I thank you for inviting me to deliver the fourth serving of this prestigious series of Newman Lectures on the Church and the World. The topic given is “Gaudium et Spes,” the document of the Second Vatican Council on the relationship of the Church to the modern world. So I will discuss, first, the significance of the Second Vatican Council, then, some points about Gaudium et Spes and thirdly, some current issues facing the Church today, fifty years on from the Council, before a brief conclusion.

1. Vatican II

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, an assembly of all the bishops of the Catholic Church, held in St. Peter’s Basilica, Rome from 1962 to 1965, has been hailed as one of the most significant religious events of the twentieth century. This is certainly so for Roman Catholics. Its four plenary sessions were attended by most of the world’s then two and a half thousand bishops, by many ecumenical observers, theological experts and the secular media. In addition, working behind the scenes, from the time the Council was announced in 1959, were various preparatory commissions that drafted the documents the Council would issue, then redrafted or amended them as the debates and discussions went along, and afterwards enacted the follow-up. The Council was thus a real-live, complex process lasting several years, marked by all the realities of human interaction, with tensions between modernisers and the ‘old guard’, different continental and cultural groupings, and local and universal concerns. More, as it got underway, it took on a life of its own and the bishops realised they were part of an event of massive, historical significance. Today, 50 years on, there is a clearer perspective on this, but even now, the Council continues to be so important for the Church that it will still be many more decades, perhaps centuries, before a balanced evaluation can be reached. The image Newman used in his Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine applies here: that while a stream might be clearest near its spring, the history of religious ideas is purer and stronger when their “bed has become deep and broad and full,” and their vital elements have been disengaged from what is passing.

Recently, a number of historical studies have appeared, notably the five-volume classic, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo, The History of Vatican II and John O’Malley’s What Happened at Vatican II. The fiftieth anniversary has prompted several works on the

---

1 See for instance G. Alberigo A Brief History of Vatican II (Maryknoll, Orbis Books: 2006).
hermeneutics of the Council, how to interpret the documents, notably from the lay
American theologians Massimo Faggioli and Richard Gaillardetz. For a brief
theological guide, may I (humbly) recommend Chapter Two from my own Philosophy and Catholic Theology. A significant contribution, however, has been the publication of the daily diaries kept by Yves Congar, the great French Dominican theologian. He, along with the then Joseph Ratzinger, Karl Rahner, Piet Schmulders and others, was one of the chief theological experts who helped draft the proposed texts. Congar affords many fascinating insights into the plenary sessions in St. Peter’s: how there were insufficient toilets, how some of the bishops found the wooden benches hard and uncomfortable, how the bishops were arranged by seniority, to mix them up, and how in the breaks many of them packed into the two temporary coffee bars set up in the crypt beneath the basilica, one called Bar-Jonah, the other Bar-Abbas.

Vatican II was the Church’s twenty-first ecumenical council, an ‘ecumenical’ council, unlike a synod, being one involving all the bishops of the world. They are rare events, and are usually called to deal with a crisis in doctrine or discipline. Pope John XXIII, however, wanted this one to be a ‘pastoral’ council. It would not make new definitions of doctrine but effect an aggiornamento, an updating, a modernisation of the Church’s style, discipline, thinking and modus operandi for the sake of evangelising the modern world. He wanted the Council to respond positively to modernity and to update those aspects of the Church that could be updated. It would bring about a spiritual renewal, a ‘new Pentecost’ reinvigorating the Church’s mission; it would open the windows to let in some fresh air. Importantly, he also wanted the Council to help bring about unity among Christians. Consequently, the key question the Council tackled was: ‘What does it mean to be the Church of Christ in the modern world?’ This implied it was out of date; if it was to evangelise and to bring about Christian unity, the Church needed modernising. Many individuals and many groups welcomed this intention with enthusiasm, whilst others, including some of the Roman Curia, were more lukewarm.

