

Gaudium et Spes and the Culture of Encounter: To Be a Church that Solidarizes the World

Marcus Mescher, Xavier University

mescher@xavier.edu

Introduction

For sixty years, Catholics have been called to reconsider what it means to be the church in the modern world. *Gaudium et spes* departs from a long history of hostility toward or condescension for a sinful world, instead calling for a relationship with the world marked by “solidarity ... respect and love for the entire human family with which [the church] is bound up” (§3). Yet this final document of Vatican II is not only interested in questions of ecclesiology or how the church relates to the world writ large; it also confronts “one of the more serious errors of our age:” the “split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives” (§43). In light of the fact that *Gaudium et spes* invites us to reconsider how to be Christian disciples in the modern world, my presentation considers the demands of discipleship through three themes: the practice of contemplation, the formation of moral conscience, and the work of building the “culture of encounter.” Taken together, these commitments are vital avenues for the renewal of the church where mission and communion orbit around solidarity with and salvation for the world (§57).

The generative theme of *Gaudium et spes* is a conversation, following Jesus’s style of engaging his contemporaries in reading the “signs of the times” (Mt. 16:3). To converse is to both listen and speak, but even more, a good conversation is the result of people who are attentive and responsive to each other. Conversations move us from strangers to companions; they lead us toward relationship with one another. *Gaudium et spes* expands what we might imagine possible thanks to a reciprocal relationship between what the church offers to and receives from the world (§§40, 44).

Promulgated on December 7, 1965 by Pope Paul VI, this pastoral constitution is a tribute to the spirit of Pope John XXIII and his vision of a church that takes responsibility for the world in faith, hope, and love. Described by Yves Congar as the “promised land of the Council,” *Gaudium et spes* took shape following the interjection of Archbishop Dom Hélder Câmara of Brazil, who asked, “Are we to spend our whole time discussing internal Church problems while two-thirds of mankind is dying of hunger? What have we to say on the problem of underdevelopment? Will the Council express its concern about the great problems of mankind?”¹ Câmara’s prophetic question should keep us from any ignorance or

¹ See Charles Moeller, “History of the Constitution,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966), 5:10-11.

indifference to the most urgent problems in the world today; we must dialogue and discern together how to embrace our vocation as promoters of the goodness of creation as partners with the Holy Spirit's redemptive work in the world (§15).

Contemplation

Gaudium et spes is the fruit of “contemplation and appreciation of the divine plan” unfolding in the world (§15). Contemplation produces wisdom (§56), leads to worship (§57), and seeks the “integral perfection of the human person, to the good of the community and of the whole society” (§59). It means cultivating a “religious, moral, and social sense” that informs how to respond to a “melancholy state of humanity” (§59, §79). Contemplation is not a beatific vision; it requires an honest account of the wounds marking the Body of Christ due to “vanity and malice” and the “powers of darkness” that lead humanity astray (§37). Just as St. Paul observed that if one part of the Body of Christ suffers, all parts suffer with it (1 Cor. 12:26), this document envisions a church of compassion, willing to enter into suffering and share the burden together. Reasons for grief and anxiety ought to inspire all members of the Church to be agents of healing by relying on God's endless gifts of grace and love (§40) in order to advance integral human flourishing (§75). The church raises its prophetic voice not to condemn the world; while it denounces sinful beliefs, practices, and structures it also announces a more charitable way of interacting: to “enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual love, and caring above all for the common good” (§43).

Contemplation – defined by Fr. Walter Burghardt, SJ, as taking “a long, loving look at the real” – means seeing as God sees, looking at creation and seeing it all as “very good” (Gen 1:31).² Practicing contemplation puts us in touch with what is good in and around us; it is a reminder that grace is always and everywhere at work, even in “in an unseen way” in the human heart (§22).

Gaudium et spes presents a theological anthropology wherein the human person is “bent toward evil” (§25) but who, with the help of grace, is made “truly new and artisans of a new humanity” (§30). When the forces of sin are overcome by the works of charity, when peace and justice are realized, these feats along with other “triumphs of the human race are a sign of God's grace” present in the world (§34). Although this document is sometimes criticized for being idealistic, its attentiveness to grace echoes St. Paul's claim that Christ's resurrection makes us all share part of a “new creation” as his own ambassadors of reconciliation, called to heal a wounded world (2 Cor. 5:17-20). The church is tasked with dispensing “the treasures of grace” for the world, not only by preaching the Gospel but “ensuring peace everywhere on earth” and facilitating “the fraternal exchange between [persons]” (§89). Here we may recognize traces of what Pope Francis would later describe as the “culture of encounter.” When Christians practice contemplation and look with eyes of love,

² See, for example, Walter Burghardt, SJ, “Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real” *Church* (1989): 14-17.

it is not just a matter of refining one's perception. Since the effect of love is union, contemplation leads to communion.

