

To Deepen Our Understanding of the Mission Entrusted to Us

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In a recent publication (2024) Jean-Marc Aveline, Cardinal Archbishop of Marseille, says – ‘l’Église (catholique) doit une nouvelle fois, soixante ans après la tenue du concile Vatican II, approfondir sa compréhension de la mission que Dieu a voulu lui confier.’¹ This is why we are gathered here these days, to consider again the mission that God has entrusted to us, to the baptised people of God. A key thought to keep in mind, as always in theology, and in prayer, is the image of God in the background of my thinking.

Thank you Michael Sean Winters for the invitation to be here today, and thanks to you all for giving of your time to gather here to consider once again the mission that God has entrusted to us, each in our particular situation. The particular focus of these days is three texts of the final sessions of the Second Vatican Council: *Nostra aetate*, (Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions, 28th October 1965); *Gaudium et Spes*, (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), and the Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, On Religious Freedom (both promulgated on December 7th, 1965). These three documents came after a prolonged process of reflection, of considered argument, and of in-depth discussion coming from differing points of view. To have reached large majority consensus and decision on these texts surely bears witness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit within the life of the Church, and to the intelligent listening of the Church leaders at Vatican Two. These leaders were attentive to both the guidance of the Holy Spirit within the experience of the Church, and in the experience of the world within which the Council occurred.

Before we look at these more specifically it is important to have some knowledge of the world from which the Council emerged. É

It is unlikely that any of us were at the Council, indeed most of us were not born when the Council was announced by Pope John XXIII on January 25, 1959. To understand the radicality of the Council, its approach to both the church and the world; a radicality in methodology, language and content, we need to know something of the world and of the Church at this time, and indeed of the 19th and early 20th century. To many it seemed that

¹ ‘The Catholic church, sixty years after the Vatican Council, must once again deepen its understanding of the mission which God has willed to gift to it.’ Jean-Marc Aveline, *Dieu A Tant Aime le Monde – Petite théologie de la mission*, (Les . Édition du Cerf, 2023), Prologue.

while the world was changing, the church was remaining static and unresponsive. Some saw this as positive, while some in the church suggested that the Holy Spirit was speaking to us through changes in the world within which we all live.

The first section of the paper will situate us in the world from which this council emerged. The second part will consider the church of the 19th and early 20th century. The third section, will focus on the distinctiveness of this, the Twenty-first Ecumenical Council of the Church, and specifically its approach to engagement with the world, considering why the Council felt the need for a different approach.

The World which birthed Vatican II

Several movements can be identified that were formative in the coming to be of the culture of the world as well as formative on the ecclesial cultures which were the context in which Vatican II came to birth. First, the Protestant reformation of the 1500s, itself a move toward reformation of religious practices. Then, the Enlightenment period (c. 1680–1820) where thinkers turned their backs on the past, turned resolutely to the future, expecting ever better things to come. New sciences developed, rationality reigned supreme. In this view, many Catholic practices were regarded as naïve - such as was the belief in a personal God whose providential care sustained human life and human endeavour. In its stead, deism flourished. This was a belief in a God who stood behind the world as its creator, but was not intimately involved as actor within the world. Alongside came the aggressive global expansion of European colonialism, the slave trades, the huge increase in wealth in the colonial powers. Then came the French Revolution, (1787 – 1799) which turned the social structure of France upside down, and saw the growth of an elite and educated group of wealthy commoners, the bourgeoisie. The French monarchy was no longer seen as divinely ordained, the relationship between church and state was severed. Church property was redistributed. In August 1789 France's National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, (*Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*). A belief in the natural rights of the citizen underpinned this declaration. It proclaimed universal liberty and equality, insisted on the separation of the powers of church and state, (le principe de la séparation des pouvoirs), and insisted that a democratic state would guarantee freedom of religion (the République). The long 19th century saw a kind of coalescence of these developments in the epoch termed 'modernity'. It was shaped by technology, and industrial innovation. The past was deemed old-fashioned. The human task was to make all things new. Within the horizon of modernity

came the turn to the subject as the centre-point of the human project, alongside a political liberalism, which championed Individual freedom against all privilege of birth, religious dogma, hierarchy, and all force of tradition. Modernity advocated a dogmatic belief in a steady progress toward a better future. Changes in the technology of human communication were supremely important in this cultural transformation. Printed books had arrived in the sixteenth century. In the nineteenth and twentieth came the telegram, telephone and radio. So that – to take one example, while at an earlier stage Catholics in Ireland, or Poland, may not have known who the Pope was – now access to the Pope's teachings were disseminated very widely.