Vatican II produced sixteen documents. These comprised nine decrees (on a variety of subjects from ecumenism to the role of the laity), three declarations (on education,  

---


8 Hahnenberg 2

9 Cf. M. Sullivan 101 Questions and Answers on Vatican II (New York, Paulist Press: 2002) 17. The Preface to the first document of the Council, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium, neatly sums up the Council’s aims and acts as a preface to everything else that would follow: “This sacred Council has several aims in view: it desires to impart an ever increasing vigour to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church” (Sacrosanctum Concilium 1)
missionary activity and religious freedom) and four great doctrinal constitutions, the key texts of the Council, dealing with the nature of the Church herself. In order these were: Sacrosanctum Concilium, the 1963 constitution on the liturgy, Lumen Gentium, on the Church (1964), Dei Verbum, on divine revelation, and Gaudium et Spes, on the Church in the modern world, both 1965. All these documents incorporated new insights from contemporary theology, modern methods of scripture scholarship, recent developments in philosophy, comparative religion and the human sciences. The underlying approach was two-fold, ressourcement and aggiornamento: that is, going back to the sources in the Bible and Tradition, then applying what had been retrieved to the present needs. It is a process, as it were, of: ‘What does Jesus say? What does the Bible say? What does the Tradition say?’ then ‘In the light of today’s need, what should the Church do now?’ This is a very different route from the pre-conciliar Scholastic theology that was heavily deductive and propositional. It is an approach that takes seriously history, culture and human experience. In this way, the Council was able to shew openness to the modern world. It sought to avoid adversarial stances and to invite all people of good will to enter into dialogue.

The pastoral intention of Vatican II marks the style of all its documents. Here were not canons and definitions, but presentations of the Church’s belief in such a way as to invite a positive response both from other Christians and from anyone of good will. Unlike Trent or Vatican I with their tightly defined conceptual frameworks, the texts of Vatican II are discursive; like a river with incoming streams, they synthesise differing theological positions and viewpoints. Biblical references and historical analyses alternate with papal magisterium and canonical directives. This can make the task of interpretation delicate, a process of investigating what was written, how it was written, and why it was written. Moreover, Paul VI wanted the documents to be approved not just by the statutory two-thirds majority, but by overwhelming majorities. This is why alternative formulations and positions, rather than being resolved in favour of one side or another, are simply juxtaposed even in the same paragraph. The final products are consensus documents. They cannot be proof-texted in the manner of biblical fundamentalism, nor can individual sentences or paragraphs be taken in isolation.

The issue of interpretation remains much discussed. The Council was such a massive event for the Church it inevitably engendered a strong sense of a ‘before’ and an ‘after’. In 1985, an Extraordinary Synod was held to mark the twentieth anniversary of the close of the Council. Its Final Report declared that the theological interpretation of the “conciliar doctrine must show attention to all the documents, in themselves and in their close inter-relationship, in such a way that the integral meaning of the

11 The standard English translation, the version referred to here, is that edited by the Dominican friar, Austin Flannery. See A. Flannery ed. Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents (New York, Costello Publishing Company: 1975/1987). Gaudium et Spes, henceforth referred to as GS, can be found therein pages 903-1001
13 Gaillardetz and Clifford Keys to the Council xv.
14 See A. Barratt ‘Interpreting Vatican II Forty Years on: A Case of Caveat lector’ The Heythrop Journal 47.1 (January 2006) 75-96. See also A. Barratt ‘Parish Convening 2006: How can we read the Documents of Vatican II?’ (unpublished)
Council’s affirmations, often very complex, might be understood and expressed. Special attention must be paid to the four major Constitutions which contain the interpretative key for the other decrees and declarations.” It added that it was illicit “to separate the pastoral character from the doctrinal vigor of the documents.” The Council must be understood “in continuity with the great tradition of the Church.”15