Conscience Formation

The “split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives” lamented in *Gaudium et spes* is due at least in part to “the discharge of certain moral obligations” by those who “plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life” (§43). To remedy this grave error, the council fathers call on Christians to turn their attention inward to hear “the voice of conscience” and heed the “natural law” that is “written in their hearts” (Rom. 2:15).

This document ushers in a paradigm shift in Catholic moral theology thanks to its stress that each and every person possesses the innate capacity to search for truth and learn how best to love God and neighbor. *Gaudium et spes* defines the moral conscience as the “most secret core and sanctuary” of the human person, where one can “be alone with God” (§16). Etymologically, “conscience” means “to know together,” indicating that conscience is a shared activity and not just a private source of moral wisdom or an inviolable sanctuary for ethical judgment. Conscience reveals that being human is fundamentally relational. *Gaudium et spes* touts the role of the church as a worldwide authority in conscience-formation and also acknowledges how science and human experience play a key role in helping people know, love, and do what is right, true, good, and just. Conscience formation is a lifelong task to form, inform, and transform not just one's own conscience but others' as well. Sources of moral wisdom are all around us, if only we pay attention.

Gaudium et spes makes clear that the moral conscience is not ordered to following rules but discerning how to properly reverence the human person since “everyone must consider [their] every neighbor without exception as another self,” with a “special obligation” for those who are marginalized, vulnerable, and made to live in poverty, “so as not to imitate the rich man who had no concern for the poor man Lazarus” (§27). The council fathers explain that any insult to human dignity and freedom ought to disturb our conscience, recalling that how we treat the least among is the measure for how we treat Jesus Christ (Matt. 25:40). Actions opposed to the fullness of life for all bring “supreme dishonor to the Creator” (§27). For this reason, Christians must be vigilant against any kind of callous indifference to human suffering or the destruction of our complex and interdependent ecosystems. Faith can never be compartmentalized from the world around us, since the vocation of the Christian is to participate in the unfolding reign of God in our midst (§§39, 40, 57). When we are diligent in the shared practice of conscience formation, we get closer to God's dream when no person—and therefore, no set of joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties—lies beyond our moral concern.

Culture of Encounter

In light of how *Gaudium et spes* envisions the relationship between the church and the world as a conversation, it is worth highlighting how the document embraces a posture of inclusion. For example, the council fathers write, “Respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them” (§28). *Gaudium et spes* affirms the equal dignity of every human person. On the one hand, this demands that Christians work for “a more humane and just condition of life” for all persons (§29). On the other hand, this means that we have much to learn from one another by listening to each other and sharing life together. Fraternal dialogue requires “a mutual respect for the full spiritual dignity of the person” (§23) and informs how to deliver on our “reciprocal duties” to one another (§25). These fruitful exchanges ought to “exclude no one,” since the ultimate goal is to accomplish an ever-more-inclusive solidarity, reflecting “flawless glory to God” in recognizing all human beings as siblings in God’s single family (§92, 32).

These passages are significant roots for the “culture of encounter” that Pope Francis introduced early in his pontificate. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis described how individuals become a community: “It is an ongoing process in which every new generation must take part: a slow and arduous effort calling for a desire for integration and a willingness to achieve this through the growth of a peaceful and multifaceted culture of encounter” (§220).

Over his twelve-year pontificate, Pope Francis filled out a picture of what this “culture of encounter” entails. However, this “culture of encounter” is not the invention of Pope Francis, as he acknowledged himself. Rather, it arises in faithful witness of Jesus Christ who modeled how God encounters humanity through the Incarnation:

the Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction. True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness (§88).

The “culture of encounter” is how disciples respond to God’s summons to the revolution of tenderness. To avoid this becoming an abstraction, let us examine how this is illustrated in the Gospels when the blind man Bartimaeus cries out to Jesus. Let us contemplate the scene together:

Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho. As Jesus was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind man, son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging. On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, Bartimaeus cried out and said, “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.” And many rebuked him, telling him to be

silent. But Bartimaeus kept calling out all the more, "Son of David, have pity on me." Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So, the disciples called the blind man, saying to him, "Take courage; get up, he is calling you." Bartimaeus threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus. Jesus said, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man replied to him, "Master, I want to see." Jesus told him, "Go your way; your faith has saved you." Immediately Bartimaeus received his sight and followed Jesus on the way (Mark 10:46-52).

Since this is a familiar story, we may jump to the end without taking time for a "long, loving look at the real" in this scene. So let us consider a few questions: Why is Bartimaeus begging on the side of the road? As a blind man, Bartimaeus was viewed by his contemporaries as a sinner; his blindness was a punishment from God and no one wanted to associate with him. Bartimaeus has been shunned and cut off from his community: he has no friends and his family has disowned him. And he is blind, so he cannot do much of anything to provide for himself. Contemplate Bartimaeus: drowning in darkness, exiled in shame. He can only survive when people take enough pity on him to provide him with some food, drink, or a few coins. Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus in pure desperation.