The bright dawn of modernity was shattered by two awful World Wars. Countries were destroyed. For example some nine million Poles lost their lives and Warsaw was a pile of rubble and ash. A new word, genocide, entered the language to deal with the murder of 6 million of Europe's Jews by the Nazis. Alongside came the development of new aggressive weaponry, most terrifyingly the atomic bomb.

The aftermath of these wars saw the demise of the European colonies. In Europe generally, there developed greater and more effective systems of representative democracy, higher standards of human rights, stronger electoral rights, clearer division of powers, and higher standards of education.

There were, however, dark shadows.

After the wars there were millions of "displaced persons". This new designation later merged into the language of the millions seeking whatever rights there might be for people of refugee status.

Stalin seeking to create a communist empire put in place oppressive regimes in Poland and other countries.

The post war world was one of rapid change. The war had accelerated change in science and technology, in its aftermath governments poured resources into developing new medicines and technologies such as penicillin and eventually the emergence of the computer age. Social change speeded up. The shared suffering of the war years strengthened most democracies' belief that governments had an obligation to provide basic care for all citizens. The rights of women took a major step forward. Their contribution to the war effort had a transformative effect. In France and Italy, women finally got the vote.

The idea that there were universal standards to be upheld, that a common humanity possessing the same universal rights was institutionalised by the establishment of the United Nations in 1945 and the International Court of Justice in 1946. On the 10 December 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed in Paris. On 4th November 1950, the European Convention of Human Rights was adopted, entering into force in 1953.

The Churches Place in the World

In the nineteenth century, the Church, caught in the maelstrom of these rapidly flowing currents of cultural change, sought, recalling again the words of Cardinal Aveline, to ‘once again deepen its understanding of the mission which God has willed to it.’

It reached out in two distinct, and even contradictory ways. One response, in the wake of the declaration of papal infallibility at Vatican I, was a tendency to shut the Church off from this bewildering world, creating a safe haven within. The other tendency was to acknowledge that the mission of the Church was to announce its God-given treasure to all of humanity. This was the direction taken by Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum* (1891). He spoke of the capitalist market economy as laying on the masses ‘a yoke little better than that of slavery itself’ (RN 3). The churches duty is to announce its mission in the context of the world at the time.

In a similar direction, theological movements in the late 19th century and the early 20th century sought to reinterpret traditional Catholic teaching in the light of 19th-century philosophical, historical, and psychological theories. This movement also reflected a reaction against the increasing centralization of church authority in the pope and the Roman Curia (papal bureaucracy). New ways of reading scripture were suggested and defended, including adopting the historical-critical method of reading scriptural texts, including the Gospels. The reaction from Rome was swift and severe: people were dismissed from teaching positions (Alfred Loisy, George Tyrrell), priests and scholars were excommunicated, an *Index of Forbidden Books* created. On September 1, 1910 Pius X instituted the Oath Against Modernism (in *motu proprio Sacrorum antistitum*). The oath was required of “all clergy, pastors, confessors, preachers, religious superiors, and professors in philosophical-theological seminaries” of the Catholic Church. It remained in force until the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with the approval of Paul VI, replaced it with a revised Profession of Faith on July 17, 1967.

As the twentieth century progressed the strong tension between these differing ways of seeking to express the Gospel, the mission of the church, intensified. A great shift is taking place in Catholic theology. The French Dominican Marie-Dominique Chenu, who was very influential at Vatican II puts it clearly: “Since Christianity draws its reality from history and not from some metaphysics, the theologian must have as their primary concern ... to know this history and to train themselves in it.”² Faith must engage with both our history as Christians, and with the world’s history. Within Catholic theology a return to the sources of Christian faith, primarily Scripture and the Church Fathers, was advocated by those such as Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar. This movement was termed by some as la *Nouvelle théologie*. It sought to nourish, reinvigorate and rejuvenate twentieth century Catholicism. From here we get the French term, *ressourcement*, a return to the sources. Alongside *ressourcement*, there came the Italian concept of *aggiornamento*. *Aggiornamento* refers to a process of updating. Jacques Maritain, writing in the 1920s noted that Catholicism possesses a ‘bold ability to adapt itself to the new conditions erupting suddenly in the life of the world’.³ This movement gained practical expression in Vatican II.