Benedict XVI also warned against ideological approaches.16 One would be to apply a ‘hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture’ rather than a ‘hermeneutic of reform.’ In other words, Benedict insisted that Vatican II must be read within the flow of Catholic Tradition and teaching, even where there are specific discontinuities or developments. Whilst significant shifts in thinking did occur, the Council cannot be interpreted as de facto rupturing the Church into a pre- and post-conciliar reality. Nor, he adds, should there be a split between the ‘spirit’ of Vatican II and its ‘letter,’ as if the real message of the Council was its impulse towards the new, and not the fact that the texts themselves confirm many old things some might deem no longer relevant. The only way to grasp the spirit of the Council, he says, is to steep oneself first-hand in its texts, in their background, genesis and subsequent development.

2. Gaudium et Spes

To turn now to the constitution Gaudium et Spes, which complements Lumen Gentium, as one of the ‘pillars’ of the Council.17 It is arguably the most remarkable document of all, what Henri Fesquet called “the star of the Council.”18

The original intention was to produce one large script on the Church. However, in an impassioned speech towards the end of the first plenary in 1962, Cardinal Suenens argued that the fathers should consider the Church both in its inner life, nature and structure (ad intra) and in its relationship and mission to the outside world (ad extra), a theoretical ecclesiology and a practical ecclesiology.19 These two dimensions suggested the need for two documents to be taken together. Later, the Brazilian Archbishop Dom Helder Camara, speaking on behalf of many from developing countries, asked irritably: “Are we to spend our whole time discussing internal church problems, while two-thirds...

---


16 Benedict XVI ‘Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia’, 22 December 2005: see www.vatican.va (April 2016). “On the one hand, there is an interpretation that I would call ‘a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture’; it has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of modern theology. On the other, there is the ‘hermeneutic of reform’, of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us. She is a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same, the one subject of the journeying People of God. The hermeneutic of discontinuity risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church. It asserts that the texts of the Council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the Council. It claims that they are the result of compromises in which, to reach unanimity, it was found necessary to keep and reconfirm many old things that are now pointless. However, the true spirit of the Council is not to be found in these compromises but instead in the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts.”

17 Hahnenberg 56


19 See Gaillardetz and Clifford Keys to the Council 89f.
of humanity is dying of hunger?” Thus began the long, tortuous history of what was known as Schema 17. *Gaudium et Spes* was the only document to be born during the Council itself. It became not only the longest conciliar text but the one most fiercely debated and radically changed. It underwent four complete re-writings before promulgation. More, its composition was daunting, since there were no models to go by, save the few documents that at that time formed the corpus of the Church’s social teaching.

By the third plenary session of 1964, large swathes of text were in place, thanks to the work of the German moral theologian, Bernard Häring. The interim text comprised four chapters on the Church’s dialogue with the world to promote human dignity and solidarity, plus five appendices on anthropology, marriage, culture, economics and peace. Many found the tone simplistic, overly optimistic, even theologically weak; Ratzinger said it needed a fuller account of human sinfulness and a fuller theology of the Cross. More, two controverted issues came to the fore, nuclear arms and birth control. This was the era of the Cuban missiles crisis and the sexual revolution. Eventually, the final text did discuss the arms race, but Paul VI gave the topic of birth control over to a separate commission, which reported back after the Council in 1966. He rejected the majority view of this commission and in his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* upheld the Church’s traditional teaching on contraception. So the third draft was withdrawn and in time a new one put forward. This after numerous interventions was approved in the last session of Vatican II in December 1965.

