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VATICAN II: THE CHURCH LOOKS AT THE WORLD

INTRODUCTION

Good evening...and thank you for attending tonight's Vatican II presentation.

Tonight our topic is the Second Vatican Council's contribution to the Church-World relationship.

LEADING UP TO VATICAN II

The death of Pope Pius XII in 1958 marked the end of an era in the church's history. His papacy had provided the church with a strong, conservative leadership.

At the conclave to elect his successor, we are told that the cardinals had difficulty coming to an agreement but, ultimately, reached a compromise.

They elected 77-year-old Angelo Roncalli, who, they believed, would serve as an interim, transitional pope.

No one at the time could have imagined what this new pope, John XXIII, would leave as his legacy. Only three months after his election, John announced his decision to convene an ecumenical council.

His announcement provoked a broad range of responses.

But it is fair to say that, overall, the response of most people could be summed up in one word: “WHY?” After all, Catholicism looked to be in pretty good shape at the time. Catholic schools were filled, vocations to the priesthood and religious life were plentiful, and... thanks to their catechism, most Catholics “knew” the faith...at least from an intellectual perspective.

So why a council?

This question was important too because after the First Vatican Council (1869-70) had articulated the teaching on papal infallibility...no one thought there would ever be a need for another council.

What was John thinking? What prompted such an incredible decision?

As we would come to know, John credited the Holy Spirit as the inspiration for this announcement and, three years later, the council opened on October 11, 1962.

By the time it ended, it had produced sixteen documents – four constitutions, nine decrees, and three declarations – each of them addressing a central issue in the Catholic faith.

For clarification purposes...

The **Constitutions** were concerned with doctrine and dogma, restating official teachings in language contemporary men and women would understand. They would also incorporate the insights from those theologians who had been working in the decades preceding the council.

The **Decrees** were concerned with renewal of some aspect of church life. They would require further action and implementation after the council.

The **Declarations** gave instruction on subjects important to the church and the world.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, will serve as the context for tonight's discussion.

In order to grasp the significance of this document, we need to take a brief look at how the church viewed the world before the council. This view was the product of nearly 2000 years of history so, an in-depth treatment of those years is, of course, beyond the scope of tonight's session.

Still, there are a number of aspects that most theologians agree characterize the pre-Vatican II attitude toward the modern world.

I will touch on three of them.

Dualism

The first is dualism.

This philosophy understood the world as the product of two forces – good and evil. Good was represented by spiritual reality and evil by material reality. In this philosophy, the world was seen as a place of exile and the human body as the prison of the soul.

Though never officially espoused by the Catholic Church, dualism did leave its mark early on in Christian history. We see hints of it in some of the early Church Fathers, such as Augustine, especially with regard to their teaching on sexual activity and marriage.

Over the years, certain dualistic distinctions crept into our theological language as well.

We would talk about:

- the sacred vs the secular
- the eternal vs the temporal and
- the supernatural vs the natural.

Using these distinctions as we did allowed a kind of dualism that clearly contributed to the church's disdain for the world. For one thing, we were far more concerned about the "next" world (heaven) than we were about this world (earth).

Defensive Stance

Another factor was the church's defensive stance.

There is no doubt that in the 100 years between Vatican I and Vatican II, the prevailing attitude of the church toward the world could be referred to as a defensive mentality. The roots of this mentality can be traced as far back as the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century...and made stronger during the French Revolution and the period known as the Enlightenment.

Many in the church came to believe that the way to avoid outside forces that would pose a threat to Christian unity...would be to insulate the church behind a power structure that would claim to have all the answers.

This unfortunate premise led to the next factor which played into the church's negative evaluation of the world.

Classicist Thinking

And that would be classicist thinking. For too long, Catholic theology had been limited to the philosophy and theology of the Middle Ages. This worldview is static and not open to the possibility of genuine growth and development.

One of Vatican II's best-known figures and representative of classicist thinking was Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani. Every bishop chooses a phrase for his episcopal motto. Ottaviani chose *Semper idem*, "Always the same."

So, in this view - truth is truth, the same today as yesterday – both in content **and** in articulation.

Yet, we saw the opposite of this in a line quoted in our first presentation from John XXIII's opening address at the council, when he said:

"The ancient deposit of the faith is one thing and the way it is articulated in every new generation is another."

