

***Gaudium et Spes* Approaching 60:**

Christian Personalism and Care for Our Common Home

Daniel Rober

Gaudium et Spes occupies a unique place amid the documents of Vatican II, of indeed of any council. The last and longest of the Council's major documents, it did not directly develop Catholic doctrine or practice as several others – for example, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Nostra Aetate*, and *Dignitatis Humanae* – did. It immediately provoked critique from major theologians, particularly in Germany. Yet its theological anthropology has become a touchstone of the magisterium ever since, particularly in the thought of St. John Paul II. Yet as this document approaches its 60th anniversary, one might be forgiven for wondering whether doubters had it right. In many places in the world, griefs and anxieties seem to outweigh joys and hopes.

I will argue in this paper that *Gaudium et Spes* remains relevant to today's church, not as a relic of 1960s optimism, as it has sometimes been criticized for, but as a guide for how to continue engaging a changing culture. In particular, I will argue that this document, in its letter and its "spirit," provides a "center" for the Catholic social tradition, systematizing and updating the earlier tradition beginning with Leo XIII and paving the way for the current period, particularly *Laudato Si'*. I will proceed in three parts. First, I will discuss the document's genesis and reception, particularly dealing with critiques around its new genre and supposed excessive optimism. Second, I will examine its resonance with the work of Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II in the area of theological anthropology. Finally, I will engage with the work of Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor and that of Pope Francis to chart a path forward for thinking with *Gaudium et Spes*. Using Taylor's recent work, I will argue that *Gaudium et Spes* represents a magisterial reception of some elements of the Romantic movement, and that the work of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* represents a continuation and deepening of that reception.

Why *Gaudium et Spes*? Formulation and Significant Themes

Gaudium et Spes has its origins as "Schema XVII" or "Schema XIII," proposed very early on in the Council's deliberations. The idea to treat "the church and the world" as it was initially labeled fit in very clearly with the *ethos* or "spirit" of the Council as evinced by John XXIII's opening address. The writing of this document thus spanned the course of the Council

and its final text reflects this extended gestation period both in the sheer length of the document and the variety of topics it covers. Its writing and reception thus became a kind of microcosm of the Council's larger work, particularly for those who either embraced or severely disliked it.

The existence and development of the schema were tied up with John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. That document represented an important intervention in the Cold War context, treating broadly of societal issues while reframing Catholic thought on war and peace in light of the nuclear threat. This document notably introduced the idea of the church responding to the "signs of the times" (*Pacem in Terris* 126). It resonated beyond the church, leading among other things to a major convocation sponsored by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions with leading diplomats and thinkers on global issues present. While building on the Catholic social doctrine that been developed in the encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI especially, it represented an important development in this regard. It also inspired backlash, sometimes, oblique, from those, often American scholars, who viewed it as overly idealistic or pacifist. In this regard it was a companion piece to Pope John's other social encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, dealing with economic matters, which was infamously critiqued by the conservative American magazine *National Review* with the sobriquet, "*Mater si, Magistra no.*"

Paul VI's 1964 encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* also strongly influenced the writing of *Gaudium et Spes*. Given the encyclical's subject matter of engaging the church and world, it offered a kind of commentary on issues which the Council document would address in much more depth (*Ecclesiam Suam* 3). Though Paul attempted to distance the encyclical from the work of the Council as such, the subject matter evinced a clear knowledge of Schema XIII, reflecting Paul's own thoughts on a number of issues discussed in *Gaudium et Spes* (6). To this point, significant draft of the schema that became *Gaudium et Spes* was subject to notable debate during the third session of the Council in 1964 around the same time as *Ecclesiam Suam* was released; this debate revealed some of the tensions within the Council itself that would manifest themselves more clearly afterward.

The approval of *Gaudium et Spes* in 1965 was extremely tense. Figures who would emerge as critics of the final document had already published articles questioning its schema form. Issues of marriage and family as well as war and peace loomed large. Paul VI's address to

the United Nations in October of 1965, famously calling for an end to war made a significant impact. Discussions about marriage reflected a clear division between older approaches focused on procreation as the sole end of the sexual act and newer relational thinking on both sides of questions about contraception.

The final text of *Gaudium et Spes* is ambitious, addressing itself “not just to the church’s own daughters and all who call upon the name of Christ but to people everywhere” (GS 2). This audience connects it to *Pacem in Terris* and also the Council’s message to the world. It takes this form of address because it diagnoses an anxiety despite widespread prosperity, as well as an increasing anonymity connected to migration: “*socialisation* is introducing new relationships without necessarily promoting *personalisation*” (GS 6).