*Gaudium et Spes* begins with a remarkable statement about the Church’s solidarity with all human beings:

> “The joy and the hope, the grief and anguish of the [people] of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, these 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. For theirs is a community composed of [people, who united] in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onwards towards the Kingdom of the Father and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for [everyone]. That is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.” *(GS 1)*

The title of the constitution was initially “On the Church and the Modern World,” but since this might suggest the Church was separate from the world, and possibly opposed to it, the final title became “On the Church in the Modern World.” It has two parts. Part One (GS 11-45) comprises a comprehensive theological anthropology based on the biblical notion of human beings created in God’s image, fallen in sin but redeemed by Christ. Four chapters cover the human person, human society, work and earthly activity and the Church’s relationship with the world. Part Two (GS 46-90) treats some urgent problems, including marriage and the family, culture, economics, politics, peace and international development. Paul VI had to push this through affront a blizzard of proposed modifications. Unlike *Sacrosanctum Concilium, Lumen Gentium* and *Dei
Verbum, Gaudium et Spes was called a “pastoral” constitution. Austin Flannery explains why. “Part II,” he says
“treats at length of various aspects of life today and human society, and in particular deals with those questions and problems which seem to have a greater urgency in our day. The result is that in Part II the subject matter, which is viewed in the light of doctrinal principles, consists of elements, some of which are permanent and some of which are contingent.”

In other words, Gaudium et Spes contains dogmatic teaching, but dogmatic teaching that is applied to transient, pastoral realities – hence a ‘pastoral constitution.’ Ever since, this has led to debates about its doctrinal weight and value.

Gaudium et Spes develops Lumen Gentium by envisaging the community of the Church as a leaven in the world, the soul of human society “in its renewal by Christ and transformation into the family of God” for the Church “is in the nature of a sacrament – a sign and instrument – of communion with God and of unity among all [people]”. Consequently, the Church must take seriously the “signs of the times.” It must interpret them theologically, and so the Constitution begins with a lengthy survey of the situation the world at the time found itself in, with its challenges, positive and negative (GS 1-10). Although the “guardian of the heritage of the Divine Word,” the Church “does not always have a ready answer to every question” (GS 33), but she wishes to enter into dialogue with everyone of good will in order to help solve the world’s problems. The Church does not have a “mission in the political, economic and social order” but has much to learn from the world, whilst in turn, Christians, as citizens of both the earthly and the heavenly cities, offer the world the saving truth of Christ and the light of revelation (GS 42-45). In this task, every member has a part to play, above all the laity, who are sent to transform the world from within (GS 40). Part Two of Gaudium et Spes applies these principles to a wide range of urgent issues from marriage and family, culture, economics and society, to politics, international development and peace.

As for the debates among the bishops, it might be tempting to characterise them as between conservatives and progressives, yet in fact the fault-lines were more subtle. The two most divisive issues were the theological meaning and value of “the world,” and the relationship between dialogue and proclamation. In other words, how positively do Christians see the world? And how is respectful and humble dialogue with the world related to the Church’s essential mission to proclaim the Gospel? The bishops became divided between those of a more Platonic-Augustinian bent, who saw the world as fallen and in need of the grace of Christ, and those of a more Aristotelian-Thomist outlook, who saw the world as redeemed in Christ and thus full of potential. The former saw the need for proclamation, the latter for dialogue. These pessimistic and optimistic positions still endure, but in the end, Gaudium et Spes largely came down on the optimistic side of the Aristotelian-Thomists. As Ratzinger remarked in the 1970s,

24 A. Flannery, Vatican Council II 903 n. a.
26 GS 40 and 42. Cf. Lumen Gentium 31 and Apostolicam Actuositatem 3.
27 See Faggioli, Vatican II. The Battle for Meaning 86-90.
“something of the Kennedy era pervaded the Council, something of the naïve optimism of the concept of the great society. We can do everything we want to, if only we employ the right means. It was precisely the break in the historical consciousness, the self-tormenting rejection of the past, that produced the concept of a zero hour, in which everything would begin again, and all those things that had formally been done badly would now be done well.”

