THOSE VATICAN II "QUESTIONS OF SPECIAL URGENCY" ARE THEY STILL URGENT?

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Two decades have passed since the Church in Council focused worldwide attention on the "joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way." The Council Fathers identified such joy and hope, grief and anguish with that of the followers of Christ since nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in the hearts of Christians who cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.

Millions of hearts around the globe felt that thrill of joy and hope. Religion suddenly appeared alive and well in the twentieth century, and moved to center stage. The Church seemed attuned to the very heart of the modern world, examining the signs of the times, probing the problems that sorely tried men's souls whether in the North or the South, the East or the West. The document manifested such freshness, such friendliness, such openness that it surprised both friends and critics of Roman Catholicism.

One section of this challenging document was entitled "Some More Urgent Problems." These included marriage and the family in the modern world, the proper development of culture, economic and social life, the political community, and war and peace. Now, two decades later the present volume under review brings together experts to assess the impact of the 1965 Conciliar Document. The very fact that this document is singled out for special
consideration and review on its 20th anniversary already tells us much about its influence.

During the two decades the urgent problems were not solved by the teaching of the Council. In fact they became more urgent, bringing more grief and anguish to all people of our troubled times. But the Council has proven more prophetic than anyone could have predicted and the principles offered to help solve those urgent problems have proven adaptable to the growing urgency. They still offer joy and hope, where others offer only despair and gloom.

The authors admit the limitations of *Gaudium et Spes*, limitations that could be overlooked at the time because of the brilliance of its visions and the promise of its breakthrough. But after twenty years of change and development we can see how unabashedly sexist, for example, was its language, how it failed to examine adequately such issues as the plight of orphans, the population problem, the role of widows, the prodigious increase in divorces, the family’s potential as a formidable political influence on society. Perhaps they were due to a lack of time, a lack of full understanding of the signs of the times, “sins of omission,” if you will, but not due to a lack of concern.

The solid theological anthropology whose keystone is the dignity of the human person established the base for a proper understanding of concern for the individual, for marriage and the family. Out of it was to develop the most beautiful and inspiring teaching on marriage that the Church ever formulated just at a time when marriage and the family are threatened as never before in history. Against such an alarming background the authors chosen to reflect on marriage represent the two opposing currents of theological reflection in the post-Vatican II Church. William E. May, of the Catholic University of America speaks for the conservatives, and Professor James Gaffney of Loyola University for the liberals. Predictably, they offer different assessments of *Humanae Vitae* and moralizing about marriage, all in the light of *Gaudium et Spes*. For Gaffney some subsequent papal statements have fallen short of the conciliar understanding that avoided “moral sexology” in approaching marriage which he believes was flawed in the pre-Vatican II Church by its overemphasis on its authority to apply natural law to sexual behavior.

May sees *Gaudium et Spes* as summarizing, deepening, and developing the Church’s position on marriage, with subsequent papal
teaching as logical development of the conciliar teaching, stressing marriage as a person — affirming reality, a love-enabling reality, a life-giving reality.

While allowing for the different emphases of the two theologians and areas of contemporary disagreement the richness of the church’s current teaching on marriage flowing from Gaudium et Spes is most inspiring, couched in the contemporary personalist idiom stressing the equality of the spouses and the God-created beauty of true conjugal love. St. Paul’s “great mystery” has become clearer, more meaningful than ever before. The controversies remaining only prove that we have not yet exhausted that mystery. If, as John Paul II affirms, “the future of humanity passes by way of the family,” the Church cannot be accused of having failed to point out the high moral road in a manner most appealing to our age.

The chapter on the “Social Mission of the Christian Family” should prove of special interest to Catholic parents concerned with the all too real challenges in raising a Catholic family today. James and Kathleen M. Ginnis, husband and wife, share with us their 25 years of social action, 20 years of teaching, 18 years of marriage and 15 years of parenting, plus the insights of a dozen other couples who have also attempted to integrate family life and social ministry. These couples have struggled against the materialism, individualism, racism, sexism, militarism and violence that constantly threaten to poison the atmosphere in which the modern catholic family strives to maintain its integrity and ideals and also fulfill a call to social ministry. They openly confront the oppressive situations and try to change the structures that contribute to such human misery.

Realistically evaluating the cultural forces surrounding them and their children does not discourage these parents. Half the battle is knowing the enemy. “The culture promises instant gratification, problem-free relationships, quick fixes, escape when things get rough. Covenantal love, on the other hand, demands sacrifices, hanging-in, forgiveness, vulnerability and efforts to keep a freshness in the relationship.... Parents face an even greater challenge in their fidelity to their children. Homework, sick and sleepless nights, frustrating interruptions, resolution of difficulties — families need to foster a consciousness of and a critical attitude towards
the prevalent cultural values of materialism and individualism. Advertising, packaging, television and film frequently foster these values, and both children and adults need to be sensitive to the manipulative techniques found in the media and marketing” (p. 46).

Clearly, amid the nitty-gritty of daily family routine this couple has accepted the challenge of *Gaudium et Spes* to take the world and its problems seriously. They believe in their mission to form the family in Christian values so that the members may be capable of influencing the world around them rather than be seduced and overwhelmed by it.