Why does the crowd – and perhaps even some of the disciples – rebuke Bartimaeus and tell him to keep quiet? Because Bartimaeus is not recognized for having equal dignity or belonging to their community. Bartimaeus is socially invisible and insignificant, a non-person. Jesus is on the move: he has places to go and people to teach. The crowd assumes that Bartimaeus is not worth Jesus' time or attention.

But Jesus calls to Bartimaeus. And Bartimaeus springs into action – he comes alive! – and draws near to Jesus. Jesus could heal Bartimaeus immediately and perhaps the crowd would marvel at him. But what does Jesus do? He asks Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus likely knew what Bartimaeus wanted, so why does he bother to ask? Because this gesture of humility and curiosity illuminates the "revolution of tenderness": Jesus does not presume and he does not offer a quick fix; instead, Jesus makes Bartimaeus seen and heard, he empowers Bartimaeus to assert his own dignity and agency by raising his voice and speaking for himself.

It is easy to jump to the conclusion that this story is about Jesus' power to perform miracles or to analyze how Jesus' gift of sight to Bartimaeus is a gift he offers to each one of us today. But then we would miss the point. This story is less about Jesus curing Bartimaeus' blindness and more about Jesus pointing out the blindness of the people who could not recognize Bartimaeus' dignity, who did little to promote his agency, and who cut him off from their community. They saw Bartimaeus through the lens of stigma, reducing him to someone who did not matter or belong to them. If we contemplate this scene, we are left to consider not just who are the Bartimaeuses of our day, but those whose dignity, agency, and sense of belonging we struggle to acknowledge.

When people talk about the “culture of encounter” they may invoke the importance of dialogue or the manner in which people are shaped by interactions with others. Certainly, the “culture of encounter” seems related to Pope Francis’ emphasis on synodality, the intentional way of journeying together as companions living in self-gift to each other. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis fills out a picture of what he means by the “culture of encounter.” He explains, “Life, for all its confrontations, is the art of encounter. I have frequently called for the growth of a culture of encounter capable of transcending our differences and divisions. This means working to create a many-faceted polyhedron whose different sides form a variegated unity, in which ‘the whole is greater than the part.’ The image of a polyhedron can represent a society where differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations. Each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable. This also means finding ways to include those on the peripheries of life. For they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centers of power where weighty decisions are made ... To speak of a ‘culture of encounter’ means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone” (§§215-216).

To create the conditions of this “culture of encounter,” then we must take up the contemplative gaze of Jesus who can recognize the dignity of all, even those who are shunned and excluded. We must resist the lie that some lives matter less than others and respond to others with an extravagant tenderness that is not conditioned by or contingent on any factors. We must be passionate about meeting others which means making ourselves available to them, not expecting them to come to us, meet us on our terms, or darken the doorways of our churches, schools, or offices.³

Conclusion: A Church that Solidarizes the World

Gaudium et spes closes by asserting that, “Christians cannot yearn for anything more ardently than to serve the [people] of the modern world with mounting generosity and success. Therefore, by holding faithfully to the Gospel and benefiting from its resources, by joining with every [person] who loves and practices justice, Christians have shouldered a gigantic task for fulfillment in this world” (§93). This is a vision of a Church that solidarizes the world. Here I use solidarity as a verb, which I think is better than how it is often defined in Catholic social teaching. For example, solidarity is often linked to Pope John Paul II’s writing in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, where it is described as a virtue that is “not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common

³ For a more detailed overview of what it takes to build the “culture of encounter,” see: Marcus Mescher, *The Ethics of Encounter: Christian Neighbor Love as a Practice of Solidarity* (Orbis, 2020).

good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all" (§38). With due respect to Pope John Paul II, this presents solidarity as something one *does*, keeping the focus on an individual moral agent. But solidarity—and here I speak humbly, since I realize I am in the land of Solidarność and I look forward to hearing what you think of what I am proposing—is less about an individual's attitudes or actions than relationships. When the church presents solidarity as "social charity" or "social friendship," it reminds us that no one can do solidarity alone. For this reason, I suggest it may be better to think of solidarity less as a noun than as a verb, reflected in the quality of our relationships, the health of our communities, and the extent of our inclusion and interdependence. The "culture of encounter" is the first step toward solidarizing ourselves together, animated by contemplation that inspires tenderness and conscience-formation that urges us to draw near those who question if they matter or belong. In marking the 60th anniversary of *Gaudium et spes*, may the vision of the church that solidarizes the world expand what we imagine possible so we can better honor the dignity of the human person, forge mutually respectful and responsible relationships, and promote the integral flourishing of God's "very good" creation.