Today, fifty years on, more than any other document of Vatican II, the strengths and weaknesses of Gaudium et Spes are obvious. Part One, in which the then Karol Wojtyla played a key part, is still the most comprehensive magisterial statement to date on theological anthropology but the analysis of urgent issues in Part Two seems outdated. Hahnenberg suggests that the signs of the times that the constitution articulated evince a primarily white, male, European perspective, shaped by the realities of the early 1960s. If at the time change was the chief sign, today it is probably globalisation. Atheism is still a threat, but so too now is religious fundamentalism. The Cold War has yielded to the war on terror. Today the role of religious faith and freedom within a secular state is contested. New gender roles, same-sex marriage, the protection of the environment, the regulation of the free market, the digital revolution, migration and refugees, the problem of crime and the impact of technology are pressing issues, to mention a few.

Unsurprisingly, in the period since the Council, the Church has issued numerous documents dealing with matters emerging. Yet the fact that it sought to address contingent realities that have now passed must not be allowed to detract from the achievement of Gaudium et Spes, as one of the first ever magisterial documents to apply a theological perspective to a wide range of concrete problems.

3. The Modern World

To turn now to the last fifty years. Vatican II coincided with the impressive scientific and technological advances of the period, the striking social upheavals of the mid-twentieth century, the struggle between competing politico-economic ideologies and the aftermath of two devastating world wars. The Council, especially in Gaudium et Spes, took a positive stance towards modernity, even optimistic, although modernity has now been overlaid with post-modernity and its greyer tones. These often oscillate between the whimsical on the one hand and the dark on the other. Catholic theology, meanwhile, freed from Scholasticism, has entered a period of enormous vitality, and these last decades have seen a welter of innovative approaches, including liberation theology, feminism, sociology of religion and ecological concern.

The postconciliar period can be divided into pre-1975 and post-1975, although it can also be argued that a further era has opened up with the papacy of Pope Francis.

In the first period up to the mid-1970s, the impact of the Council dominated the whole of the Church’s life and consciousness, with widespread internal change, the revision of the Liturgy and new forms brought in by the commissions that were given the task

---

29 See Hahnenberg 69-72.
of implementing the Council’s recommendations. It was inevitably a period of self-absorption, one that led to a sharp sense of a ‘before’ and an ‘after’. In the fervour of the times, popular speakers would suggest that the Church had been reinvented at Vatican II, that there had been a ‘return to the sources,’ and that the postconciliar Church was much closer to the primitive Church than the alleged clericalism and mediaeval pedantry of the pre-Vatican II era. In this way a polarisation has arisen that, albeit waning, is still extant. Contention can still revolve around the liturgy, authority, and anthropology, especially sexual morality. The publication of *Humanae Vitae* occasioned a canon of dissent frequently heard, that calls on the Church to abandon her teaching on abortion and contraception, to allow divorcees to remarry, to change doctrine on homosexual acts, to ordain women to the priesthood, to make priestly celibacy optional, to decentralise the Roman curia and to allow Catholics to receive communion at non-Catholic eucharists.

But after the 1974 synod on evangelisation, and Paul VI’s magnificent 1975 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, a new era of mission-mindedness began to emerge and a growing concern with evangelisation. This was the original intention of John XXIII for Vatican II and an awareness that became central to the mission of Pope John Paul II. In the 1980s, new ecclesial movements appeared such as the *Neo-Catechumenal Way* and *Communion and Liberation*. These coincided with a growing disquiet about the situation of the Church in Europe, where secularism was rapidly de-Christianising countries of ancient Christian origin, causing the Church to become a minority. This in turn led to a renewed study of the theological meaning and value of culture: that to proclaim the Gospel, the culture in which it is proclaimed must be better understood in order to recognise within it the mediation of the Holy Spirit.

It is difficult here to underestimate the impact of the long pontificate of Pope John Paul II and his successor, Benedict XVI. These were men of outstanding intellect, one more Thomistic, the other Augustinian. Both had been personally involved in the Council itself and both worked vigorously to implement conciliar teaching. What makes Vatican II unique is the on-going process it started, still active today. While the contingent elements have paled, its documents continue to be alive, prompting dialogue between competing positions within the Church and enabling deeper understanding and new applications. This is why the reception of the Council is also part of the Council. Papal teaching, the prudential judgments of the Roman curia, discussion among theologians, plus the on-going study of the documents by the Church as a whole, continue to be decisive for its authentic reception. Fruits typical of this include the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* and the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Unlike previous councils, Vatican II is a work in progress, what Gaillardetz deems an “unfinished council,” which is why calls for a Vatican III can sound premature.

