

**John 23, Vatican II, and Paul VI:
Becoming the Church in the Modern World**

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As I sat down to draft these reflections, my task seems impossibly difficult. How does one capture the development of Catholic social teaching during the pontificates of St. John 23rd and Blessed Paul VI – pontificates that include Vatican II in about 45 minutes? For me – this is the period that both prompted and grounded my own work as a moral theologian – especially my focus on human rights, solidarity, and global development. And so – we proceed in three sections: 1. Vatican II & Becoming the Church in the Modern World, 2. Engaging all People of Good Will: St. John XXIII's Focus on the Common Good, Human Rights, & Peace, and 3. Seeking the Integral Development of All Peoples: Blessed Paul VI & Catholic Social Doctrine & a new Global Reality

1. Vatican II & Becoming the Church in the Modern World: Spotlight on *Gaudium et Spes*

I begin with a short personal story – During my final semester of graduate coursework, I wrote an encyclopedia entry on Catholic social teaching for an International Public Policy and Theory encyclopedia. The entry was supposed to include basic paragraphs on each major papal document. At first, it seemed pretty straight forward: during the industrial revolution, Leo XIII releases *Rerum Novarum* (on the condition of labor) focusing on workers' rights and private property; forty years later during a world-wide depression, *Quadragesimo Anno* (on the 40th year) is written emphasizing the common good and subsidiarity in decision-making. John 23rd who gives us two

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important encyclicals on the common good and human rights (*Mater et Magistra* (Mother and Teacher) and *Pacem in Terris*(Peace on Earth). And then, smack in the middle of the 1960s – 1965 to be precise I hit a brick wall – I spent about a week staring at my copy of Vatican 2 and finally walked into Fr. Kenneth Himes, OFM’s office exacerbad. “I don’t know what to do with *Gaudium et Spes*,” I announced, collapsing into a chair. “I’m not quite sure that is something you want to say to loudly Meghan,” he said with a chuckle. How do you boil down a 70-page document resituating the very self-identity of the Catholic Church’s engagement in the world into a paragraph? Eventually I penned a wholly inadequate 5 sentences on the need for participation and engagement in society by the Church and individual Christians.

And so – when looking at this period- I begin with this question - - What do we do with Gaudium et Spes?

As a moral theologian who specializes in Catholic social thought, this document shapes my very identity – The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World - gives scope and context to how I understand my vocation as a moral theologian and a public voice for human dignity and justice. It calls upon all Christians to participate in the life of the community, to become more fully human together. A leading contemporary theologian on the history and influence of the Council, Massimo Faggioli, argues that it is pastorally and prophetically “one of the most original and characteristic documents of Vatican II” (171).¹ He paints an image of the council stating, “if

¹ Massimo Faggioli, *A Council for the Global Church: Receiving Vatican II in History* (Fortress, 2015).

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we were to describe Vatican II in the language of motion, we would say that the council initiated a movement *in depth*, taking a closer look at the sources of theology and of Catholic theology, and a movement *ad extra*, outside the church, in a cosmic assumption of responsibility for humankind and the whole of creation.” (811) Movement inward and outward, of depth and universality, is the vision of *Gaudium et Spes* -- that is an embodied and inculturated church. It is what grounds Catholic Social Doctrine and the call to participate in the world.

In the very first paragraph, the Council begins with two profoundly simple truths – that the church “is truly and intimately linked with humankind and its history” (1) and that the Church must engage in “scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel . . . in language intelligible to each generation” (4). It is reminiscent of Leo XIII’s urging that “Nothing is more useful than to look upon the world as it really is, and at the same time to seek elsewhere . . . for the solace to its troubles.” (*Rerum Novarum* 18) It would be articulated by Pierre Cardijn as “see, judge, act.” And as *Gaudium et Spes* makes clear, we are to stretch outward more to all peoples and more deeply inward as the people of God and as individual Christians.

By 1965, in the wake of colonialism, industrialization, and world wars, the “destiny of the human community” was recognized as ONE, as inextricably unified. In unavoidable ways that previous generations had not considered, and “for the first time in human history, all people are convinced that the

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benefits of culture ought to be extended to everyone” (9) as recognition of universal human dignity expanded.

Vatican II also recognized that “the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person, contributing to the common good, according to his own abilities and the needs of others, also promotes and assists the public and private institutions dedicated to bettering the conditions of human life.” (30)

Gaudium et Spes reorients our vision focusing on engagement – the push to read the signs of the times, participation and the common good, - this is the movement outward. But it also challenges us to look inward at ourselves as individuals, as church, and at our relationship with God. We see this same call in Pope Francis’s apostolic exhortations today.

