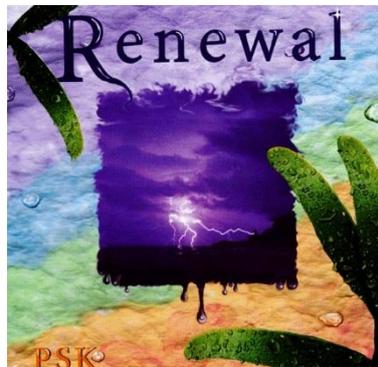


Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes, Francis and Mercy



“We consider our *primary duty* to be that of promoting, with prudent but encouraging action, the *most exact fulfilment* of the norms and directives of the Council. *Above all* we must favour the development of *conciliar attitudes*. First one must be in harmony with the Council. One must put into effect what was stated in its documents; and what was ‘implicit’ should be made explicit in the light of *the experiments* that followed and in the light of *new and emerging* circumstances.” - John Paul II, October 17, 1978

John Paul’s original intentions are what St Charles Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan, actually put into action in his archdiocese following the Council of Trent (ended 1563). He not only *received* the teaching of Trent, he was convinced that the work of a general Council did not cease at the end of the last session but that it needed ongoing interpretation and application at the local level. Borromeo instituted this practice in earnest by holding annual synods which diligently published its work. Even though the Milanese synods were most likely very clericalist in nature and procedure, nevertheless their established example of continuing interpretation of the Council of Trent became a model for local churches throughout Europe.

Pope Francis has, in his turn, has made it clear that he has ‘received’ Vatican II, its Magisterium, its vision and challenge and he believes that the work of interpreting the Council and applying its teachings must continue. He has committed himself to restore synodality, one of the Council’s principal fruits, and the vision of Vatican II at both the global and local levels of the Church. With the Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom (c349-407), Francis believes that “Church and synod are synonymous.” The opposition he faces in this transformative process however is considerable.

The election of Jorge Bergoglio as Pope Francis has marked a tipping point in the history of post-Vatican II Catholicism. Francis has reignited hope in a whole generation of Catholics and restored confidence and encouragement after the long years of inertia and sterility under his two predecessors. Vatican II is back on the agenda for reform and it now informs the

centre piece of Francis' pastoral vision for the Church. For many conservative Catholics from bishops through to laity, Francis represents a new and very dangerous threat to papal continuity and doctrinal orthodoxy in the Church.

John Allen has recently sought to find an explanation for the conservative opposition and resistance facing Pope Francis:

“Today Pope Francis ... (is) ... massively popular around the world, but somewhat divisive inside the Church itself. In his case, it's often more conservative Catholics who find themselves ambivalent.” (1)

Massimo Faggioli, an Italian theologian, presently Associate Professor of Theology at St Thomas University in St Paul, MN, offers an explanation considerably more profound than that of Allen:

“For many years, the Vatican was the expression of a contradiction between two partially conflicting visions of Vatican II: John Paul II's fundamentally positive view of the council and Cardinal Ratzinger's acutely pessimistic reading of the post-Vatican II period. This “dialogue” of interpretations, at the beginning under some control of the pope, gave place gradually to a more important role for Cardinal Ratzinger's views. The conclave of 2005 put an end to the dialogue between the two most important interpreters of Vatican II in the first fifty years of its reception and opened a new phase, in which the Church could not count anymore on the fact that Ratzinger's interpretation was balanced by John Paul II.” (2)

A graphic illustration of just how far Ratzinger/Benedict was prepared to go can be gauged from his 2011 Letter, *Porta Fidei* (the “Door of Faith”) to announce the Year of Faith in the lead up to the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of Vatican II. In that document, Benedict declared that his Magisterium was the authentic interpreter of Vatican II and that the distillation of that body of interpretation is found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. His need to control, contain and limit free and open conversation is probably traceable to his unsettling experience of the 1968 youth upheavals in Europe and especially when ‘the disturbances’ reached his classroom at the University of Tübingen. He lost his nerve back then, along with a great deal of balanced perspective, and never quite recovered.

One of the central motifs of Vatican II which made Ratzinger/Benedict and others feel uneasy was the ancient biblical idea, “the People of God.” as Vatican II applied it to the Church. It was a term Cardinal Ratzinger and colleagues thought smacked too much of the rhetoric of liberal democracies. In an ecclesiological context, it sounded dangerously close to the doctrine of *conciliarism* which was taught by the Councils of Constance (1414-1418) and Basel (1445). These Councils taught that the supreme magisterial authority in the Church subsists in an Ecumenical Council not in the Pope alone. The fears generated by the Councils of Constance and Basel have continued to haunt Popes and the Roman Curia up to the present. (3) Ironically, many of the ideas of these two pre-Reformation Councils were actually later enshrined, at least in part, in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

However, both John Paul II and Benedict XVI succeeded for a time in imposing their very restrictive interpretation on almost every document of Vatican II.