The election of Pope Francis, the first Latin American pope, clearly a different personality from his two predecessors and one who was not himself a participant at the Council, has now opened up a further period of reception, especially given his stated intention to address such allegedly neglected conciliar themes as mission,
service of the poor and synodality. His 2013 encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* encapsulates the new evangelisation that had been gaining ground within the Church since Vatican II, but especially from the later years of Pope John Paul II. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis encourages Christians to rediscover the joy of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ in order to engage with renewed vigour in the mission of spreading the Gospel as spirit-filled evangelisers. This message is identical with that of John Paul II who called for an evangelisation “new in its ardour, new in its methods and new in its expression.”

The new evangelisation is centred on the *kerygma*, the core Gospel ‘Christ has died; Christ is risen’ and the transformation of life brought about by Christ’s call to become a missionary-disciple. Its focus is on witnessing to faith among non-believers, especially through service of the poor and those on the peripheries. The General Directory for Catechesis, published in 1997, also speaks of re-evangelising the many non-practising Christians of ancient Christian societies, which have now become secularised. Many people may still be connected to the Church in some way, through schooling or receiving the sacraments of initiation, but are not effectively evangelised or personally united with the Lord in the Holy Eucharist.

For older Catholics, this shift to what George Weigel calls ‘evangelical Catholicism’ is challenging. It is the shift from an ecclesio-centric (Church centred) world-view to a Christo-centric view, from, as it were, the Church of the Lord to the Lord of the Church. It suggests a new missionary consciousness, with less emphasis on internal Church matters and more on the centrality of Jesus of Nazareth, the New Testament, the kerygma of His death and resurrection, intentional discipleship and membership of a formative support-group. The question posed at Vatican II is arguably not today’s question. Then, it was: ‘What does it mean to be the Church of Christ in the modern world?’ Today, in the early twenty-first century, in a more uncertain postmodern, pluralist and highly secularised culture, hostile to traditional Christianity, the question is: ‘Who is Jesus Christ and what difference does He make to my life?’

**Conclusion**

Summing up, the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* remains, in my view, despite its weaknesses, a programmatic document for the Church in the modern world, that is, for the Church in the world of the twenty-first century. However problematic, it is the

---

30 See Gaillardetz *An Unfinished Council* 115-136  
33 In this regard, Pope John Paul II insisted that new evangelisation is not a programme, but a Person: “We are certainly not seduced by the naive expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you!” See John Paul II *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6th January 2001) 29, available on-line at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) (April 2016).  
Council’s most remarkable and ambitious document and it continues to play a pivotal role. For me two of its features are especially important.

The first is the extraordinarily rich theological anthropology of Gaudium et Spes Part One. Behind the family, gender and sexual issues of today’s society lie the questions: What does it mean to be human? What brings happiness? What does it mean to be male and to be female? What about same-sex attraction? What is the value of the body? What is natural and what is good? What constitutes identity? Behind these questions, two polar-opposite anthropologies are vying for ascendancy. Are human beings machines, or creatures? Are humans higher animals, or transcendent persons? Are people objects to be manipulated for pleasure, economic gain, power, or subjects to be respected, with meaning, purpose, dignity? A battle is raging between two radically different versions of what it means to be human. Pope Francis has broached these issues, notably in his 2015 encyclical Laudato Si and the recent Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia. But there is an urgent need for the Church’s magisterium to develop an authoritative, systematic teaching document on Christian anthropology, the theological meaning and value of the human person, created in God’s image, fallen in sin, but redeemed by the Cross of Christ. Provided one also incorporates an adequate theology of the cross, the basic outlines of this are already given in Gaudium et Spes Part One, with the addition from Part Two of the chapter on the dignity of marriage and the family.