Thus, in the early 1960s, as the Council assembled, we have a world changing rapidly, and a worried church, caught between those who want to update, modernise, by reading a longer history than that of a few hundred years; and those who seek stability, sometimes too fearful of the changes taking place

Is reform possible ... can the church change?

The concepts of *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*, together with acceptance of authentic development of doctrine, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, underpin the teachings of Vatican II. The background outlined above demonstrates the radicality of the path the church decided to follow, the courage of the leadership, and the challenges of adaptation, in line with the truth of Jesus Christ. The story begins with Pope John XXIII.

During his time as papal nuncio in France, Archbishop Angelo Roncali (later Pope John XXIII) read Congar’s *True and False Reform*, (*Vraie et fausse Reforme dans l'Eglise*, 1950), reputedly writing inside the cover, reform of the church “is such a thing really possible?” A decade later as pope, he opened the Second Vatican Council, seeking authentic reform: reform centred on God, focused on God’s message of salvation for the whole of humanity.

² Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Une École de théologie : Le Saulchoir* (Paris : Cerf, 1985), 132.

³ Jacques Maritain, *Antimoderne*. (Paris: Editions de la Revue des Jeunes, 1922), 39.

One month before the opening session of the council, on September 11, 1962, Pope John delivered a radio address in which he proposed peace as the greatest wish of the Church, and of the Churches interest in working for peace. He also urged all to social justice. This is something, he believed, the Church can offer the world. The Church is needed by the world to denounce injustices and shameful inequalities ... “so that, according to the principles of the Gospel, the life of a human may become more human ... our concern goes out to the lowly, poor, and powerless. ... As we undertake our work, therefore, we would emphasize whatever concerns the **dignity of the human person**, whatever contributes to a genuine community of peoples.” (AS I/1, 230-232)

On 1st October 1962 opening the Second Vatican Council, John XXIII issued the invitation to rejoice, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*. We the church are to rejoice, and to ignore the prophets of doom seeking to distract us from within. His eyes are wide open to the reality of the church in the world, he asks us to remember church leaders not at the Council due to constraints imposed on by political systems. This is the world within which Pope John XIII invited us to find new ways to proclaim the unchanging Christian message – Christ came to save all. This message he proclaimed to both the church and to the world.

In this address John XXIII sets the vision for this Council:

1. The Church must remain attentive to its rich traditions and roots, never departing from ‘the sacred patrimony of truth’ received from the Fathers
2. And yet it must ever turn its attention to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world.
3. ‘The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.’
4. The Church must oppose errors making ‘use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity’.
5. Particular concern is expressed for the separated Christian brethren - Christian charity is the method to eradicate the seeds of discord and promote visible unity in truth of the entire Christian family.
6. The address is to all people.
7. All people who are born are redeemed by the blood of Christ— all have dignity - but there is ‘sadness that many do not yet participate in those sources of divine grace which exist in the Catholic Church’.

8. John XIII speaks of the paramount dignity of the human person, and the responsibility that accrue to this gift of dignity, the dignity of being an adopted child of God.
9. He warns of the dangers of war, of the stockpiling of weapons.

With his opening address the Pope was inviting the church leaders gathered to wisely penetrate doctrine attentively, to be open to new methodologies and dialogue partners, to moderation in proposals, dignity in discussion and argumentation, and wisdom of deliberation.

The Council he called was distinct from many others in that it was called not to reform heresy or to denounce errors but to

1. update the church's capacity to explain itself to the world and
2. to revitalize ecclesial life, particularly recognising the plurality of the churches unique local manifestations.

Following this orientation given by John XIII Vatican II defined itself as pastoral, engaged with the world and not against the world. This is reflected in its language and methodology. Vatican II uses a methodology of persuasion, a rhetoric of invitation. The language it uses has been described by O'Malley as horizontal language. This horizontal vocabulary brings to the forefront terms such as people of God, priesthood of all believers, collegiality; Vatican II speaks of partnership, collaboration and individual conscience. Furthermore Vatican II gave concrete recognition to what Cardinal Newman had written about in the late nineteenth century – the development of doctrine. Tradition is alive, the Word of God is “alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb 4:2).

