

## *Gaudium et Spes, The Church in the Modern World*

Second Vatican Council, 1965

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### OVERVIEW

*Gaudium et Spes*, Second Vatican Council, 1965  
Vatican II's *The Church in the Modern World* is seen by many to be the most important document in the Church's social tradition. It announces the duty of the People of God to scrutinize the "signs of the times" in light of the Gospel. In doing so, it finds that change characterizes the world. These technological and social changes provide both wonderful opportunities and worrisome difficulties for the spread of the Gospel. The Church's duty in the world is to work for the enhancement of human dignity and the common good.

### HISTORICAL NOTE

This document represents the opinion of the overwhelming majority of the world's Bishops. Originally, the material contained here was not scheduled to be considered separately by the Council. Cardinal Joseph Suenens of Belgium, however, intervened at the end of the first session to urge consideration of issues more "external" to the Church than the role of Bishops or the use of vernacular in the liturgy. The document is the product of a commission and was altered by a 2,300 member deliberative assembly. In final form, it represents a significant break from the rigid traditionalism of the Council's preparatory commission.

### DOCUMENT OUTLINE

#### Introduction

- The "joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties" of the people of the world are the concerns of the People of God (#1).
- Church's duty: to scrutinize the "signs of the times" (#4).
  - Technological changes have caused social changes (#5).
  - These changes have affected everybody—individuals, families, communities, and nations—with both good and bad results (#'s 6-7).
  - Conflicting forces have ensued: tremendous wealth and abject poverty, great freedom and psychological slavery (#9).
  - Conviction has grown that humanity can establish a political order that will serve human dignity (#9).

#### Part One: The Church and Humanity's Calling

##### Human Dignity

- Nature of Human
  - Created in God's image (free and intelligent), and as a social being (#12).
  - Split within self: inclination toward good and evil (#13).
  - Dignity depends on freedom to obey one's conscience (#16).
- Christianity and Atheism
  - Atheism: a serious concern, impeding the liberation of the complete person and antagonistic toward religion (#19).
  - But recognition of God is in no way hostile to human dignity (#21).
  - A living faith, activating people to justice and love, is needed to overcome suspicion of religion (#21).
  - Church calls all to work to better the world; this work corresponds to the work of the human heart (#21).

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### DOCUMENT OUTLINE (continued)

- Human Community
  - Technological changes have created interdependence without fostering interpersonal relationships (#23).
  - Advancement of individuals and society depends on everyone (#25).
  - All must work for the common good (#26).
  - Everything necessary for a truly human life must be made available for us (#26).
  - Scripture mandates love of neighbor; every person is our neighbor; active love is necessary (#28).
  - Jesus calls us God's children so we should treat each other as sisters and brothers (#32).
- The Church in the Modern World
  - The Church and humanity experience the same earthly situation (#40).
  - History, science, and culture reveal the true nature of the human person (#41).
  - The Church is not bound to any particular political, economic, or social system (#42).
  - The Church needs to purify itself continually (#43).
  - Individual Christians need to penetrate the world with a Christian spirit and witness to Jesus in the midst of human society (#43).
  - The Church can be helped by the world in preparing the ground for the Gospel (#44).
  - The Church's mission, part saving and part eschatological, begins in this world; Jesus is Lord of history (#45).

### Part Two: Special Areas of Concern

- Marriage and the Family
  - Families are the foundation of society (#47).
  - Destructive to marriage are: divorce, free love, excessive self-love, polygamy, worship of pleasure, certain modern economic-social-political conditions, overpopulation (#47).
  - Marriage is intended for the procreation and education of children and a whole manner and communion of life (#50).
  - Responsible parenthood is advocated (#50).
  - From the moment of conception, life must be regarded with sacred care (#51).
  - The healthy condition of individuals and society depends on stable families (#52).
- The Development of Culture
  - Circumstances of Culture
    - Changes in technology have created fresh avenues for the diffusion of culture (#54).
    - A new humanism has dawned and an individual is defined by his/her responsibilities to the world (#55).
    - Culture must evolve so as to foster the development of the whole person (#56).
  - Principles of Cultural Development
    - The quest for heaven should inspire Christians to build a more human world on earth (#57).
    - Danger exists that humans may rely on modern discoveries and stop searching for higher realities (#57).



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### DOCUMENT OUTLINE (continued)

- God speaks to the various cultures (#58).
- Church, in ways that respect its own tradition, should use modes of culture to spread the Gospel (#58).
- The Good News renews and advances culture (#58).
- Culture needs freedom in which to develop (#59).
- Cultural Duties of Christians
  - Strenuous work is needed in economic and political fields to liberate people from ignorance (#60).
  - Everyone has a right to culture, thought, and expression (#60).
  - Women should participate in cultural life (#60).
  - Development of the whole person should be fostered (#61).
  - Christian thinking should be expressed in ways consistent with culture (#62).
- Socio-Economic Life
  - Basic Principles
    - Human beings are “the source, the center, and the purpose of all socio-economic life” (#63).
    - Fundamental imbalances between wealth and poverty exist in today’s world (#63).
  - Economic Development
    - Technological progress which serves the whole person must be fostered (#64).
    - Progress must be controlled by humanity (#65).
    - Justice necessitates a quick removal of economic inequities (#66).
  - Economic Life
    - Human labor is superior to other elements of economic life; economic activity detrimental to the worker is wrong and inhuman (#67).
    - Workers should participate in running an enterprise (#67).
    - God intended the earth for everyone; private property should benefit all (#67).
    - All have a right to goods sufficient for themselves and their families (#69).
    - Distribution of goods should be directed toward employment (#70).
    - Public authorities can guard against those misuses of private property which hurt the common good (#71).
    - Genuine sharing of goods is called for (#71).
- Political Community
  - Modern changes have increased the awareness of human dignity and the desire to establish a just political-juridical order (#73).
  - Public authorities (and individual citizens) should work for the common good (#74).
  - Church and political community (#76):
    - both serve the vocation of humans;
    - Church has the right to pass moral judgments when human rights are at stake;
    - Church should use the means of the Gospel to fulfill its mission.

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### DOCUMENT OUTLINE (continued)

- Peace
  - Basic Principles
    - With modern weapons, humanity is in a crisis situation (#77).
    - Most noble meaning of “peace”—based on love, harmony, trust, and justice—should be fostered (#78).
  - Avoidance of War
    - Non-violence and conscientious objection are legitimate (#79).
    - Just defense is permissible, but not wars of subjugation (#79).
    - Participation in armed services is allowed, but not blind obedience to orders (#79).
    - With new weapons, a new evaluation of war is needed (#80).
    - Arms race is not the way to build peace; it can actually foster wars and it injures the poor (#81).
    - No act of war at population centers is permissible (#81).
    - Deterrence “is not a safe way to preserve steady peace” (#81).
    - Everyone has responsibility to work for disarmament (#82).
  - Building Up the International Community
    - Causes of dissension, especially injustices, need to be eliminated (#83).
    - Greater international cooperation demands the establishment of an international organization corresponding to modern obligations (#’s 84-85).
    - Development of whole person is to be fostered (#86).
    - Ecumenical cooperation is needed to achieve justice (#88).
    - Church must be present to injustice (#89).

### Discussion Questions

What are the most important “joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties” of our contemporary world? Which ones affect you and your church community the most?

Freud referred to religion’s function as “illusion”; Marx as “ideology.” In what way do you think religion should function in the human community?

Should the Church respond to the agenda of the world? What does this mean in practical terms?

List what you believe are the major things that people need in order to realize their dignity. What factors in your community contribute to, or hinder, the achievement of this dignity?