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Gathering in this domed space reminds us of the perennial human effort to create a sacred space, a space set apart in the midst of human work and human folly. The great dome that rises above us both contains and expresses the longings of men and women for a sign of the transcendent, of the divine. The roundedness of its height and its expanse looms above us as the undercroft of heaven beyond which human hearts have risen for millennia in the hope of glimpsing some larger purpose for the human travail and human triumph that can be found just outside those back doors.

Many religious traditions gather under this dome with different purposes, different prayers, different beliefs. But who could doubt that every eye is drawn upward with the same hope and the same yearnings.

Thirty years ago when *Gaudium et spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) was promulgated that was not so. Oh, Catholics may have gathered here for Mass—down in the red room if I remember correctly. But then our differences were far greater than they are today—not only with the Episcopalians for whom this chapel was once consecrated, but the Lutherans, and certainly Buddhists and Hindus. Our differences are still considerable, but in this space it is our common yearnings that shine forth.

The Second Vatican Council was for Catholics the moment when we stopped concentrating on what divided us from other Christian bodies, from Judaism and other faith traditions, from the world outside our doors, and began looking at what united us with the whole human community. Many of the documents of Vatican II lent

force to that reorientation. This fall we celebrate not only the thirtieth anniversary of *Gaudium et spes*, about which I want to speak tonight, but *Nostra aetate* (Declaration on Relations with Non-Christian Religions) and *Dignitatis humanae* (Declaration on Religious Liberty).

There may have been other documents that had a more immediate, clear, and direct impact on the life of the church itself: the constitutions on revelation, liturgy, and the church, for example. But in a fashion more diffuse—in fact, in a fashion that suffused everything that the council did—none was more important than *Gaudium et spes*. For many of the great minds that have reflected on the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes* is the text that summed up what was particular and distinctive about Vatican II, the pivot on which the conciliar enterprise turned and the lens through which we should read all the conciliar texts.

Thirty years after the council, one finds among Catholics, and sometimes non-Catholics too, a certain distress. Among the more traditional it is expressed as a keen sense of loss at what is gone; among the more progressive, a keen sense of disappointment that more has not been achieved. As we all know and experience, there is more than a little disorientation in the whole Church, along with worthy disagreements and silly squabbling. Robert Lauder succinctly captures that sense in a short essay recently published in *Commonweal* in which he remembers his ordination thirty years ago, just before the final session of the council (October 20, 1995): “Much that was firm was shaken, much that was crystal clear became cloudy, and much that was deemed immutable changed.”

*Gaudium et spes* has not escaped the resulting mood of complaint; in fact, for some it is the main cause of complaint. It has been accused of being naively optimistic. It has opened the Church itself to the insidious and corrosive influences of democracy and populism. In some quarters of the Church, it has been brushed aside as a period piece, largely superseded by the more recent statements and encyclicals of John Paul II (even though themes and phrases from it appear prominently in the pope’s address to the United Nations earlier this fall).

Yet I think that if we are to shake off the malaise, the polarization, the ecclesiastical gridlock that often seems to afflict the people of God today, *Gaudium et spes* remains the restorative, the balance, the compass, and the inspiration that the Catholic Church, indeed the whole Christian Church, needs.

The subject of *Gaudium et spes*, we should remember, was not the Church in the world, a subject as old as St. Paul and on which the classical treatment, at least for me, remains H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. No, *Gaudium et spes* addressed the "church in the world today" or, even better, the "church in the modern world."

It was the Church's relationship with modernity that *Gaudium et spes* reconsidered. It attempted to nurture a conversation where there had been a blanket refusal to be on speaking terms at all. Thirty years have taught us that this conversation is not easy to sustain, that it demands skills in listening, precision in speaking, and an integrity in both maintaining and renewing our identity—all skills that we seem not to have yet sufficiently developed.