In order to address the problematic it has set out for itself, *Gaudium et Spes* turns first of all to the question of human dignity. This provides a foundation for thinking about community and urgent problems that it diagnoses as in need of addressing. The discussion of human dignity takes a global view, looking both at the questions humanity asks itself and the answers that Scripture provides. The ground of human dignity is found in relationship to Christ: “it is only in the mystery of the Word incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of humankind” (GS 22).

The areas of concern include first marriage and family. This is a notable topic given changing (though more slowly than they would just a few years later) sexual mores at the time and the parallel discussion going on with the commission on birth control. This vision of family is clearly social and distinct from nuclear family ideals that had become entrenched in many Western nations, yet also making new space for individual choice on matters such as whether and to whom to get married (GS 52). These are issues that remain relevant, particularly with declining birthrates in many Western countries becoming cultural and political issues, and *Gaudium et Spes* does a good job of engaging them in a way that affirms the tradition and the reality of people’s lives.

The section on culture is substantial, taking a broad definition of the term and trying to parse how it engages with “a new age in human history” (GS 54). It envisions a culture which must “pursue a balanced cultivation of the entire human person” (GS 56). Culture exists in a tense relationship with political authority and should thus not be “forced to serve political or economic interests” (GS 59). This is clearly an important category, one that would be taken by

St. John Paul II particularly in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, and *Gaudium et Spes* addresses it in a careful, nuanced manner.

The discussion of economics follows that of culture, laying out an anthropological logic for how these dimensions of human life relate. The document is concerned particularly that “people appear to be almost ruled by economics” such that “virtually their entire personal and social life is imbued with an economic spirit” (GS 63).

Gaudium et Spes concludes by emphasizing the importance of dialogue both within the church and with those outside. It boldly states that “Christians can have nothing more at heart than to be of ever more generous and effective service to humanity in the modern world” (GS 93). Thus service and dialogue are given a central place to the overall work of the church. This open-ended offer of service sets an orientation of the church’s mission.

Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, representing two generations and approaches in German theology, notably expressed concerns about *Gaudium et Spes* more or less immediately upon its promulgation. For Ratzinger, it failed to properly observe the distinction between pronouncement and what he thought to be the new model of a “dialogue” (*Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, 225). On this specific point, Rahner advances a very similar argument, namely that it represented a new kind of conciliar document. Rahner also critiqued what he viewed as the imprecision of the document and its failure to properly treat of the increasing “worldliness of the world.”

Walter Kasper took a more positive view, arguing that *Gaudium et Spes* was the first time a council gave a systematic treatment of theological anthropology. For Kasper, this is a belated reception of Enlightenment ideas. Kasper is particularly concerned to point out the tension the document raises between anthropology and Christology. This tension, connected with the discussion above of the various objections to the document, would become definitive for the reception of *Gaudium et Spes* in the postconciliar period.

Gaudium et Spes remains a keystone document for thinking about Vatican II as an event in addition to a set of documents. It is also key to the vision of the council as being pastoral in addition to doctrinal in nature. The document is thus both unusual in its length and scope as well as emblematic of the Council and its contribution to church life. This is true in the tensions

and oppositions it spurred as well as in its positive reception. It is to one such reception that I will now turn by examining the approach taken by Karol Wojtyla prior to his papacy.

***Gaudium et Spes* and Karol Wojtyla**

Here in Poland, the legacy of John Paul II looms large, not least for his interpretation of *Gaudium et Spes*. In his first encyclical as Pope, *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul centers the anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes*, which he cites 13 times. This Christocentric anthropology became a major theme of his papacy. Yet Wojtyla's interpretation of *Gaudium et Spes* did not begin with his election as Pope, nor do I intend to focus on that latter period which is more well-known. Rather, he developed it both as a bishop with input on the document and in various contemporaneous writings, particularly lectures he gave throughout the 1960s. This period of work, I argue, and its contributions to question of phenomenology and theological anthropology may be of more lasting significance than some of his more famous papal writings. The recent publication of fresh English translations of some of this work has made it more accessible and is revelatory for understanding his contribution to and reception of *Gaudium et Spes*.

