

# Liturgy and Social Justice

## Celebrating *Gaudium et spes*

Paul Turner

Exactly fifty years ago this December 7, on the eve of the close of the Second Vatican Council, the bishops of the world approved four final documents: *Gaudium et spes*: The Church in the Modern World, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*: The Ministry and Life of Priests, *Ad gentes divinitus*: The Church's Missionary Activity, and *Dignitatis humanæ*: Religious Liberty. These have made an impact on the ministry of all Catholics, and in the way we think about the world.

In the case of *Gaudium et spes*, the council considered how the Church relates to the world - what we can learn from the world, but more importantly what we can contribute to it.

*Gaudium et spes* is not a liturgical document. Its predecessor, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, established the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. Still, even as the revisions to the rites got underway, they showed parallels between the moral stance of the Church in the world and the values that the liturgical renewal imbued.

The first part of *Gaudium et spes* treats the dignity of the human person, the community of humans, human activity in the world, and the relationship between the world and the Church. The second part considers specific pressing issues of the day: marriage and family, culture, economic and social life, the political community, and peace and communion among nations.

Here are some examples of the way that the themes that ring through *Gaudium et spes* resound also in the liturgical renewal:

### Sacramental life

“The Church has a saving and an eschatological purpose which can be fully attained only in the future world. But [the Church] is already present in this world, and is composed of [human beings], that is, of members of the earthly city who have a call to form the family of God's children. That the earthly and the heavenly city penetrate each other is a fact accessible to faith alone” (40).

When we gather for worship, we participate in supernatural realities through natural signs. We acknowledge this every time we sing the *Sanctus*. We join with the angels in a song of praise to God.

The revised translation of the First Eucharistic Prayer uses a beautiful expression in regard to the chalice on the altar. As the priest picks up the chalice, he says of Jesus that he took “this” chalice. Not “the” chalice or “his” chalice. “This” one. The word seats us at the Last Supper with Jesus. The contents of the vessel are the same.

A little later in the same prayer we pray that the angel will take our gifts to God's altar on high, so that we will be blessed through “this” participation at

“the” altar. Not through “the” participation at “this” altar. There is only one altar, the altar in heaven. We are there.

When *Gaudium et spes* explains why the Church should play a role in the world, it starts from the sacramental principle that we are human beings of the world who also inhabit the heavenly city. We are citizens of heaven.

### Community life

“Interpersonal relationships... demand a mutual respect for the full spiritual dignity of the person. Christian revelation contributes greatly to the promotion of this communion between persons, and at the same time leads us to a deeper understanding of the laws of social life which the Creator has written into [a person’s] moral and spiritual nature” (23).

Catholic piety is not isolationist. We are members of a community, and we promote communion among persons.

This value shines through the post-Vatican II emphasis on celebrating sacraments in common. For example, for the first time in history the Church gave us a communal form of the sacrament of reconciliation. The anointing of sick persons may take place when the larger community has gathered for mass. Even when the priest anoints in a home or hospital room, family and friends are encouraged to participate. The baptism of children has moved from the close quarters of a baptistry into the spacious environs of the church where a community may gather for common worship.

### Economy

“For this reason the Church down through the centuries and in the light of the Gospel has worked out the principles of justice and equity demanded by right reason both for individual and social life and for international life, and she has proclaimed them especially in recent times. This sacred council intends to strengthen these principles according to the circumstances of this age and to set forth certain guidelines, especially with regard to the requirements of economic development” (63).

Although the council aimed to turn the attention of richer nations to assist those that are poor, its principles of economic justice have caused discussion in liturgical circles as well. For example, alleviating the cost of olive oil in certain parts of the world, clergy may now use any plant oil to administer sacraments. Still, the elements of the eucharist remain unchanged. The insistence on grape wine, costly in some parts of the world, has forestalled attempts to expand the practice of communion under both forms.

Economic justice has questioned some attributes of weddings and quinceañeras. These have become social events as much as liturgical ones, and expectations associated with cost have challenged individuals and families trying to focus on the spiritual values of liturgical prayer.

Dioceses have closed some parishes due to a shift in demographics and the inability of local Catholics to maintain buildings or pay staff salaries. This

often practices good economic stewardship, but it shows the painful decisions that have to be made when liturgy comes under the scrutiny of economic justice.

### Conscience

“In the depths of [your] conscience, [you detect] a law which [you do] not impose upon [yourself], but which holds [you] to obedience. Always summoning [you] to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to [your] heart: do this, shun that. For [you have in your] heart a law written by God; to obey it is [your] very dignity...; according to it [you] will be judged” (16).

This principle of conscience has opened a door onto variations in some liturgical practices. Although the Catholic Church enforces a considerable body of laws, liturgical rules slackened after the council. This caused some people to reason that conscience could reinterpret rules. For example, on Holy Thursday Pope Francis has famously washed the feet of some women, in spite of the missal’s rubric that only mentions the feet of men. According to his spokesman, the Pope did this in order to show mercy rather than legalism. In parishes some people genuflect before receiving communion, and some priests exaggerate the elevations during the eucharistic prayer in an attempt to show eucharistic devotion. In all these cases, the rules of conscience honored in *Gaudium et spes* overshadow the rules of liturgy.

### Questions

As you think about the impact of *Gaudium et spes* in your life, here are some questions to consider.

How do you find harmony between the Church and the modern world?

Which of your primary communities help you connect Church and world?

What are your personal economic principles?

How does your conscience affect the way you pray and participate at mass?

Father Paul Turner is pastor of St. Anthony Catholic Church in Kansas City, Missouri.

“Liturgy and Social Justice: Celebrating Fifty Years of *Gaudium et spes*. *AIM: Liturgy Resources* 47/4 (Winter 2015): pp. 10-14.

“Liturgia y justicia social: cincuenta años de *Gaudium et spes*. *AIM: Recursos Litúrgicos* 47/4 (Invierno 2015): pp. 11-15.