"Siege mentality" is by now such a well-worn way of describing the Church's stance toward the world in the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth that we forget how literally true it was. The emblematic gesture took place in 1870. Pope Pius IX declared himself a prisoner in the Vatican as a protest at the seizure of the papal states by the newly united state of Italy. This was the culmination of the papacy's long struggle against the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the spread of liberalism, nationalism, and democracy. Six years earlier, in 1864, Pius had condemned all of this in the Syllabus of Errors, along with Bible societies, the separation of Church and state, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, all summed up in the denial that "the Roman pontiff can and ought to reconcile himself and reach agreement with progress, liberalism and modern civilization."

This condemnation, unfortunate as it was, was not unprovoked. Hurricane John Paul II is very fresh in our memories, and all the recent attention and affection heaped upon him by hundreds of thousands of the faithful and by the world's political leaders should not bring us to forget that the nineteenth century began with Napoleon actually humiliating and imprisoning not one, but two successive popes. The toll that the century took on the Church can be seen in this: it was a century that began with the political power imprisoning the pope and ended with the pope imprisoning himself.

That image of the prisoner in the Vatican conveys another deep and ironic truth. The Church was at war with modernity. Yet in the very act of waging that war the Church itself became a very modern institution. Father Joseph Komonchak has pointed this out in a brilliant and too little known essay: in opposing the rise of centralized states and highly articulated bureaucracies, the church itself took on,

as never before, the character of a centralized government and highly articulated bureaucracy. To the new popular loyalties, mass organizations, and encompassing ideologies, the church raised its own parallel structure of popular devotions, organizations of everything from Catholic farmers to Catholic trade unions and Catholic political parties, and an apologetics of Catholicism that with implacable logic and fervent exclusion of every doubt or smidgen of mystery matched the militant tracts of positivists, Darwinians, and socialists.

In other words, even while the Catholic Church was aggressively refusing to be at home in the modern world, the structures and mentality of the modern world were making themselves very much at home in the Church. It is a situation that we still live with, and it should be a warning to us never to pretend that too sharp a line can be drawn between the Church and the social-cultural-political soup in which it swims. In fact, *Gaudium et spes* contains some very instructive language on this point. In paragraph 40, which opens chapter 4, we read: "The church at once a visible organization and a spiritual community, travels the same journey as all mankind and shares the same earthly lot with the world. . . . That the earthly and the heavenly city penetrate one another is a fact open only to the eyes of faith."

The idea of a sharp separation between believers and the world in which they live may be approximately possible for a small sect of "come-outers," as the Pilgrims were originally called. It is not a very credible stance for a Church of a billion people, which baptizes infants before they can declare themselves, embraces sinners before they can confess themselves, excommunicates only in exceptional cases, and leaves it to God to separate the wheat from the chaff.

It was to this outward breach and unacknowledged embrace between the Church and modernity that *Gaudium et spes* finally spoke in 1965. I want tonight to look at the impact of *Gaudium et spes* over the last thirty years, to consider the criticisms raised against it, and to make the case for its continuing relevance. But first, in the course of an anniversary year, it is not inappropriate to spend a few minutes looking at what it said, a little *explication de texte à la Steinfels*.

*Gaudium et spes* begins:

The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men [and women] of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.

In 1965 these were astonishing words; those who heard them and saw their full import could not fail to have been moved by them. They set loose a new dynamic, one of dialogue and engagement. This first paragraph signaled a profound shift in the Church's understanding of itself and its relation to the world. And it ends with the sentence: "Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history."

I suppose that can sound banal, even laughable: Yes, of course, Christians live in this world, are part of this human race; for better, and not infrequently worse, we have made this history along with everyone else. Like everyone else, this is the only world that Christians have. We do not inhabit a world apart from others. So said *Gaudium et spes* as it began to dismantle a reified other world in which at least some Catholics thought they lived.

That sentence—"Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history"—admits two things: a sense of historical consciousness and a commitment to human solidarity—not of a history through which the Church passes unaffected by events, not a world of two humanities, Catholic and non-Catholic, but of one. We all live in the same world, a world that the second paragraph describes "as the theatre of human history, bearing the marks of its travail, its triumphs and failures," but also a world that the Christian knows in faith "has been created and . . . sustained by the love of its maker, which has been freed from the slavery of sin by Christ."