In his notable essay "The Problem of the Constitution of Culture Through Human Praxis," Wojtyla argues that the focus on culture in *Gaudium et Spes* is in fact "an epiphenomenon, a derivative manifestation, of all that Council did to articulate the Christian meaning of the *humanum*" (Wojtyla, "Problem," 265). He views it as a starting point for necessary insights about the human condition, particularly our relationship to nature and technology. He particularly draws connections between the insights of the Council and those of secular groups such as the Club of Rome which were warning about the dangers of technological overreach in particular (270). In contrast to this technical approach, Wojtyla proposes a vision of praxis grounded in the transcendentals of truth, beauty, and goodness (271). He thus situates the work of *Gaudium et Spes* with regard to the downsides of technological progress and prosperity which were becoming increasingly apparent. As he puts it elsewhere, "the dignity of the human being means to place people higher than anything derived from them in the visible world" ("The Dignity of the Human Person," 178). This is an important point particularly in its leaving open any discussion of natural phenomena not derived from humanity.

Wojtyla attended the Council and thus had an "insider" view of the development of *Gaudium et Spes*. His high regard for it comes through clearly in his statement that this

document “did not concern itself with the philosophical concept of the person, but...it in some way presupposed it.” (Wojtyla, “Symposium on *Person and Act*, 428). He thus views it as of a piece with his largest-scale philosophical work of this period, *Person and Act*. From his perspective, *Gaudium et Spes* carried forward a view of theological anthropology that he thought immensely important. He emphasizes in particular its discussion of what he calls the “axiological aspect” of theological anthropology – that is, a person as a gift to themselves. For him, this understanding of the gift of self allows the person to become a gift to others (Wojtyla, “Personal Structure of Self-Determination,” 463-64).

Wojtyla’s reception of *Gaudium et Spes*, which also includes significant contributions on its discussion of marriage and family, complicates narratives about its reception and ideologies (Wojtyla, “The Family as a Community of Persons”). His divergence with Ratzinger on this point is notable given their partnership during his papacy. Some of this distinction clearly lies in Wojtyla’s Thomistic orientation in contrast to Ratzinger’s Augustinianism. It also likely connects to his background in philosophy and embrace of philosophical movements such as Personalism that had clear resonance with *Gaudium et Spes*.

Wojtyla’s approach also makes sense in that the major themes of *Gaudium et Spes* – theological anthropology as well as marriage and family – fit very clearly into his intellectual trajectory and priorities. In addition to these interests, Wojtyla was also a noted follower of the Polish Romantic movement, particularly the poems of Adam Mickiewicz. The language of *Gaudium et Spes* thus fit very naturally into his worldview and approach. In the following section, I will argue with Charles Taylor that Romanticism is a helpful hermeneutic for viewing *Gaudium et Spes* and its contribution.

***Gaudium et Spes* and Today’s World: From Romanticism to Climate Consciousness**

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has been one of the preeminent Catholic thinkers of the last half-century and has spent much time thinking about issues relevant to interpreting *Gaudium et Spes*. Taylor’s work has effectively chronicled how modern values such as authenticity emerged both out of Enlightenment thought and out of changes to lived realities in society. He thus makes clear indirectly (but helpfully in light of Ratzinger and Rahner’s comments discussed above), how a document like *Gaudium et Spes* – focusing as it does on anthropology in response to contemporary problems rather than the kinds of doctrinal issues

conciliar documents traditionally took up – could have been written in the first place. Particularly at the end of his large and significant book *A Secular Age*, Taylor’s thought synchronizes very effectively with *Gaudium et Spes*. He engages very directly with the Council, viewing it as a contribution to this journey of human self-understanding (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 752).

Taylor’s view of Romanticism as a movement hinges on what he calls the “human need for cosmic connection,” which he calls “not just any mode of awareness of the surrounding world, but one shot through with joy, significance, inspiration” (Taylor, *Cosmic Connections*, ix). This movement emerged in part out of the loss of church authority during the Enlightenment, proposing a new kind of mystical relationship between the self, the world, and God. To return to issues of anthropocentrism discussed earlier, Taylor views Romanticism in part under this rubric. Romanticism found fertile ground here in Poland. Mickiewicz in particular drew on traditional Polish folk songs and poetry to try to articulate a new poetic language in a way that pushed back against imitation of Classical ideals. John Paul II has often been located as his disciple within this tradition.