No doubt, Ottaviani must have bristled when he heard this line from John's speech.

This attitude can lead to a deadly arrogance and authoritarianism...a closed system that has little, if any, meaning for those who live outside the system.

How then can the mission of the church to transform all things in Christ be accomplished...if we refuse to speak and listen to those outside the walls, walls which we ourselves erected?

AGGIORNAMENTO

Against this backdrop, Pope John believed his council could be an *aggiornamento*... a bringing-up-to-date of the Catholic faith, adapting itself to meet the needs of modernity.

And GS would be the centerpiece of this endeavor.

Even though this document came about after John's death, it represents him more than any other council document. It expresses the most profound change from being a church in conflict with the world...to being a church in dialogue with the world.

It revealed a church in the direction of progress and serious renewal, no longer fearful of the world.

And, like John XXIII's opening address, GS addressed itself **not just** to Catholics and other Christians...but to the **whole** of humanity, desiring to engage them and the world in authentic dialogue.

We cannot overestimate the significance of this point.

For the first time in the history of church councils, the entire human family was invited to the table.

And the dialogue would begin by focusing on the human person.

If the church is to make a real contribution to the world, it would have to demonstrate that it understands the human condition and the world in which humans live.

The final draft of GS passed with 1,710 votes in the affirmative. 480 of the council fathers voted against it.

This last and longest of the council's documents was promulgated on December 7, 1965...the day before the council ended.

Before taking a closer look at GS, three things need to be addressed:

1...The first deals with what we might call the inherent problem in all of the council's documents. This problem has been acknowledged by most council commentators and should be noted here for the sake of theological honesty.

When one studies the documents carefully, it becomes clear that, given the makeup of the participants, the documents frequently bear the marks of compromise.

Two distinct forces were at work at Vatican II.

These forces have been called:

- conservatives vs liberals
- minority vs majority, and
- those holding on to established positions vs progressive thinkers.

Such titles are rarely fair because they suggest an overly simplified designation. The truth is this: regardless of which "camp" a particular council father represented, two things are clear about all of them. They loved their church and they tried to be attuned to the Holy Spirit in their midst.

2...The second point is of a personal nature but I think it is important. When I read the documents now, almost 60 years after they were written... I wonder if the council fathers could have even imagined the far-reaching implications of the words they put on paper as the legacy of Vatican II.

Many examples of this “wonderment” could be offered but one will suffice for now. In article 44 of GS, we read:

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God...to hear, distinguish, and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine Word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated and better understood.
(Underlining mine.)

A remarkable paragraph in that it contains so much...

...that the “whole” people of God are involved in this process
 ...that we need to “hear” the many voices of our age
 ...that truth can be more deeply penetrated and better understood

The council Fathers could not possibly have foreseen the emergence of groups like Future Church or the Voice of the Faithful or questions about the role of women in the church today. And yet their words provide a genuine opening for a discussion of such issues.

Can anyone doubt the influence of the Holy Spirit on the council’s deliberations?

3...The third concept has to do with three paradigm shifts that took place prior to the Council.

I do not want to be overly academic but these shifts are very important because they changed the way we did theology and ultimately led us to Vatican II.

Paradigm Shifts in Theology

The first shift involved our worldview. The traditional classicist view maintained the truth of the past as certain and unchangeable for every future time and culture.

Whereas the historically conscious worldview holds that every expression of a theological truth is a product of the time period in which it was expressed.

This does **not** mean that the basic truths of the faith change.

Rather, believers come to deeper insights into those truths.
(Cf. Example of how our understanding of the Incarnation changed, Ransom Theory, Satisfaction Theory)

Each new age presents new data, new questions, new discoveries that theologians must take into account when they seek to give reasons for the hope that is in them.

The deposit of faith does not change...we do!

The second shift involved the method of doing theology...**from Deductive to Inductive.**

The basic task of theology has always been to study the Divine-human relationship and...in the pre-Vatican II deductive approach, theologians began with the Divine partner.

In the interest of time, I am oversimplifying a bit here.

But theologians took their picture of God from scripture and then, they came across the quote: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Since we read the bible literally at the time, we assumed that was how humans should act. We imposed divine behavior on humans.

This expectation of divine behavior from nondivine beings (quite prevalent before Vatican II) caused much frustration and guilt for those Catholics who came to realize the impossibility of meeting such expectations. This approach did not take the human condition into consideration in the doing of theology.