The contrast between the seen and the unseen is drawn, not in some gnostic way, but in a straightforward language, acknowledging the world as it sees and understands itself. The very same world, the council wants to say, can also be known and more fully understood through the revealed word of God and through Christian understanding of creation, the incarnation, and the saving acts of Jesus.

This turn outward, this change of focus also requires a change of heart, of affect; there is a change in ideas and a change in language and tone. There is a surprising warmth and emotional resonance in *Gaudium et spes*. It does not condemn in the rhetoric of Pius IX or instruct in cool scholastic propositions; rather, as paragraph 3 says, "it longs to set forth the way it understands the presence and function of the Church in the world of today," which is "to carry on the work of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit," the work of "Christ who came into the world to bear witness to the truth, to save and not to judge, to serve and not to be served." Those words bespeak a meek-

ness that the Church had rarely used of itself; words addressed moreover not only to the world, but to the church its very self, words whose standards are not earthly power or worldly ambition, but the example of Christ.

Following this preface, the introduction (4–10) describes and analyzes the Church's responsibility for "reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel." Repeated throughout the introduction is a major theme of the whole document and of the council, and certainly an important sign of the times: that of change and its consequences; of human progress and of scientific advances that benefit humankind and yet turn upon us and confront us with new dilemmas and conundrums. Change affects the individual and society in ways that are often unanticipated. Changes come about so rapidly, one upon the other, that the very foundations of social and cultural life are shaken and fractured, what sociologists and philosophers now call the reflexivity of the modern world.

There is a synergistic effect in these changes, the whole begins adding up to more than the sum of its parts; in fact, *Gaudium et spes* was speaking of the whole achievement and dilemma of modernization. If the Church was late in acknowledging modernization, that has not been a barrier to its understanding not only its benefits, but the darker elements of modernity as well.

At the center of these challenges stands the human person, described in paragraph 9 as "an individual and as a member of society who craves a life that is full, autonomous, and worthy of his/her nature as a human being; he/she longs to harness for his/her own welfare the immense resources of the modern world." But this is not, you can be sure, *Candide* being profiled here. There is self-consciousness and the power of thought to turn back upon itself; individualization brings with it the erosion of community; and with the growing capacity to control human destiny comes fear of annihilation. *Gaudium et spes* describes this paradox of modernity as the "dichotomy of a world that is at once powerful and weak, capable of doing what is noble and what is base, disposed to freedom and slavery, progress and decline, brotherhood and hatred."

Even religion is not immune from the effects of modernity. In paragraph 7 *Gaudium et spes* acknowledges that magical world views which sometimes support religious belief are passing away at the same time that people are demanding a more personal sense of the divine. The Church, it says, has a responsibility to speak of that which is not



apparent, what is hidden; to pay attention to the human condition in its modern manifestation; to say that religion has meaning in everyday life and to say it in a way that can be apprehended. And finally, to say it "with a loving awareness of humanity in its actual condition and a loving sense of responsibility to it." Religion and a spiritual life are not just the province of clergy and religious, but of everyone. *Fiats*, mystification, obscurantism can no longer serve as props to religious authority.

The Church that wrote *Gaudium et spes* was not only turning from a monological to a dialogical stance toward the world, it was (we were) beginning a dialogue with its own people (with ourselves), all of us, the whole Church. And it is perhaps this dialogue more than any other that frustrates and vexes us today.

What was the world with whom this dialogue has taken place like?

In 1965, the council ended and the spirit of Vatican II began. *Gaudium et spes* appeared in the United States at a time of great hope and optimism. There were certainly clouds on the horizon—urban rioting in 1964, Watts in 1965. The cold war was sealed in concrete by the building of the Berlin Wall; there was continuing and apparently irremediable isolation of Eastern Europe; international relations were fixed around the cold war's bipolar goals. Ever increasing militarization of the world's economies was threatening the promise of development and democracy in newly decolonized nations of Africa and Asia. Certainly many problems had to be faced. It may be hard to believe now, but in 1965 most Americans believed that the economic and political framework for the struggles against racism, poverty, hunger, and tyranny were in place, that the war on poverty, affirmative action, and Great Society programs could remedy problems at home. The Soviets could be beaten without selling our souls; development in far-off lands could be helped through the efforts of American college students organized into a Peace Corps. The prospects seemed good for steady progress without intractable conflict. In 1965, *Gaudium et spes* was read by American Catholics with eagerness and enthusiasm.