On October 20 ten days after the Council began a decision, unprecedented in the history of ecumenical councils was made, to deliver a message to the world. This proposal came from the French sector. Chenu and Congar proposed this as they wanted to ensure the council did not cut itself off from the real issues of the world; that it did not get lost in abstract doctrinal discussions. It began:

“We wish to convey to all people and to all nations the message of salvation, love and peace which Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, brought to the world and entrusted to the Church.

We will strive to propose to the people of our times the truth of God in its entirety and purity so that they may understand it and accept it freely.

we also expect a spiritual renewal which may provide a happy impetus for human welfare; that is, the findings of science, the progress of the arts and of technology, and a greater diffusion of culture.

United here from every nation under heaven, we carry in our hearts the anxieties of all peoples entrusted to us, the anxieties of body and soul, sorrows and desires, and hopes. We turn our mind constantly toward all the anxieties afflicting people today.

Our concern is directed especially to the more humble, the more poor, the weaker, and, in keeping with the example of Christ, we feel compassion for the throngs who suffer hunger, misery and ignorance.

We are constantly attentive to those who, deprived of the necessary assistance, have not yet reached a standard of living worthy of the human.

For this reason, in performing our earthly mission, we take into great account all that pertains to **the dignity of the human** and all that contributes toward the real brotherhood of nations.⁴

In the preparation for the Council a plethora of documents had been created and presented to the Council members. The council was awash with a profusion of documentation, unclear as to its direction of travel. On December 4th 1962 the Belgium, Cardinal Suenens took to the floor. He stated that the Council needs a basic orientation, a plan, a focus. The theme, he suggested, should be as the Pope had said on September 11, ‘the church of Christ, light to the world,’ *Ecclesia Christi, lumen gentium*. This gives two parts to the council; one looking inward, *Ecclesia Christi*, for the Church to ask itself ‘What do you say of yourself?’ (as in the documents *Lumen Gentium*, *Dei verbum*, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*), the other, *lumen gentium*, looking outward, to explore the relationship of the church to the world, to the poor, to world peace, to evangelisation, to dialogue with other Christians, and to dialogue with other religious traditions, as in the documents *Nostra aetate*, (Declaration on the Relation of

⁴ This message was approved and released by the Council on Saturday, Oct. 20, 1962, nine days after the Council opened. Text available at <https://vaticaniiat50.wordpress.com/2012/10/20/text-of-councils-message-to-world/#:~:text=In%20his%20broadcast%20message%20of,does%20not%20ardently%20desire%20peace> Two days later President Kennedy announced the American blockade of Soviet ships heading for Cuba. The terrifying prospect of a nuclear war loomed into view.

the Church with Non-Christian Religions, 28th October 1965); *Gaudium et Spes*, (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), and the Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, On Religious Freedom (both promulgated on December 7th, 1965). He said -

‘Let us hope that this plan that I propose open a way for a better hearing of the church and understanding of it by the world today and that Christ be for the men and women of our times ever more the way, the truth, and the light.’ (O’Malley, 158)

His intervention met with prolonged applause ... and importantly sowed the seed for a new document, utterly unforeseen in these early days of the council ‘the document most distinctive of the council and the one perhaps most revelatory of the council’s meaning, *Gaudium et Spes*, The Church in the Modern World.’ (O’Malley, 158)

Then in 1964 Paul VI issued his first encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (Aug 6) which mentioned the word dialogue 77 times, unequivocally infusing the word into the council’s vocabulary, the effect is clearly seen in *Gaudium et Spes*.

Gaudium et Spes discusses the relationship of church to the world using terms of mutuality, friendship, partnership, cooperation and dialogue. These are the great themes of *Gaudium et Spes* which saw itself as addressing “not only the sons and daughters of the church and all who call upon the name of Christ but the whole of humanity as well”. As O’Malley noted ‘*Gaudium et Spes* is an instruction but also an invitation writ large.’ (O’Malley, 267) The call was for a more humane world, the birth of a new humanism, for responsibility one for the other. To be sure the documentation emphasises, ‘the need and the duty to battle against evil through manifold tribulations and even to suffer death. But, linked with the paschal mystery and patterned on the dying Christ, the Christian will hasten forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from hope. (GS 22)

Grace works in the hearts of all people of good will in an unseen way. Christians are called upon to believe that the Holy Spirit ‘in a manner known only to God offers to everyone the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery. created by God, infused by Holy Spirit, destined for God (GS 22).

