel” (EG 51, 53, 133). Averse of ideological abstractions, Francis, moreover, warns against doctrinal principles that “remain mere generalities that challenge no one” (EG 182). For him realities are more important than ideas and doctrine may not become a false representation of reality: “conceptual tools exist to heighten contact with realities they seek to explain, not to distance from them” (EG 194).

An important characteristic of Francis’ thinking is that, loyal to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, he assigns the task of social discernment to the whole church community in dialogue with others. Hence, not only his unambivalent reference to the texts of episcopal conferences and his reconfirmation of the collegiality between Pope and the bishops, but also his clear application of the integral ecclesiology in the second chapter of the dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*. Social discernment is “not the exclusive task of the Pope, nor of an elite speaking for the people,” but rather the task of the entire people of God: *all the communities* are meant to participate in the discernment (EG 51). Moreover, unlike his predecessors, Francis does not reduce the word ‘Church’ in his texts to “the hierarchy speaking to the people,” but he refers to the whole people of God as subject of discernment.

The most striking component of Francis’ social discernment is the way in which he links an unambiguous analysis of unjust structures and a sharp critique of contemporary capitalism both in *Evangelii gaudium*, with a radical interpretation of charity. Ruben Mendoza notices that *Evangelii gaudium* refers to ‘the poor’ in 81 instances, and

‘justice’ a total of 34 times.¹⁴ But simultaneously, Francis highlights that structural analysis must be rooted in a direct contact with the poor in whom we must see the ‘the sacred grandeur of our neighbor’ (EG 92). Crucial for his approach is the conviction that “only on the basis of this real and sincere closeness” we can “properly *accompany* the poor on their path of liberation” (EG 199).

Cardinal Kasper interprets this as ‘mysticism of co-existence and encounter’ and according to him this is “a paradigm shift in method.”¹⁵ Francis radicalizes the significance of the encounter with the poor in the light of following Jesus and in this context he adds something important to *Gaudium et spes*. The pastoral constitution refers to Christ as the *conditio sine qua non* for an adequate understanding and realization of what it is to be human: “The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate word does the mystery of man take light...Christ, the final Adam...fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (GS 22). While John Paul II referred to this text for an articulation of the Christological basis of his social teaching in *Redemptor hominis* (in paragraph 8), Francis puts more emphasis on the *imitatio Jesu*, and in a quite radical sense. Christians should not only become companions of the poor, but precisely in doing so, they become Jesus’ companions, “Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people’s lives and the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives

¹⁴ Ibid., 18.

¹⁵ Walter Cardinal Kasper, “Open House: How Pope Francis Sees the Church,” *Commonweal* 142, no. 7 (2015): 15.

become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people” (EG 270).

This commitment to the poor leads to a radicalization of charity, which one can interpret as follows: In Francis’ approach, true charity implies that the poor cannot be reduced to “passive objects for the more powerful donor’s greater spiritual good.”¹⁶ The closeness to the poor reveals “the shame and stigma of poverty, including the shame of being an object of charity.” The direct encounter with the poor is even a strong remedy against misplaced charity which “handicaps many, who then experience a lifelong struggle with low self-esteem, a deep sense of inferiority” as well as an inability to be empowered and to achieve the life one values for oneself and others.¹⁷ In this regard, one can contend that Francis’ mystery of encounter leads to a “disempowerment of shame.”¹⁸

Personal encounter generates, moreover, a genuine reciprocity or mutual sharing in which the ‘donors’ take “the commitment to walk together alongside” and work with the poor “on their own terms,”¹⁹ acknowledging their dignity, interests and experience, and engaging oneself in a process of *mutual* liberation. Only then one can overcome the risk of misunderstood gifts or volunteer work which risk to cause damage whenever they neglect “the depth of relationship and cultural humility that may take years (or perhaps a lifetime) to develop.”²⁰ The same applies to the search for structural solutions at the global level. Only when we are becoming companions of the poor, only when poor people are partners and participants in projects affecting their life and only then their interests and values will be taken into account, and only

¹⁶ Susan R. Holman, *Beholden. Religion, Global Health and Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

then they will feel respected. In other words, “action responding to poverty is not essentially about stuff; it is about how I relate in daily life to everything and everyone who is ‘other.’”²¹

The originality of Francis’ social thought is that, in a much clearer way than *Gaudium et spes* and his predecessors, he has elucidated how our relationship with poor and vulnerable people is both individual and institutional. In avoiding structural analysis of poverty or action to alleviate poverty (in which we meet the other as *socius*), we become alienated from real people and their life-experience. We must meet the poor as *neighbors*. In this regard, one can interpret Francis’ approach with the words of Paul Ricoeur about how charity personalises and humanizes the abstract relationships of justice: “In order to avoid that the ‘to each’ of the just distribution, would be reduced to the anonymous level of the ‘everyone’ or to the reification of social relationships, the imagination of charity and its singularizing regard must see that the privilege of the face to face is extended to all relations with the others without face.”²²

CONCLUSION

Gaudium et spes is more than a text from the past. It is a historical document in the fullest sense of the word. It has made history and it continues to inspire the social commitment of the Church. The social discernment approach based on “scrutinizing the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” has generated insights and interpretations beyond the letter of the text of the Pastoral Constitution. Francis continues this ongoing

²¹ Ibid., 192.

²² Alain Thomasset, *Paul Ricoeur. Une poétique de la morale. Aux fondements d’une éthique herméneutique et narrative dans une perspective chrétienne*, BETL, 124 (Leuven: Peeters/University Press, 1996), 572.

interpretation. His radical mystic of encounter which radicalizes (in the fullest sense of the word) an indispensable structural analysis and action for justice, is a fundamental contribution to a servant church immersed in the complex history of humankind on its way to fulfillment.

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