This optimism dissipated under a long string of unanticipated turns in the story; I will get back to those in a moment.

I want to first pick up another strand that *Gaudium et spes* helped weave in the history of our time, for what it said and encouraged had an enormous if sometimes delayed impact around the world. Think of Eastern Europe, where the most amazing and unexpected

events of 1989 and 1990 took place. Attention has focused on leaders, military might, political staying power, and strategy. But among the most important actors were the people of Central Europe themselves; especially in Poland and Czechoslovakia, where brave groups pressed back, in a nonviolent way, the constrictions of Soviet power. The key idea here is summed up in Poland's labor union movement, solidarity, a phrase from *Gaudium et spes*. It is also a phrase raised as a *cri de coeur* in Czechoslovakia post-1968, and whose velvet revolution was built on the commitment of the "solidarity of the shaken" (in Jan Patočka's evocative phrase).

Both a civil and religious understanding of human dignity and human rights is implicit in this sense of human solidarity; it recognizes the innate value of each and every person and the communal ground upon which those human rights must be established, acknowledged, observed.

The international human rights movement has varied origins: in the work of Pawel Wlodkowic at the fifteenth-century Council of Constance (as the pope reminded the UN), and certainly in the values of the Enlightenment and of liberal political thought. But at Vatican II, in *Gaudium et spes*, and in subsequent papal and episcopal documents, many of them from our own bishops, the Church has supported and augmented a view of human rights largely, though not wholly, compatible with the secular one. As a result, all around the world—in El Salvador, Chile, Brazil, and the Philippines—we have seen over the last three decades Catholic communities living out the meaning of human dignity and claiming their human rights against political and economic tyranny—sometimes suffering martyrdom. In lands where Catholics are a minority—in South Africa, especially—solidarity with the majority helped to bring down tyranny in a nonviolent struggle. And now often in fragile but promising ways, all of these countries are becoming democratic societies committed to human dignity and human rights. What would Pius IX say?

In the United States, the consistent ethic of life—another form of the Church's embrace of human rights—recognizes the dignity of every individual from the unborn to the dying, from the immigrant to the prisoner on death row, and acknowledges that those rights can only be protected in communities, can only have meaning in solidarity with the poor and the vulnerable.

But as all of this was going on, the world was passing through a very different period, sometimes termed in shorthand "the Sixties."

The struggle in the Third World about which I just spoke, from Latin America to South Africa, gave rise to liberation theologies, some of which stressed conflict and political-cultural insurgency. In the United States and Western Europe, there were the beginnings of the counterculture whose attacks on authority came to permeate American society and American campuses in the late sixties and early seventies. This counterculture challenged virtually all authorities, traditions, and established institutions, all the while accelerating the secularization well underway in Europe. The two places, Poland and Ireland, which, for different reasons, were exceptions to that secularization, are today struggling to be churches in societies confronting and being confronted by modernity belatedly and often with a vengeance.

These events, part and parcel of the last thirty years, have left another legacy of *Gaudium et spes*: the legacy of its critics.

They come from both left and right. From the liberationist left came the view that modernity was a much nastier, more exploitative, more intractable place than that proposed by the liberal and reformist agenda, which they read in *Gaudium et spes*. In particular, the Marxist-influenced exponents of this criticism argued that *Gaudium et spes* did not acknowledge the possibility that there were fundamentally different views of the world, depending on one's position in society, that is, from the bottom or from the top, and that these class conflicts could not be bridged by anything but struggle, possibly even armed struggle.

This liberationist left was not against dialogue but favored a very selective dialogue, limited largely to those forces that saw modernity in the same highly ambivalent fashion as they. Some of this critique remains unanswered today. But some of it simply missed the subtlety and complexity in *Gaudium et spes*'s own view of modernity. Ironically enough, this critique was most seriously undermined by its own naiveté and lack of ambivalence about the utopian project of revolutionary socialism in which it vested so much hope, in Cuba, Nicaragua, and other places, especially in Central and Latin America.