However, in the decades leading up to the council, theologians came to realize they were beginning the theological enterprise with the wrong partner. If they wanted the gospel to take root in the hearts and souls of humans, they must first understand the needs, desires and the potential of the human person.

The council fathers realized this as well.

If the church is to be in dialogue with the people of God, it must take seriously the world in which they live.

In this inductive methodology, the reality of the human condition, with all its strengths and limitations, becomes a factor in the doing of theology.

Perhaps the best example of this methodology in the council documents is found in G&S. The very first line reads:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ...indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in our hearts. Therefore the council focuses its attention on the world of men (and women), the whole human family... along with the realities in which that family lives.

Needless to say, not all the council fathers approved of this approach.

They feared that it prepared the way for a kind of relativism to emerge, or the view that truth changes from culture to culture, from individual to individual...a kind of “you have your truth, I have mine.”

But the proponents of this method believed there was a safeguard against relativism. That safeguard was the very gospel itself. That is the measure by which we come to authentic truth.

The third shift would have an impact on the way we taught the faith.

We could label this a shift from the “apologetic” approach to the “foundational” approach.

In theology, the word apology does not mean I am sorry. Rather, it describes a way of teaching. Anyone introduced to the faith before the council would have experienced the apologetic approach in the Baltimore Catechism.

Good as it was on many levels, the catechism focused more on saying what the truths of the faith were and less on what they might mean in our everyday lives...on how these truths would affect the way we act.

And, given the world in the 1950s, this approach worked very well. We did not question our parents, police officers, or – heaven forbid – our religious leaders.

Simply put, something was right because an authority figure said it was right.

But the 1960s ushered in a new way of thinking. It brought about the “What does it mean?” generation.

Now the task of theologians was not simply to reiterate the truths of the faith and expect immediate assent. No, now they would have to provide a foundation for the faith. They would need to give reasons to believe.

When I taught this concept to undergraduates, I used to call it the “I’m the mommy approach.” Something is right because I said it was right.

But parents know that children reach a point where that no longer suffices. They want to know why. And that is precisely what happened to the people of God. They grew up. They reached a point where they wanted to know why.

And in the years leading up to Vatican II, we find a good number of theologians whose theology clearly demonstrated the impact of these shifts in theology.

These theologians were the precursors of Vatican II, the architects of what would become the theology of Vatican II. In my study of these theologians, I developed a great respect for what they achieved, often in the face of great hardship. Many suffered the suspicions and discipline of their own church during their day.

They were prophets among us and, like the Old Testament prophets, they were not always received very well.

Happily for us, many of these theologians assisted the bishops in the writing of the Vatican II documents. G&S clearly demonstrates their influence.

CHURCH AND WORLD: A RECONCILIATION

G&S succeeded, at least on paper, in reconciling the church with the world. The English title of the document, “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” reveals the first hint of a change.

It speaks of the church *in* the world, not *for* the world, or *toward* the world. And in the years leading up to the council, efforts were being made by certain theologians to develop a more positive view of the world.

Romano Guardini was one of the earliest proponents. He began with the basic concerns and questions his listeners had in their concrete situations. He believed that theology must always find a language that gives life, one that men and women of any given generation can understand.

Dominican Father Yves Congar was also one of these theologians. He maintained that the church must ask questions of the world and must listen to the “others.”

He believed that if theology remains at the level of intellectual activity alone, remote from the real world...it is a dead theology because theology must listen to and try to respond to the questions men and women have.

Their attempts were rarely received with any enthusiasm by church officials before the council.

Still, those theologians believed that a broader dialogue between the church and world was necessary if Catholicism was to remain credible to contemporary believers.

G&S provided the foundation for such a dialogue.

Because it begins its examination with the human person, with experiences that are common to believers and non-believers alike...a new light would be cast on issues such as:

- the possibility of salvation for all persons
- on the inherent goodness of the created world
- on the plurality of cultures and
- on the ultimate vocation of the human person.

Christianity had always claimed that its message was a universal message...and that claim became all the more credible now because, by beginning with the reality of human existence, the message of G&S becomes accessible to all humans, not just those within the Catholic family.

And by choosing the human person as the starting point for its church-world relationship, G&S made clear the necessity of a sound theological anthropology.

