

Summary Document No 8

Signs of the Times

When the Pharisees and Sadducees attempted to test Jesus by asking for a sign from heaven, he told them: “You know how to read the face of the sky but you cannot read the signs of the times. It is an evil and unfaithful generation that asks for a sign” (*Mt 16:3-4*).

When Pope John XXIII convoked Vatican II in 1959, he was almost alone in discerning the signs of a world crisis. He saw humanity “on the edge of a new era, with tasks of immense gravity and amplitude awaiting the Church, as in the most tragic periods of its history”.¹ He recognised that the Church had to change direction and bring the modern world - blinded by its technological and scientific advances and being reorganised with the exclusion of God - into contact with the life-giving energies of the Gospel. He believed that with Jesus ever present in the Church (*Mt 28:20*) and the Spirit ever active, the Council would be able to read the signs of the times and fulfil its mission.

In calling on Christ’s faithful to unite their joys, hopes, griefs and anxieties to those of all peoples, especially the poor and afflicted, Vatican II recognised that the Church, intimately linked to the human family and its history, needed to explain to women and men its presence in the contemporary world – a world created and sustained by God, enslaved by sin, emancipated by Christ, and ready to be fashioned anew to reach its fulfilment.² It saw the Church, scrutinising the signs of the times, as offering a service to the whole human family. It could identify the important questions and trends of the time, seek to understand people’s expectations and longings, interpret them in the light of the gospel, and engage in a helping conversation.³

Vatican II understood the human family to be on a dynamic, evolutionary path, with the constant social and cultural crises in its history bringing major consequences in their wake. New problems constantly called for new analysis and synthesis⁴, and women and men, always seeking permanent values, asked urgent questions about the movements and events of the day.

God sent his Son into the world to inaugurate and proclaim the Kingdom of God, where God’s will is done, all creation brought to wholeness, the dynamic evolutionary process brought to perfection, humanity freed, and there is justice and peace, unity and happiness, fullness and plenty, joy, and an end to suffering (*Mt 5:2-10*).

To continue the proclamation and building up of the Kingdom, Jesus established a church, the People of God. By continually scrutinising the signs of the times, the Church uncovers the Kingdom already in the world, and discovers what still needs to be done to build it to fullness. But it scrutinises not only the signs in the world; it needs first to scrutinise the signs

¹ Pope John XXIII, *Humanae Salutis*, 1961

² Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes – Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 1965, n.4

³ *Ibidem*, nn. 1-24. An excellent example of this is the 2015 Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* of Pope Francis on ecology and climate. In it he says: “I urgently appeal for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone” (n. 14).

⁴ *Ibidem*, n. 5

in its own body, for the Church is the sign of the Kingdom in the world, and inseparable from it, and it cannot admit of anything in its life, structures or ministry which runs counter to the Kingdom. Therefore, if it finds anything in its own life, structures or ministry, which is not of the Kingdom, it must change and reform itself (*ecclesia semper reformanda est*).

There are many occasions in the past when the Church read the signs of the times but did not act. It went 'off mission' and became a counter-sign to the Kingdom. One occasion was the lead-up to the Reformation, when simony, corruption, and the traffic in indulgences had transformed the Church into a scene of desolation. Another is the recent worldwide phenomenon of clerical child sexual abuse, with its systemic Episcopal cover-up. On both occasions the signs were evident for a long time, but were ignored or denied, and no reform actioned. The result rendered the Church a counter-sign to the Kingdom.

Scrutinising the signs of the times is not a task for clerics alone. Rather, it is the right and duty of all the People of God, from the bishops to the last member of the laity; for it is the 'whole body of the faithful', which shares in Christ's prophetic office, and being anointed by the Spirit, cannot err in matters of belief. It is the 'sense of faith' of all Christ's faithful (*sensus fidei fidelium*), sustained by the Spirit of Truth, which clings to the gospel message, penetrates it, and applies it to life.⁵

A clear sign of the times in the Church today is the profound sense of restlessness, incompleteness and dissatisfaction which many Catholics feel with the *status quo*. But they are not just 'feelings'; they are baptismal instincts, informed and supported by good theology.

The Church cannot build the Kingdom by itself, but only in partnership with God. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: "God without you won't, and you without God can't."

⁵ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium – Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 1964, n.12. A good example of a communal reading of the signs of the times was the recent Listening and Dialogue phase of the preparation for the 5th Australian Plenary Council, when over 200,000 Australian Catholics engaged themselves in this process.