A voice of hope and moral authority in a fragmented world

What a number of prominent theologians and conciliar historians are proposing about *Gaudium et Spes* (the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) was that it was not a proclamation of mid-1960s naive optimism or wide-eyed unfounded hopefulness, but a powerful affirmation of the Church's claim to be the world's moral conscience, compass and voice in the modern world. After more than half a century of unimaginable loss of life, catastrophic destruction of natural and built environments and with the Cold War being prosecuted aggressively by proxies, the international community was looking for a credible, authoritative moral guide and mentor to whom it could look for enlightenment and direction. It found this in the bold challenges and revolutionary teachings of Vatican II.

The Council had, for the first time ever perhaps, produced a blue print for a decent global society and harmony in a world community which cried out for healing and reconciliation. Faggioli quotes French theologian Philippe Bordeyne:

“ ‘..... (the Constitution [Gaudium et Spes] is not about optimism – the original title was *Gaudium et Luctus, Spes et Aangor* [‘Joy and grief, hope and anguish’] – but about hope as an answer to the ‘anguish for justice as the initial spark for moral reasoning.’ In my view, Bordeyne correctly sees *Gaudium et Spes* as the document through which Vatican II fulfils its responsibility.” (4)

Gaudium et Spes (The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), the final document of Vatican II, serves to draw together the major threads of the others. Its vision was, and remains, breathtaking in scope and with good reason. The global community saw in the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* and the entire Magisterium of Vatican II a *Constitution* of the Catholic Church and it was received as such. The Council's great ground-breaking teaching offered humanity an expressly Catholic Christian world view and held out hope for a new way for people co-exist and flourish in the modern world. Even though these documents were written by Catholic Christians, *Unitatis Reintegratio* (Christian Unity/ Ecumenism), *Nostra Aetate* (Recognition of the intrinsic worth of non-Christian faiths with a strong focus on Judaism), *Dignitatis Humanae* (Human liberty and freedom of conscience) all, in their own way embodied great human aspirations of the modern world. Finally they were grounded in *Lumen Gentium* (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) and in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the ways in which the Church celebrates God's original grace which makes Redemption and human reconciliation possible. All of these were distilled in *Gaudium et Spes*. Faggioli comments:

“This core (that is, the documents listed above) is a *development of the tradition* of the Catholic Church also thanks to a political-cultural exchange between a centuries-long universal claim in the global world. The gap between the Church and the world was

dramatically evident at the moment of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the time of Vatican II and in the years after, that gap is substantially different.” (5)

Appreciating Francis’ reception of Vatican II is vitally important for an understanding the basic theological and pastoral underpinning of his papacy. He believes profoundly and passionately in the Council’s vision and affirmations of human hopefulness in Christ, the credibility of his Gospel and moral authority of his Church in human history. Furthermore, he believes and teaches insistently that the Church its doctrines and laws are not ends in themselves but servants of Christ and his Gospel.

Francis calls for a Vatican II style ‘relocation’ of the Church

When Pope Francis speaks about the necessity for the Church to refocus itself, he uses the image of the Church as a ‘field hospital’ for the fringe-dwellers occupying the *existential peripheries* and the margins of respectable society. He is appealing not only to his own rich experience as a priest and bishop working among the slum dwellers of Buenos Aires, he is talking about the solemn commitment of the Second Vatican Council to embrace anew the human condition in all its dimensions. (GS # 1)

In the midst of human misery and depravation, he learnt so much of what has become the core of his constant teaching and preaching. In *Laudato Si’*, Francis outlines the ethical and moral imperatives to care for the entire human and natural environment. He has clearly shown that he stands firmly in the long history of the Catholic social teaching. With that authority, he has reclaimed the Council’s prophetic edge in demanding responsibility and accountability in overseeing the just distribution and use of wealth has caused outrage among many conservative political and economic groups for his criticism, among other things, of the charade of *trickledown* economics.(6)

Central to this re-location of the Church’s pastoral focus is the huge shift away from the interventionist moral micro-management from afar, from clericalist infantilisation of the laity, an acknowledgment of adult faith and a trust in the intrinsic integrity of the *sensus fidelium*. In *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis firmly supports the principle of decentralisation and co-responsibility in the way most moral and pastoral issues are addressed and resolved

