

THE KINGDOM OF GOD: EVER ANCIENT EVER NEW:  
REFLECTIONS UPON THE VATICAN II COUNCIL: PRESENTATION V  
THE CHURCH, THE LIGHT OF NATIONS, PART I: THE PEOPLE OF GOD

I. From the beginning, the Council intended to promulgate a constitution on the Church, which would be central in the work of the Council. The result of this effort was Lumen Gentium, the first document on the church in herself published by an ecumenical council

A. In the lead-up to the Council, there was a great deal of interest in making a statement about what the Church is.

1. The Vatican I Council had intended to address this topic in 1870, but the Council had to adjourn prematurely due to the invasion of the Papal States by Italian forces.
2. In 1943, Pope Pius XII published Mystici Corporis (The Mystical Body), which described his insights into the Church, building upon St. Paul's image of the Church as the body of Christ, see, e.g., 1 Cor. 12:12-27, Eph. 5:29.
3. In his Christmas 1961 address Humanae Salutis, Pope John XXIII described the need for the Council to present the Church's gifts for the world.
4. In August of 1964, Pope Paul VI published his first encyclical letter Ecclesiam Suam (His Church), in which he called for the faithful to reflect more on the Church as their mother and teacher, and called for more dialogue with non-Catholics and the world at large.

B. The Preparatory Commission on Doctrine drafted a lengthy document entitled De Ecclesia (On the Church). But then the Council called for revisions of that document, which then became Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

1. The initial document had eleven chapters, entitled: (1) The Nature of the Church Militant; (2) The Members of the Church Militant and Its Necessity for Salvation; (3) The Episcopacy as the Highest Sacrament of Orders and the Priesthood; (4) Resident Bishops; (5) The States of Evangelical Perfection; (6) The Laity; (7) The Magisterium of the Church; (8) Authority and Obedience in the Church; (9) The Relationship Between the Church and State; (10) The Necessity of Proclaiming the Gospel to the Nations of the World; and (11) Ecumenism. The intention, which the Council would continue to maintain, was not to declare new doctrine, but rather to summarize the Church's understanding of herself as developed over time.
2. As the chapters imply, there was a traditional focus on the idea of the "church militant," i.e. the Church in the world (as complemented by the church triumphant in heaven and the church suffering on earth) and on the role of bishops and their teaching and guidance. On the other hand, the fact that there was a chapter on the laity, and then a final chapter on ecumenism, indicated an attempt to reach out to the world.

3. At the First Session of the Council, this document was considered after the documents on revelation, the liturgy, and Christian Unity.

a. The Council had largely approved of Sancrosanctum Concilium on the liturgy, but there had been much more criticism of the document De Fontibus on revelation. When De Ecclesia Unitate, on Christian unity, came up, the Council fathers favored a proposal that the three documents on Christian Unity be merged into one. At this point the Doctrinal Commission presented the constitution De Ecclesia.

b. Some bishops, such as Cardinal Ernetso Ruffini of Palermo were basically satisfied by the text. Other bishops, such as Cardinal Achille Leinhardt were generally supportive, but wanted significant changes to the tone.

c. Other bishops, backed up by theologians such as the Jesuit Father Karl Rahner, rejected the text as fundamentally flawed. For example, Cardinal Emile-Joseph De Smeldt of Brugge, Belgium gave one of the most critical (in both senses) speeches of the Council denouncing the text for triumphalism, clericism, and juridicism.

d. Cardinal Joseph Frings of Cologne (whose peritus was Fr. Joseph Ratzinger) offered a more subtle criticism, that the conservative text paradoxically did not take enough account of the patristic understanding of the Church, instead focusing only on the theology of the last few centuries.

e. Cardinal Suenens then proposed a course that Pope John had hinted at when he gave a radio address on September 11, 1962 entitled “the Church of Christ, light of the world.” Building upon that theme, Cardinal Suenens said that the document on the Church should give the rest of the Council a central focus. He said that there should be three dialogues, the Church and her members among themselves, the Church and other Christians, and between the Church and the world. That speech received a great deal of support, including that of Cardinal Montini; and it would set the stage for both Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes, and Redintegratio Unitatis, the decree on Christian Unity.

f. Because the debate began late in the First Session, and thus did not leave enough time for the arguments to be developed, Pope John XXIII sent a note saying that there would not be an immediate vote on the document. He also appointed a Coordinating Commission, which included Cardinals Leinhardt, Suenens, and Francis Spellman of New York, to guide the drafting of all of the documents of the Council.