Richard A. McCormick, S.J. of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University, an acknowledged authority in moral theology, examines the current world of bioethics from the perspective of *Gaudium et Spes*. With the conciliar norm of the human person integrally and adequately considered in the light of “the signs of the times” McCormick examines such questions as the very role of the physician, the increasing depersonalization of health care, the question of eugenics, and care of the dying. Writing especially for the Western World, he notes that medicine and the machine are now wed. From diagnosis, through intensive care, to billing, the computer has taken over. This gives efficiency, as McCormick acknowledges, but inevitably leads to some impersonality. How to preserve the human touch, an atmosphere of tender loving care in the middle of tubes and electronic machines? Perhaps the local reader will suggest that the East has much to offer the West in this area.

Good stewardship in managing scarce resources for the health care of the greatest number of people is one of the problems facing all governments today. As the developing nations move in the direction of total health care painful choices must be made. Here in the Philippines the new constitution pledges the state to “adopt an integrated and comprehensive approach to health development which shall endeavor to make essential goods, health and other social services available to all the people at affordable cost. There shall be priority for the needs of the underprivileged sick, elderly, disabled, women, and children. The State shall endeavor to provide free medical care to paupers” (Art. XII, Sec. II). Such a noble and laudable goal, almost identical with current Catholic Church
social teaching, can only be achieved by maximum efficiency in the use of scarce resources.

Distributive justice is the main virtue to consider as McCormick points out. The Church, the state, all men of good will today would accept proper health care at all stages as a fundamental right of every human being. But how to bring it to every barrio, to every squatter, to every displaced person, to every refugee? Aim at a "decent minimum" for all? Follow an egalitarian principle whereby the sickest get what they need, even the most sophisticated interventions (transplants?) if they can benefit from them?

These thorny moral issues will face our legislators when they soon gather to start translating the lofty ideals of the new constitution into reality. This chapter will help to put the problems in focus from the perspective of morality and especially of distributive justice.

The chapter on "Political Hopes and Political Tasks" turns our attention to the political arena, uppermost in the minds of most thinking people today in every corner of the globe. Professor John Langan, S.J. of Woodstock Theological Center and Senator Patrick Leahy, United States Senator from the state of Vermont, reflect on and update the conciliar teaching in the sphere of politics. For Langan the Council made a fourfold contribution. For the human community it offered a theological anthropology whose keystone is the dignity of the human person, Christian ideals, moral norms, and policy directions and recommendations. Its optimism has been tempered by the harsh realities of the intervening twenty years. Some have been tempted to give way to pessimism and disappointment, abandoning the struggle for peace with justice, and true freedom with economic prosperity but the ideals of Gaudium et Spes take on more urgency than ever. They cannot be abandoned just because the struggle is more painful than we expected and the goal much further away than we ever believed possible. There is too much at stake. The welfare of hundreds of millions of people is the real issue.

In the socio-economics sphere the guest authors show the firm growth of the Church's thrust for justice starting with Gaudium et Spes and getting stronger and stronger through papal statements and the pronouncements of National Conferences of Bishops, at Medellin and Puebla. Finally the Bishops in Synod (1971) gathered around Pope Paul VI in Rome made commitment to justice, to
the poor, "constitutive of" the preaching of the Gospel message today, with a preferential option for the poor, with the Church striving to change socio-economic structures. Liberation theology, which transformed the theological landscape of Latin America with its vision of economic and political liberation "as one of the dimensions of salvation in Christian belief, has become an undeniable influence in the theological discussion of socio-economic life since Vatican II" (p. 149).

Neither capitalism left to itself nor communism can be trusted to work for the common good, the true welfare of the people. Economic development "must be kept under the control of mankind — at every level the largest possible number of people (should) have an active share in directing that development" (Gaudium et Spes, no. 65). Neither individuals nor governments alone can be entrusted with the economic welfare of the people (ibid.).

The Church does not claim a special mandate from Christ in the whole political, economic and social order. But out of the religious goal set before the Church by Christ, to teach all nations, there comes a function, a light, an energy which can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to divine law (no. 42).

To change the economic structures which lock the poor nations into an unending cycle of poverty has become a burning issue in Catholic social thought. It is a far cry from the passive acceptance by the poor of their condition ("tranquil resignation") counselled by Leo XIII in 1891 while he pleaded with the rich to share their superfluous wealth with the poor out of "charity" and "generosity." Today the injustice so prevalent in the world is seen as deriving from a worldwide "network of domination, oppression and abuses — unjust systems and structures" (1971 Synod of Bishops, nos. 3, 5). The work of the Church is the "liberation of people from every oppressive condition" (no. 6).

The structuralist analysis found in embryo in Gaudium et Spes has emerged full blown on the Catholic theological stage. On this matter the Church in the East and the West, in the North and the South, speaks with one voice even though individual church leaders may vacillate. But there can be no backing away from the Church's preferential option for the poor, its special care for the handicapped, the oppressed, following the exhortation of Christ who said
that we would all be judged by what we did or did not do for the
least of these His little ones (Mt 25).

This concern for the poor and the underprivileged, the have-
nots, now so forceful in the whole Catholic Church is in full har-
mony with the new constitution of the Philippines. Church and
state speak with one voice as they express their concern. The poor
work patiently for the implementation. The communists would
love to see Church and state lose this golden opportunity so that
they can move into the vacuum with their solution imposed under
the gun.

These comments should more than suffice to convince the
reader that this is a book with much to offer for all concerned
with the problems now so acute in the Philippines. Many of the
developed insights of Gaudium et Spes are put at our disposal in
this volume in an attractive, formal and pleasing style.