:

“Since “time is greater than space,” I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the Magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. *Jn* 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For “cultures are in fact

quite diverse and every general principle... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied". #3

Francis' papacy has occasioned the return of sound Moral theology, finally out of the catacombs after forty years of being closely scrutinised and, therefore, being understandably cautious. It's no wonder Francis appeals to the very best in sound moral theology in his major writings so far. He wants people to recognise that the Christian life is primarily informed by the Gospel of Christ which is incarnated in human history and human experience. Francis has made it a priority to support his teaching with the great moral thinking of St Thomas Aquinas. Thomas' moral doctrine is founded on the Christian virtues of Faith, Hope and Love and not on Church Law. His doctrine of free will and the primacy of conscience make possible safe and integral solutions to problems intractable in Church Law and even in the best Sacramental Theology.

The final vote of the Bishops' synod in Rome, October 2016, was decided on this very matter. In those extremely complex pastoral situations not readily resolved through the normal Church practice and procedures, solutions can be reached through recourse to a long process of moral discernment, honest dialogue and a gradual path to reconciliation. This process is known as the *internal forum*. Its authenticity is grounded in and guaranteed by St Thomas' theology of the human freedom and the primacy of conscience. In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis wrote:

"We find it difficult to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfilment than as a lifelong burden ... We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations," he states. "We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them." (7)

Francis' reaffirmation of the principle of *Gradualism* (growth towards moral maturity over time) marks an important step forward by the Magisterium in its articulation of moral teaching which is informed by studies in psychological and intellectual development. There is nothing new about all this but it is timely that Francis has appealed to it. It is known in the Eastern Tradition as the *Oikonomia*. Those who recognise their serious moral deficiencies but continue to yearn for a more mature moral adulthood may reasonably access the Sacramental life of the Church, including the Eucharist. In the discernment of their situation and their progress, pastors encourage people by the grace of the *Oikonomia*: "If you cannot do at the moment what you are supposed to do, try doing this much for now, without becoming overly concerned or anxious about the future." (8)

Over the past three years, Francis has redressed a very serious deficiency in Catholic life which persisted during the papacies of his two immediate predecessors. He has affirmed the central importance of Moral theology in the normal conversation and inquiry of the Catholic Church. Francis has reminded everyone that the realities of the Christian life are complex and

that sound moral thinking is done best when people are able to make appropriate distinctions and recognise nuance. For example, in *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis addresses the question of “irregular situations” and how moral culpability may be seriously influenced and even reduced by external circumstances:

“It can no longer simply be said that all those in any ‘irregular’ situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace. More is involved here than mere ignorance of the rule. A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding ‘its inherent values’, or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin. As the Synod Fathers put it, ‘factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision’”. # 301

Francis has served the Church well in reclaiming the collective memory of Vatican II, in validating its authority and affirming its vision. The Council led the People of God out of a tired old near static ecclesiastical world into a stunning new human environment with all the challenges of modernity. A major accomplishment of Vatican II was to shift the Church’s centre of gravity away from itself into the very centre of human society, to embrace the world and evangelise it from the inside as its citizens and not from the outside as strangers. Faggioli comments on the enduring significance and authority of Vatican II:

“Vatican II is still relevant because it has produced a change that is now clearly, in its fundamental core, irreversible – or reversible only at an unimaginable cost. The amount and the quality of change have now gone beyond anyone’s ability to turn back the clock.”
(9)

Vatican II created another irreversible fact namely, the theological, psychological and spiritual relocation of the episcopate of the Catholic Church from the ecclesiastical mindset of Trent and Vatican I to the world of the twentieth century and beyond. After nearly four decades of domestication, blind obedience and regimented compliance under his two immediate predecessors, Pope Francis has sometimes berated the bishops to take up the task for which they were ordained. Over the past three years, he has demanded that they get close to their people, listen to them closely and to demonstrate leadership that is informed by love, prophetic wisdom and compassionate care.

Another likely unstoppable initiative is that Francis has also taken almost all Catholic people with him so far down the path of renewal, re-imagining, ‘conceptual relocation’ and recovery of the genius and vision of Vatican II that it will be near impossible for these to be reversed easily by anyone.