4. The Coordinating Commission and the newly composed Conciliar Commission on Doctrine guided the draft of what would become Lumen Gentium.

a. The Commissions reduced the number of chapters from 11 to 4: (1) The Mystery of the Church; (2) The Hierarchical Constitution of the Church and the Episcopacy in Particular; (3) The People of God and the Laity in Particular; and (4) The Call to Holiness. The chapters on religious life, evangelization, church and state relations and ecumenism were assigned to other documents, while the chapters on the magisterium and governance became mostly a part of the chapter on the hierarchy. The Commission gave greater emphasis to the universal call to holiness also called for a discussion on devotion to Mary.

b. This document then became the main subject of debate at the Second Session and the most debated document of the Council. There were several close votes, including a vote of 1543 – 702 regarding whether to restore the permanent diaconate in the Latin rite and a vote of 1114 to 1074 on whether to have a separate chapter on Mary, rather than a distinct document. The Council also voted to have two separate chapters on the People of God and the Laity, with the chapter on the People of God coming before that of the hierarchy. The Council also brought back the chapter on religious life (previously called a chapter evangelical perfection) and added a chapter on the Church as a pilgrim people,

c. During the Third Session in 1964, there were votes on each section and then on each chapter and finally on the entire document. By the time the document had reached that stage, each section and the entire document received overwhelming approval, with only 5 dissenting votes.

D. Lumen Gentium is organized into eight chapters, which gather together the Church's teachings regarding her own nature as a whole and our participation in her mission and gifts. It begins with two chapters on the church in herself, reflecting upon her essence and how she draws people together. The constitution then has four chapters on the different walks of life in the Church, and in particular on the clergy, the laity, religious life and the universal call to holiness. (The chapter on holiness is after the chapter on the laity in part to emphasize that the laity are called to holiness as clergy and consecrated brothers and sisters are.) The constitution then has two chapters on the church beyond this earth, first on the communion of saints and the heavenly goal of the church, and then concluding with a chapter on Mary and devotion to her.

E. The theology and principles in Lumen Gentium bring together themes of all the other Council documents.

1. The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World complements Lumen Gentium, with the latter describing the Church herself and the former addressing how the Church deals with the world.

2. The Constitution on Liturgy and the Decree on Missionary Work build upon this theme by describing the Church's activity in her prayer and her presentation of the truths of the faith to the world.

3. The Constitution on Revelation describes how the Church developed and interacts with Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.
4. The decrees on bishops, priests and the training of priests build upon the theology outlined in chapter 3, on the Hierarchy.
5. The decree on the Apostolate of the Laity builds upon chapter 4, whose subject is the laity. Likewise, the decree on Religious Life builds upon chapter 6, whose subject is the same..
6. Similarly, the decree on Ecumenism and the declaration on Non-Christian religions build upon parts of chapters 1 and 2 that describe the relationship of the Church to people outside of her formal structure.
7. The decree on Oriental Churches also describes how the one Church has different traditions within her.
8. While also dealing primarily with society at large, the decree on Education and the declaration on Mass Media both address the Church's activity in these fields.

II. The first chapter, called The Mystery of the Church, describes what the Church is by reference to her founding, her mission, and several images that help our understanding of her.