From the right, the challenge to *Gaudium et spes* took several forms. The first was simply an extension of the pre-conciliar attitude toward modernity. Some conservatives in the curia and elsewhere viewed the council as something like a massive failure of nerve and dialogue, a prelude to surrender.

In the late sixties and early seventies, however, this outlook won new recruits, shell-shocked by the cultural revolution in society

and its influence in the Church, or disappointed that secularization had accelerated in Western Europe, especially in Germany, France, and the Netherlands, which had been wellsprings of the council.

Like the left, the right concluded that the modern environment was far more hostile to Christianity and the Church than they thought *Gaudium et spes* recognized. From this world there was less to learn and more to fear, hence sympathy with it was less justified and dialogue with it much riskier. Once again emphasis shifted not just to the threat that the modern world posed to humanity in all its fullness—a theme certainly sounded in *Gaudium et spes*—but to a threat very specifically aimed at the integrity of the Church.

In practical terms, this viewpoint has produced attempts to restore the tightly bounded Church of the preconciliar period. If this approach succeeds at all in today's very different historical circumstances, it is hard to see how the outcome will be any different than what it was in preconciliar Western Europe: the decline of religious practice among masses of people, the isolation of the Church from the mainsprings of culture, and the weakening of the Church's ability, as in the era of fascism and Nazism, to resist the most ominous currents of history.

Yet another, more sophisticated variation on this critique of *Gaudium et spes* has emerged, one that makes ample use of the concept of "postmodernity." Postmodernity, of course, can be a very flexible, even vaporous notion. In this case, it means the extreme relativism that undermines all of the major post-Enlightenment challenges to religious faith, including scientific materialism, historicism, Darwinism, Marxism, Freudianism, and belief in progress.

In this analysis, modernity's challenge to the Church had been vanquished, largely by modernity's own self-destruction. Postmodernity, in its jumble of fragmented experience without any direction, and in its questioning of all stable meanings, has initiated a reign of moral decadence and intellectual chaos against which the Church stands as the primary, if not even the lone, rescuer.

Conservative critics use postmodernity less as a reason to reject *Gaudium et spes* than to ignore it. It is rendered irrelevant by its concern with a world that has reputedly metamorphosed, and attention is re-directed to more recent writings, primarily those of the current Pope in which the culture of death has figured so prominently.

The postmodernity analysis, though often stimulating and sometimes infuriating, is also exaggerated. Virtually no one, except a

few inhabitants of Soho and some literature departments, really live in postmodernity, and I am not sure about them when they are on the subway. But apart from that, the postmodernity analysis risks being just a fancy wrapper on yet another denunciation of today's Dark Ages, a curious characterization, since Catholic conservatives do not believe that the Dark Ages of yore were really dark ages. Their view is that postmodernity is so devoid of substance that the Church need not converse with it. Postmodernists here tonight will, of course, see that this stance is itself postmodern: Catholic Christianity becomes another lifestyle in the postmodern bazaar; reading the Bible our way becomes perfectly okay in a world where you can read texts in virtually any way.

The rejection or marginalizing of *Gaudium et spes* that has emerged from the right has led to a concerted strategy promoting what I have elsewhere and at length called the Countercultural Temptation.

In the last decade, the cry that the Church must be countercultural has become a familiar part of the Church's vocabulary. Like the term prophetic—an adjective with far deeper roots in our tradition—the word countercultural is easily abused. In fact, sometimes it seems that countercultural has become to conservatives what prophetic has been to the Church's left, a phrase that covers a multitude of sins.

This language entered official Catholic circles through Cardinal Ratzinger, who borrowed it from those militant students of the sixties that I spoke about before. The head of the Holy Office, a former academic, clashed with leftist German students. Like all intellectuals he knows how effective it is to steal the thunder of one's adversary by stealing their words. But even back in the sixties the term countercultural lent itself to oversimplification and self-congratulation, sometimes even delusions about how far from the culture one actually stood in announcing oneself countercultural.