The council fathers would have to address this important question: What does it mean to be human?

The understanding of humanity as outlined in the introduction and first four chapters of G&S...is the most exhaustive and theologically rich treatment that can be found in the council documents.

A key element in theological anthropology is the attempt to understand the divine-human relationship.

As noted earlier, dualism found its way into the **pre-Vatican II** understanding of this relationship.

And it separated nature and grace....as though grace was something like icing on a cake, poured on top of our wounded human nature.

But a new understanding of the grace-nature relationship was being suggested by those prophet theologians before the council...men like Jesuits Henri deLubac and Karl Rahner.

DeLubac was convinced that nature was made for the supernatural.

And, rather than speak about grace as something added on to the human person...Rahner preferred to speak about our “graced nature,” that in fact, we have never been without God.

We are reminded of the well-known quote of St. Augustine: “God is more intimate to me than I am to myself.”

G&S’ theological anthropology is grounded in a solid theological principle: Humanity was created by God, for God.

We were created in such a way that it is in our very nature to have a capacity for the supernatural. At the creative moment, we are not receiving mere truths about God.

We are given a presence.

This understanding of humanity would find a home in G&S, article 19, which states:

The root reason for human dignity lies in humanity’s call to communion with God. From the very moment of origin, the human person is called to converse with God.

It is commonplace today to speak like this about grace. But such thinking was not common before Vatican II.

Those theologians who had broken new ground and suffered because of it were vindicated when the Council Fathers adopted this theologically rich anthropology. And it is a description of every human in the world, not simply Catholics.

CONCLUSION

Let me offer some closing thoughts...

Another leading voice at Vatican II was Dominican Father Marie-Dominique Chenu. He clearly left his mark on G&S.

He was especially influential with regard to the discussion of the ongoing development and understanding of doctrine.

Chenu maintained that the church in every historical period is being called to new ways of being present to the world...that each and every change requires a new incarnation.

Perhaps that explains one of Chenu's favorite themes: "God speaks today."

For the theologians we have met thus far, the plan of salvation is not a fixed, static reality.

The first glimpse that Vatican II would embrace this kind of thinking came in John's opening speech...where he made the distinction between the truths of the faith and how they are expressed in history.

In many ways, his opening address set the tone for the documents to come. It is certainly true for G&S, which actually included John's quote in the text.

Also included was a statement that must have brought great joy to those theologians whose prophetic insights had been dismissed by church officials over the years.

The council fathers acknowledged the need to take seriously the questions posed by modernity, claiming:

The recent studies and findings of science, history and philosophy raise new questions which affect life and which demand new theological investigations. Furthermore, theologians...are invited to seek continually for more suitable ways of communicating doctrine to the men and women of their times.

(G&S, 62)

Theology is never about making isolated statements of fact. Every theological statement is rich with potential implications...and G&S' acceptance of a new worldview is a good example of this point.

Toward the end of the document, we find a remarkable comment:

While this council presents teaching already accepted in the church, the program will have to be followed up and amplified since it sometimes deals with matters in a state of development.

(G&S, 91)

The importance of this statement was not lost on commentators.

The great church historian John O'Malley, SJ noted that, for the first time...this church gathering appeared to be aware of its own mortality, that they were not uttering the **final** word.

Yves Congar also weighed in on this moment in church history. If, as G&S states, the ideas set forth by Vatican II will need to be followed up then, according to Congar, reform will be the willingness to adapt the structures of ecclesial life to new situations.

This willingness to adapt church structures was at the very heart of the church in its earliest days. Though united in the essential truths of the faith...the earliest Christian communities were distinguished by their unique "situations."

The local church of Rome, for example, was different from other local churches in Ephesus, Corinth, Jerusalem, and so on.

As new concerns and questions emerged, the local churches developed structures to meet those needs.

(I would love to see this comment printed at the top of every church's Sunday bulletin.)

This awareness was one of the greatest benefits from our prophet theologians' *return to the sources* as the foundation for doing theology.

The history of the church's relationship with the world, with modernity, is a complex one. But it is fair to say that in the decades prior to Vatican II, the church's view was not a positive one.

Hopefully, this evening's discussion of G&S has demonstrated the enormous leap that Vatican II took with regard to its relationship with the world...and encourages us to continue to find ways to advance that partnership.

The journey is truly not finished!