Taylor notably invokes Czeslaw Milosz and his Catholic faith in particular to argue with Milosz that “the poet’s way of articulating the deepest intuitions that come to him/her as a spiritual being contemplating our present condition” are emblematic of Romanticism’s insights (542). *Gaudium et Spes* in its language attempts to connect the life of the church to these insights. He draws on Milosz’s insight that an encounter with eternity “shows us the significance of the movement, of the challenge, and of how we should go forward” (544). This in many ways is what *Gaudium et Spes* accomplished for the church – drawing together the insights of the *kairos* moment of Vatican II in ways that are still being unpacked.

Gaudium et Spes embraces elements of a Romantic understanding of anthropology while not following through as clearly on its approach to the natural world which had already given rise to early ecological movements. In this way it reflects the place of Vatican II between eras. More contemporary ecological concerns raised by Rachel Carson and others had only begun to penetrate the consciousness of society; concerns about the alienation of humans by technology were more commonly held than those surrounding damage to the earth. Pope Paul VI began to address these issues in 1971’s *Octogesima Adveniens*, arguing briefly but importantly that

humanity is becoming aware of “ill-considered exploitation of nature” that “risks destroying it” and becoming the victims of this destruction (21). *Gaudium et Spes* thus stands at a hinge point in Catholic social teaching, with new priorities emerging in its wake both because of its specific points and because of its broader emphasis on reading the signs of the times.

Laudato Si', likely to be the most important document to come from the papacy of Francis, develops key areas of emphasis from *Gaudium et Spes* to address contemporary concerns. It evokes *Pacem in Terris* and *Gaudium et Spes* by addressing itself to all people of good will (LS 13). While the factual situation that it addresses is a negative one, it sets out to preach not doom but a renewed Christian vision of care for the world. Francis sets out his agenda as to “bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change” (LS 13). This last point in particular reflects in some way a return to the “optimism” of *Gaudium et Spes* that change actually is possible.

Carmody Grey has argued that *Laudato Si'* develops the tradition in such a way as to definitively reject anthropocentrism in a way that previous magisterial teachings had tended toward but not actually completed. *Laudato Si'* carries forward the legacy of *Gaudium et Spes* by reintegrating the “proto-Romanticism” of St. Francis of Assisi. For St. Francis, his life and death were a kind of sacred drama bridging nature and eternity. Indeed, Pope Francis appeals directly to the vision of the *Poverello* by evoking his relationship to nature: “he burst into song, drawing all the other creatures into praise” (LS 11).

In its reappropriation of St. Francis and his approach to nature, the encyclical deepens and applies the work of *Gaudium et Spes*. Most notably it corrects for possibly the most dated aspect of the Council document, its tendency toward anthropocentrism in emphasis though not in philosophical outlook. Francis argues that such approaches have prized “technical thought over reality” (115). While that was an understandable approach to take in the wake of the Second World War and its immense destructiveness to human life, it was insufficiently attentive the immense damage being done to the natural environment of the planet. Rather than repudiating the “optimism” of *Gaudium et Spes*, *Laudato Si'* redirects its energy outward from theological anthropology to integral ecology.

Conclusion: Joys and Hopes?

Clearly many of the concerns *Gaudium et Spes* expresses, particularly about economic life, ring true today. Greater wealth and prosperity, particularly in areas related to technology, have not necessarily created a more humane economy. These dynamics have spread even into the church, where donors and companies with platforms such as apps have become deeply tied into everyday life. Francis' critique of the technocratic paradigm articulates this very clearly.

The anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes*, refracted through *Laudato Si'*, strikes a balance that is much needed today. It centers human dignity while situating humanity in relationship to God and one another; *Laudato Si'* expands this scope more properly to the rest of creation. *Gaudium et Spes* also importantly grounds the communal dimensions of Catholic anthropology in an approach that resists the Fascist temptations of earlier Catholic corporatism. This was a necessary move in the postwar context and remains just as relevant today when movements such as Catholic integralism have sought to recapture that earlier mode of thinking. The examination of Wojtyla's thought demonstrates a basic continuity with that expressed in *Laudato Si'*, particularly a version of the same concern that Francis labels as the "technocratic paradigm."

Gaudium et Spes, then, provides a contemporary center point to the Catholic social tradition – an authoritative document on which further developments such as *Laudato Si'* have built. Its unusual origins and formulation are an exception that proves a rule – a solidification of a new way of discourse in the church ushered in by Vatican II. There is still much work to do to make that dynamic a reality in the everyday life of the church, but *Gaudium et Spes* gives the roadmap for it.