Of course, the idea of being countercultural expresses some truth. The Church must stand against the powers and principalities. But a major accomplishment of the Catholic tradition—reasserted at Vatican II and in *Gaudium et spes*—has been to produce and to hold distinctions that avoid the language of dichotomy and dualism, to use language that says both/and rather than either/or.

In the present case, "countercultural" raises several problems for the Church, problems that undermine the spirit of *Gaudium et spes*.

First of all, our culture—in the United States more than anywhere else—is not monolithic; a fact of life for all of us who live on the

west side where Thai bagels are served with bacon and eggs. Being countercultural in a middle-class or affluent Westchester parish is far different than being countercultural on the streets of Harlem.

There is no one culture. And there is no one way to be countercultural. In thinking we are bravely speaking out against what we label "The Culture," we need to be sure that we are not confusing conformity with courage, holding positions comfortably in harmony with our own social, political, and intellectual surroundings. In this neighborhood, affirming the human dignity of homosexuals, however important, is not a very countercultural thing to do—not nearly as countercultural as affirming the permanence of marriage. In many other neighborhoods reality runs in the opposite direction. It is easy to wield the language of countercultural as a slogan against someone else's culture.

A second problem with this appeal to be countercultural is that it is essentially negative, tempting us to overvalue condemnation and confrontation. It naturally surfaces and promotes people who are denunciatory and rigid, people so convinced of their views—so right about what is wrong—that they see no need to persuade others of their views, to recast their argument so that others can grasp it, to empathize with their opponents sufficiently to see the obstacles that bar understanding and perhaps some agreement. The countercultural encourages a tendency to say: We do not have to make the case for our Christian convictions by dialogue and persuasion.

There are several dangers in this strategy. The most obvious is the danger to truth. Our culture is far from universally corrupt. It harbors much that is good, much that reflects our Christian heritage, and much that stems from other sources but gives us new corrective insights into God's revelation in Jesus. To ignore this not only distorts reality, it can give us a vested interest, an unattractive tinge of satisfaction, in our culture's deepest troubles.

Then there is the danger of this outlook taking opposition and criticism as a barometer of the Church's rightness and greatness. We all know there have been more than a few moments in Catholic history when criticism and hostility were earned not by the Church's greatness but by its pettiness, its narrowness, and the betrayal of its own true mission. Just because people hate the Church does not mean we are doing what Jesus told us to do.

Finally, the great danger is to turn our backs on the dialogic stance the Church took in *Gaudium et spes*—a stance that recognized

not only that the Church has something to teach modern culture, but that it has something to learn as well. One of the ironies of the current moment is that Catholics have become more adept in listening, respecting, and carrying on that dialogue with other Christian bodies, with the Jewish community, and with the world outside our doors, than among ourselves.

For we have not done badly at being a Church in the modern world, in reading the signs of the times in the highways and byways and learning to respond as followers of Jesus should. It is only when the world has crossed our own threshold, when the signs of the times appear within our own precincts, that so many revert to a monologue. One of the characteristic polarizing positions in the Church today is precisely that so many are ready to teach a lesson while so few are willing to listen and to learn. The Pope, cardinals, and bishops certainly do this; but they do not have a monopoly on the franchise. Prioresse wag their finger at the hierarchy. Theologians issue novel teachings, for example, just last weekend, on the discipleship of equals. Even editors long to hurl anathemas. It is in the Church itself where the dialogic stance of *Gaudium et spes* is most needed and least practiced.

Listening to the words of John Paul II at the United Nations, how many of you, like me, longed to have these words pronounced to Catholics around the world from the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square?

We must overcome our fear of the future. But we will not be able to overcome it completely unless we do so together. The "answer" to that fear is neither coercion nor repression, nor the imposition of one social "model" on the entire world. The answer to the fear which darkens [our] existence . . . is the common effort to build the civilization of love, founded on the universal values of peace, solidarity, justice, and liberty. And the "soul" of the civilization of love is the culture of freedom; the freedom of nations, lived in self-giving solidarity and responsibility.

That is the spirit of Vatican II and of *Gaudium et spes*; and now we, the Church, must learn from it.