Inevitably, this turn inward leads us to ask fundamental questions - Who am I? Who are you? Who are we? Doubt, anxiety, despair, faith, hope, love and justice – all of these themes – positive and negative- running through modern culture begin with the struggle over humanity’s own self-identity. Examining the role of the Church in the world, *Gaudium et Spes* concludes that “through her individual members and her whole community, the Church believes she can contribute greatly towards making the human family (family of man) and its history more human.” (40). Appreciating the dialogue and engagement called for requires first articulating what it means to be human – and the claim that our existence, community, the world all can be made more or less human.

A hallmark of the document is its reflection on Scripture – especially themes like covenant and the incarnation. God enters into relationships – covenants

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– with peoples. Even more notably, God enters into covenants with succeeding generations of peoples reaching across our traditional understandings of past, present, and future. However, in Jesus Christ, in God becoming human – all boundaries are eliminated. In paragraph 22 (a particular favorite of St. Pope John Paul II), the Council explains “for by his incarnation the son of Man has united himself in some fashion with every human person. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, and loved with a human heart” (22) *like us in all things except sin.*

Because I think it is a particularly rich passage – I want to pause a minute on paragraph 32 – it is a long passage but gives a sense of the social mission Vatican II invited all of us into – clergy and laity – to set about building more fully human communities, our “obligations of justice and love,” and as rooted not only in reading the signs of the times (looking outward) but in our theology (looking inward).

32. As God did not create man for life in isolation, but for the formation of social unity, so also "it has pleased God to make men holy and save them not merely as individuals, without bond or link between them, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness."(13) So from the beginning of salvation history He has chosen men not just as individuals but as members of a certain community. Revealing His mind to them, God called these chosen ones "His people" (Ex. 3:7-12), and even made a covenant with them on Sinai.(14)

This communitarian character is developed and consummated in the work of Jesus Christ. For the very Word made flesh willed to share in the human fellowship. He was present at the wedding of Cana, visited the house of Zacchaeus, ate with publicans and sinners. He revealed the love of the Father and the sublime vocation of man in terms of the most common of social realities and by making use of the speech and the imagery of plain everyday life. Willingly obeying' the laws of his country He sanctified those human ties, especially family ones, which are the source of social structures. He chose to lead the life proper to an artisan of His time and place.

In His preaching He clearly taught the sons of God to treat one another as brothers. In His prayers He pleaded that all His disciples might be "one." Indeed as the redeemer of all, He offered Himself for all even to point of death. "Greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). He commanded His Apostles to preach to all peoples the Gospel's message that the human race was to become the Family of God, in which the fullness of the Law would be love.

*As the firstborn of many brethren and by the giving of His Spirit, He founded after His death and resurrection a new brotherly community composed of all those who receive Him in faith and in love. **This He did through His Body, which is the Church. There everyone, as members one of the other, would render mutual service according to the different gifts bestowed on each.***

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This solidarity must be constantly increased until that day on which it will be brought to perfection. Then, saved by grace, men will offer flawless glory to God as a family beloved of God and of Christ their Brother.

There is much more that could be said about *Gaudium et Spes* – but the key development I wish to bring out is this reorientation of becoming more fully human through being the Church in the World. Also of importance in this reorientation is the Council's statement *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Decree on Religious Liberty.

2. Engaging all People of Good Will: St. John XXIII's Focus on the Common Good, Human Rights, & Peace

By the beginning of the 1960s, the tensions between USA and USSR hit a breaking point. In his 1961 encyclical, *Mater et Magistra* (*Christianity and Social Progress*), Pope John XXIII began to lay the foundation for the central mission of both *Pacem in Terris* (1963) and Vatican II (1962-1965), to reposition and refocus the engagement of the Church in the growing complexities of the contemporary world – the cold war, the nuclear arms race, and neocolonialism in development, among others. With peace firmly in his grasp as a goal, *the common good, the interdependence of the global community, and human rights* are three main themes in John XXIII's Catholic social doctrine.

Encyclicals are not easy reading and at times seem simply unwieldy as a

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literary genre. *Mater et Magistra* is at once an incredibly rich document and a stunning example of why my students hate reading encyclicals. In 270 paragraphs, John addresses a wide range of topics in exceptional detail, for example, his attention to rural and agricultural communities. At the same time, there is one deep, overarching theme of the encyclical – the common good. At this point, John shifts the tradition and focuses on increasing interdependence and argues that “socialization” is something that – while complicated and with some dangers – is also a positive.