In this horizon of the paschal mystery dignity is a pervasive theme in *Gaudium et Spes*. The text praises and underlines the dignity of freedom, the dignity of conscience, the dignity of marriage, the dignity of human culture, the dignity of the human person. The genre of

Gaudium et Spes is epideictic genre; that is, it is in praise of the world, lauding all that is good, and this genre and style of speech bespeaks a style of being, a style of living.

Another way in which the council chose to speak of human dignity is its reference to conscience. The document speaks of conscience revealing ‘that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbour’, a law written by God; ‘to obey it is the very dignity of the human ... Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a human.’ (GS 16) Thus it is referring to conscience as an internal and not an external norm. Christians, the document declares, are joined with the rest of people in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships.

The complexity of conscience is recognised. Conscience can err. Perhaps the complexity of the idea of conscience and the importance of formation of conscience is a matter we haven’t properly developed in the aftermath of the Council.

‘Freedom’ became an important item in the lexicon of Vatican II. Only in freedom can a person direct themselves toward goodness. (GS17). Strikingly the contemporary world is applauded: ‘Our contemporaries make much of this freedom and pursue it eagerly; and rightly to be sure.’ (GS 17) Again a nuance, a check is mentioned, freedom must not be seen as a license for doing whatever one pleases. ‘Authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within the human (GS 17). ... [however]. ... Since human freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the aid of God's grace can one bring such a relationship with God into full flower. Before the judgement seat of God each person must render an account of their own life, whether they has done good or evil.’ (GS 17)

Gaudium et Spes recognises that political freedom is necessary for proper exercise of personal freedom, for proper exercise of conscience – freedom is a good to be cherished and secured.

The opening words of *Dignitatis Humanae* focus on these themes:

‘A sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary human, and the demand is increasingly made that people should act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty. The demand is likewise made that constitutional limits should be set to the powers of

government, in order that there may be no encroachment on the rightful freedom of the person and of associations.

This demand for freedom in human society chiefly regards the quest for the values proper to the human spirit. It regards, in the first place, the free exercise of religion in society. This Vatican Council takes careful note of these desires in the minds of people. It proposes to declare them to be greatly in accord with truth and justice. To this end, it searches into the sacred tradition and doctrine of the Church-the treasury out of which the Church continually brings forth new things that are in harmony with the things that are old.' (DH 1)

Dignitatis humanae, the Declaration On Religious Freedom was one of the most-discussed conciliar documents, (December 7th, 1965) It employs a bold, radical *ressourcement*, digging deep into the tradition for a truth that had been obscured. Its recovery helped point the church on a path that promised harmony between church teaching and much that was best in contemporary political practice and political philosophy. It recovered, and elaborated an ancient truth: an act of faith could not and should not be coerced. Created after the image of God, an act of faith to be genuine must be free and sincere.

The very short declaration, *Nostra Aetate*, on the relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions, had a very important message: anti-Semitism is an evil that must be addressed. The document aroused great anxiety. In its final version it began 'One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. One also is their final goal, God.' Jews are not guilty of deicide ... they cannot be said to have corporate responsibility for the death of Jesus.

Conclusion

The three documents we will be exploring these days are three of the most important, and also most contested texts in the Council. Coming at the end of the Council, after much argument, discussion and prayer, these three documents reflect well what came to be termed the 'Spirit of the Council'. The church was not to be alienated from, estranged from, the world, but in living communication. The search is for mutual understanding between church and world as we work together for the common good. The style, the genre, the sentiment, are reminiscent of biblical and patristic sources, the writings we read in our Divine Office. The message of Vatican II is at once traditional and radically prophetic. The tone is soft spoken – and counter cultural – seeking to respond to the deepest human yearnings. A style shift is

evident from previous councils, from a different era. Updating, change, *aggiornamento*, development of doctrine, *ressourcement*, have all now become acceptable ideas for the church in the twentieth century. Not only does the world need the church, but the church needs and learns from the world. It is because the church lives in Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, that this learning is possible.

The task of the Church today is, to recall again the words of Cardinal Archbishop of Marseille, – ‘l’Église (catholique) doit une nouvelle fois, soixante ans après la tenue du concile Vatican II, approfondir sa compréhension de la mission que Dieu a voulu lui confier.’ These three documents which we study are not blueprints for our task, as if all we had to do was to repeat one more time what they had already said. They should rather be taken as pathways, avenues leading our thoughts towards our goal deepening our grasps of our mission.

We can make no greater preparation for our task and mission than to walk these avenues with careful study, learning along the way.