Endnotes

- 1) "A guide to decoding Catholic reaction to Francis", *Crux* March 27, 2016 (Link [here](#))
- 2) *A Council for the Global Church. Receiving Vatican II in History*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 49; See also on You tube: Massimo Faggioli, "Vatican II after Fifty Years," Panel 6 *Georgetown University Conference Vatican II*. October 11-12, 2012. (Link [here](#)); Massimo Faggioli, "Vatican II: the Battle for Meaning", *Lectures in Catholic Experience*, University of St Jerome, January 16, 2013 (Link [here](#))
- 3) John O'Malley, *Trent. What Happened at the Council* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2013) 25-26, 30.
- 4) L'homme et son angoise: La théologie morale de 'Gaudium et Spes' (Paris: Cerf, 2004, 21 in Faggioli, *A Council for the Global Church. Receiving Vatican II in History*, 173. See relevant passages from *Gaudium et Spes*:

"Hence this Second Vatican Council, having probed more profoundly into the mystery of the Church, now addresses itself without hesitation, not only to the sons of the Church and to all who invoke the name of Christ, but to the whole of humanity. For the council yearns to explain to everyone how it conceives of the presence and activity of the Church in the world of today.

Therefore, the council focuses its attention on the world of men, the whole human family along with the sum of those realities in the midst of which it lives; that world which is the theatre of man's history, and the heir of his energies, his tragedies and his triumphs; that world which the Christian sees as created and sustained by its Maker's love, fallen indeed into the bondage of sin, yet emancipated now by Christ, Who was crucified and rose again to break the strangle hold of personified evil, so that the world might be fashioned anew according to God's design and reach its fulfillment." *Gaudium et Spes*, # 2. (Link [here](#)); See also, Faggioli, *A Council for the Global Church*, 159.

- 5) *Ibid*, 155. US prudential contender, Bernie Sanders' participation in a Vatican sponsored conference on the commonalities shared by those committed to the social Gospel would not have happened without Vatican II. Michael O'Loughlin, "Sanders to visit Vatican, no Pope meeting planned," *Crux*, April 8, 2016. (Link [here](#))
- 6) *Laudato Si'* (linked [here](#))
- 7) Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (Link [here](#)) See Francis' comments on decantalsation in the arbitration of pastoral-moral issues: "Since "time is greater than space", I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the Magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. *Jn* 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For "cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied".

- 8) See the footnote in *Amoris Laetitia* which has infuriated many conservative Catholics: “In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments. Hence, ‘I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber, but rather an encounter with the Lord’s mercy’ (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* [24 November 2013], 44: AAS 105 [2013], 1038). I would also point out that the Eucharist ‘is not a prize for the perfect but as nourishment for the weak.’” (*AL*, Footnote 351). *Oikonomia* includes the essential notion of *the action of God’s grace in the Church*. See also, John Allen, “The Synod’s key twist. The sudden return of gradualism,” *Cruz*, October 8, 2014 (Link [here](#))
- 9) Faggioli, *A Council for a Global Church*, 185.

Some other related material:

Massimo Faggioli, “The Battle over ‘*Gaudium et Spes*’ Then and Now. Dialogue with the Modern World after Vatican II” Georgetown University Conference Vatican II. October 11-12, 2012. (Linked [here](#))

Despite his trenchant criticism of *Gaudium et Spes* and what he called ‘analogical interpretations of Vatican II, Council *peritus* Henri de Lubac sj, was firmly convinced that the Magisterium of Vatican II is at the centre of the Catholic tradition:

“Vatican II completed the work of Vatican I and initiated by Vatican I through a solemn teaching that confirms the teaching of the whole Catholic Tradition.” *Entretien autour de Vatican II: Souvenirs et réflexions* (Paris: France Catholique, Cerf, 1985) 76.

Faggioli comments on the stumbling blocs to reception of Vat II over the past fifty years:

“A second fact is that *Vatican II had, in its first fifty years of life, a quite interesting and complex history of reception*, always rooted in a theological debate that encompassed all cultural and geographical latitudes of world Catholicism. The debate on the reception of Vatican II survive not only the generation of bishops and theologians who were at Vatican II, but also the most difficult and important moments in the relationship between magisterium, theologians, people of God, and the outer world. Thee moments include the encclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. Paul VI’s disappointments of the mid-1970s, the new Code of Canon Law in 1983, the Extraordinary Synod of 1985, the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, and the election of the first pope who was not a councilfather, Pope Benedcit XVI, in April 2005. All these eventful and consequential moments never managed to overshadow the council or put it in the broader context of the theological zeitgeist of the “sixties.” The message of Vatican II has not become tame or a distant reference, at least for theologians.” *A Council for a Global Church*, 184-5.

David Timbs is a member of Catholics for Renewal

April 2016