The second programmatic feature of Gaudium et Spes for the twenty-first century is its pioneering treatment of culture and the dialogue or ‘critical conversation’ needed between faith and culture. Here culture means not high culture, but everything, as Gaudium et Spes 53 puts it, that goes “to the refining and developing of man’s diverse mental and physical endowments.” Bernard Lonergan helpfully defines culture as the communal meanings and values informing and shaping a society or way of life, such that “culture stands to the social order as soul to body;” there are “as many cultures as there are distinct sets of such meanings and values.” Gaudium et Spes lays out the reciprocal relationship between the Church and the world, between dialogue and proclamation, between what the Church receives from the world and what the Church offers the world, namely the healing, transforming Gospel of Christ. To proclaim the Gospel Christians must understand the culture they are addressing, and they must also acknowledge the mediatory role of culture. Culture is a medium in which the Holy Spirit is at work. At the heart of the new evangelisation, therefore, lies a humble, dialogical process, one requiring a careful discernment of light and dark, between, as it were, Thomist enthusiasm and Augustinian caution. As the French Dominican theologian Marie-Dominique Chenu once put it, the “world is ambiguous.”


B. Lonergan Method in Theology (London, Darton, Longman and Todd: 1971) 301

See GS40-45 and 53-62

Cited in Faggioli ‘The Battle over Gaudium et Spes’ 132.
In its two thousand year history, the Catholic Church has never before engaged with a pluralist, secular culture such as that now extant in the Western world. Its role is to be what Pope Benedict XVI has called a “creative minority,” promoting an authentic humanism that serves the poor, builds up the common good, appeals to the natural, and points out the way to happiness. The proximate goal of evangelisation is the individual, but the ultimate goal is to leaven culture. The proclamation of the Gospel is meant to reform social and economic structures, to baptise the contexts in which people think, act, live, work. Today, there are vast sectors of contemporary culture, from politics, business and economics to medicine, the arts and the human sciences, almost entirely ‘unbaptised’ with which there needs to be a theological dialogue. In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II noted how St. Paul went to the Areopagus in Athens and preached in language appropriate to his context. He then discusses some modern equivalents of the Areopagus, such as the new media, efforts for justice, peace and development, scientific research and movements for human rights and minorities. To these might be added today: environmental concern, human trafficking, inclusivity and diversity, globalisation.

New evangelisation is a massive challenge to the Catholic Church today, fifty years on from Vatican II, especially for the Church in this country with its declining resources. The Church is evidently countercultural, and for many pastors and for active lay Catholics, it can seem like flogging a dead horse. Yet Christians believe that Christ is the Way, the Truth, the Life (John 14: 6) and that even now, the Holy Spirit is universally at work in people’s hearts. For sure, it is not the ‘product’ that is defective but the ability of people, young and old, within a busy, secular culture to hear the call. What Bernard Lonergan once said in an address to Jesuit novices in 1964, the year before the promulgation of *Gaudium et Spes* applies today:

“Our time is a time for profound and far-reaching creativity. The Lord be with us all – *ad maiorem Dei gloriām* – and, as I have said, God’s own glory, in part, is you.”

Thank you for listening.

---

40 Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium* (London, CTS: 2013) 176f. The proclamation of the Gospel is meant to reform social and economic structures, to influence culture, to lead to the service of the poor and needy, to baptise the contexts in which people think, act, live and work. Pope John Paul II once said, the greatest challenge of this age comes from a growing separation between faith and reason, between the Gospel and culture. See John Paul II *Inter Mysterià Academiae 2*, available on-line at www.vatican.va (April 2016)

41 *See John Paul II Redemptoris Missio. On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate* (1990) 37; available on-line at www.vatican.va (April 2016)