In *Mater et Magistra* he defines the *common good* as “the sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby men are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection” (MM 65). True community, for John, exists, “only if individual members are considered and treated as persons, and are encouraged to participate in the affairs of the group” (MM 65). This is the most quoted definition of the common good – but it is not very clear. Through the rest of the encyclical, aspects of the common good are examined concerning worker’s participation, taxation and the international order.

As Marvin Mich summarizes, John’s contribution to Catholic social doctrine on the common good has two parts. The first is this sense of the common good as “a social reality in which all persons share through their participation in it.” The second, in *Pacem in Terris*, emphasizes the human rights aspects of the common good.² *Pacem in Terris* expands this to include a *global common good*. Both documents emphasize repeatedly the *interdependence of the global community*.

² Marvin K. Mich, “Commentary on Mater et Magistra” *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: commentaries and interpretations* (Georgetown University Press, 2017).

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Within 2 years – Vatican II is in process, John himself falls ill and the Cuban Missile Crisis brings the world to the brink of nuclear confrontation. The nuclear arms race, and the danger it poses to the entire world, highlights this interdependence. *Human rights* include both civil-political and socio-economic rights. They are divided into levels of relationships (individuals, individuals and the state, between states), and at every level of society each right has a corresponding duty (PIT 8 – 144).

For example, “the right to live involves the duty to preserve one's life; the right to a decent standard of living, the duty to live in a becoming fashion; the right to be free to seek out the truth, the duty to devote oneself to an ever deeper and wider search for it.” (PIT 29).

While much of the world was debating whether or not civil-political rights (those emphasized by western democracies) or the social-economic rights (those often associated with communism) were the primary or “real” rights, the actual cause of human rights suffered as a result. The UN Declaration sought to transcend this debate by including all categories of rights and leaving it to the member states to implement and prioritize. John XXIII, instead, sought to integrate and expand further the canon of human rights by offering a systematic listing of human rights and corresponding duties. Defining his starting point, John XXIII explains:

Any human society, if it is to be well ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principle, namely, that every human being is a person; that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because he is a person he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from

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his very nature. And as these rights are universal and inviolable so they cannot in any way be surrendered. (PT 9)

Its divisions are not the polarized divisions between civil-political and socio-economic rights. Instead, Catholic human rights are divided into three major categories: order between persons, between individuals and public authority within a state, and those between states. *Pacem In Terris* functions as a sort of declaration of human rights for the Church's social doctrine. It is important to note *Pacem in Terris* is a significant development in the tradition. In 1948 the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – and at that time, the official voice of the Catholic Church resisted the language of rights, preferring its older categories of natural law. Yet, Angelo Roncalli – who would become John 23 - was the Holy See's ambassador to France and he was present at the UNESCO working session on human rights.

3. Seeking the Integral Development of All Peoples: Blessed Paul VI & Catholic Social Doctrine & a new Global Reality

After John XXIII, Pope Paul VI questioned the growing gap between developed and developing countries in light of the interdependence of the global community. Placing the issue of development at the center of his writings, Paul VI exposed *neocolonialism* and its connection to development. In 1967, he released *Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples)*. From the first paragraph, Paul VI explains, “the demand of the Gospel makes it [the Church's] duty to put herself at the service of all, to help them grasp their serious

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problems in all its dimensions, and to convince them that solidarity in action at this turning point in human history is a matter of urgency” (PP 1).

Paul VI’s emphasis across his contributions was a focus on integration and holistic approaches – thus he emphasizes the need for integral development and solidarity, rejecting a purely economic approach to development: “The development We speak of here cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic, it must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man.” (PP 14). This understanding of development offers a structural critique of neocolonialism and insists that private property must be understood within the context of the common good. In particular, “These words indicate that the right to private property is not absolute and unconditional. No one may appropriate surplus goods solely for his own private use when others lack the bare necessities of life.” (PP23).

Any attempt at promoting integral development must include “mutual *solidarity*—the aid that the richer nations must give to developing nations; 2) social justice—the rectification of trade relations between strong and weak nations; 3) universal charity—the effort to build a more humane world community, where all can give and receive, and where the progress of some is not bought at the expense of others,” (PP 44) to combat neocolonialism. Both individuals and nations must live up to their responsibilities to themselves and others, for, “The very life of needy nations, civil peace in the developing countries, and world peace itself are at stake.” (PP 55). Paul VI’s encyclical represents one of the first serious critiques of development theory of the time; however, it was criticized from both the right and left. Both for being too critical of capitalism – for example Michael Novak accused the pope of

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listening too much to “third world development intellectuals” (Deck 2004: 308). Sounds a bit like some of Pope Francis’s critics, who attack the pope for taking seriously the perspectives of people on the margins of power.

Furthermore, in 1971, Paul VI released *Octogesima Adveniens* (*A Call to Action*), a letter to the Pontifical Council for Peace and Justice. *Octogesima Adveniens* calls for greater attention to *urbanization and marginalization* in the developing world. In the wake of industrial development, “Man is experiencing a new loneliness; it is not in the face of a hostile nature which it has taken him centuries to subdue, but in an anonymous crowd which surrounds him and in which he feels himself a stranger. Urbanization, undoubtedly an irreversible stage in the development of human societies, confronts man with difficult problems.” (OA 10). The major concern with urbanization is the *marginalization* of workers and the lower classes.

The emphasis is on the development of the whole person and an attention to the common good. This includes active participation and taking responsibility through solidarity. “It is too easy to throw back on others responsibility for injustice, if at the same time one does not realize how each one shares in it personally, and how personal conversion is needed first. This basic humility will rid action of all inflexibility and sectarianism, it will also avoid discouragement in the face of a task which seems limitless in size.” (OA 48). In both documents, the emphasis is on the process of development and the need for it to be inclusive and protect the human rights of all. In response, Christine Gudorf notes that “throughout the 1970s there were thousands of justice and peace organizations established within diocese and parishes. ... Catholic social justice lobbying groups were established to deal with local issues of poverty,

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racism, and violence, as well as with international and global issues of injustice.” (Gudorf 2004:330).³

In the decades since, *Populorum Progressio* would become the only document other than *Rerum Novarum* to be marked with anniversary encyclical with Benedict XVI likening it to the “*Rerum Novarum* for our time.” And Catholic social doctrine recognized the right to development as a human right, a right of communities – almost 20 yrs before the United Nations signed a declaration on the right to development in 1987.

The legacy of Paul VI is one that remains highly contested. His magisterium includes *Populorum Progressio*, *Humane Vitae* and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. It is during his pontificate that the 1971 synod releases a document – calling pursuit of justice constitutive of the gospel. Then, in 1974, the synod structure pulls back so that it is the pope who releases a document afterwards – separate from the synod report (see EG and AL from Francis).

I want to note that Benedict’s approach to Paul VI in *Caritas in Veritate* is both interesting and important. It recognizes that integral human development is the fundamental insight of Paul VI’s social magisterium – and tries to unify the vision of Paul VI through these disparate and at times controversial documents like *Humanae Vitae*.

In my opinion, the legacy of Paul VI is tri-fold – it is this deep sense of integral human development, this sense of interdependence of the one human family, and the emerging sense of development as both a human right and a vocation.

³ Summary of Paul VI taken, adapted and expanded from: Meghan Clark, “Catholic Social Teaching”, in Phillip Anthony O’Hara (Editor), International Encyclopedia of Public Policy--Governance in a Global Age: Volume 3--Public Policy and Political Economy, pp. 62-70. GPERU: Perth, Australia. <http://pohara.homestead.com/encyclopedia/volume-3.pdf>

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Conclusion:

If I had to summarize the development of Catholic social doctrine from this period, I would pull out 4 things that quickly become central to the vision and moral analysis of the social doctrine to this day.

1. Reaching out beyond the Church: Catholic social doctrine is not merely an internal theology but meant to contribute to a conversation with all people of good will. This begins with John 23's *Pacem in Terris* but is rooted in the vision of the Council – it is an outgrowth of being / Living *Gaudium et Spes*.
2. The Common Good excludes no one: Participation in all aspects of civil society is supported and encouraged throughout this period.
Historically, the focus on human rights, human dignity, concerns with war and neocolonialism are all connected to the deep commitment that every individual person is part of the community, and can contribute to the common good. This encourages the growth of faith-based justice organizations. It also increases responsibility of the community for all its members . The sections on just taxes in *Mater et Magistra* is an interesting example of this.
3. Greater inclusion of the Bible and reference to the Incarnation as part of the overarching vision of Vatican II. From this point, we see Catholic social doctrine include greater reflection on the theology not just natural law.

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4. Integral Human Development becomes a central theme for the tradition; it becomes a contribution to larger conversations on development and weaves together the question of human rights of individuals and the rights of the community, responsibilities of both individual and communities. Alongside a holistic approach to human rights and of development – it includes development as a vocation and reflection on responsibility – this continues to be important within Catholic social teaching and within broader conversations on development today.