- A. The document begins by describing Jesus as the light of the nations, and the Church as showing forth this light as a "sacrament," a visible sign of His invisible presence. Section 1 then states the purpose of the document, to explain to the world the nature and universal mission of the Church.
- B. Sections 2 through 4 describe the Church in terms of the Trinity.
  - a. Section 2 describes how the Father calls all people together as His sons and daughters. And, to achieve this goal, He created the nation of Israel and then fulfilled her history by establishing the Church and guiding her until the end of time.
  - b. Section 3 describes how the Son, in His time on earth, established the Church to be His kingdom, and how He is continuing to unite her people throughout the world, most powerfully in the Eucharist.
  - c. Section 4 outlines how the Holy Spirit was sent forth at Pentecost and ever inspires the people of God, pouring forth the truths, grace and gifts of heaven.
- B. Sections 5 and 6 describe the founding of the Church by Christ during His public ministry. As section 5 reaffirms, Jesus made the Church His visible kingdom and the beginning final kingdom that will be manifest at the end of all things on this earth. Section 6 draws from the Scriptures a number of analogies for the Church, i.e., as the

sheepfold of God, the field or farm of God, the building or Temple of God, the new Jerusalem on earth, and the bride of Christ and mother of the faithful. Here, as with many fields of teaching, including the parables of Jesus, images make principles more vivid

C. Section 7 describes how God unites and sanctifies His people through the sacraments, through the Holy Spirit, and through the joining together of the different gifts and callings we have received. All these gifts are given by Christ, the head of the Church and through the Holy Spirit.

C. The first chapter culminates in section 8, which reaffirms that the Church of Christ “subsists in” the Catholic Church and that she and she alone is fully one, holy, catholic and apostolic. It does grant, however, that many elements of salvation exist outside of her formal boundaries. The section draws an analogy to Jesus Christ, who unites together His human and divine natures in one person. Similarly, the Church unites together both her heavenly and earthly realms, not as two separate entities, but as one people guided by the Holy Spirit. The theme here stands in contrast with those who believe either in an entirely invisible unity among Christians and those who would present the Church’s earthly works as the center-piece of her saving mission.

- The term “subsists in” has been the subject of much debate. In 2007, the Vatican Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith published an explanation that said, among other things, that that term was used to express the idea that the Catholic Church is the continuity in full of the Church Christ established, but that many elements of that Church can be found outside of the visible confines of the Catholic Church.

III Chapter 2 focuses on the People of God as a whole, emphasizing the centrality of the Church, but also recognizing that people who are not formally in the Church are still related to her.

A. The lengthy section 9 describes the creation of the Chosen People of old as God’s pre-figurement of the Church today.

1. As the section describes God called together the Chosen People as the first Israel, and then promised that there would be a new Israel who would unite all nations together. The Church is this new Israel.
2. As with the Chosen People, the faithful in the Church may at times be small in number. But as with them, we bring salvation to the entire world and unite all times and places in this common quest.

B. Sections 10-13 describe how all of the People of God share in the priestly, prophetic and royal mission of Jesus Christ.

1. In the Old Testament times, priests, kings, and sometimes prophets were anointed. Thus Jesus, as the anointed one (Messiah in Hebrew, Christos in Greek) fulfilled all of these roles in perfection. But it has also become common to describe the call of the Christian faithful, or those with specific roles, in terms of the priestly, prophetic and royal callings. See, e.g.,

Catechism of the Catholic Church 897 – 913. Lumen Gentium supports this way of understanding our vocations.

2. Sections 10 and 11 describe the priestly role of the laity and affirms that there is both an ordained priesthood and a priesthood of all believers. The two types of priesthood complement each other. Section 11 develops the theme of the priestly role of the people of God in terms of the sacraments. This discussion of the sacraments describes Matrimony central in making each Catholic family a “domestic church” where the faith is first lived and proclaimed.
3. Section 12 describes the prophetic office of the People of God. It discusses the unity between the “sensus fidelium,” the universal sense of the faithful, and the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church. . The section also describes how the Church’s faithful, with their many and varied gifts, build up the Church that she can manifest the Holy Spirit.
  - Chapter 3, on the hierarchy, describes at more length the Magisterium; and chapter 4, on the laity, describes a related concept the “sensus fidei” the sense of the faith. The Magisterium develops ideas in a more structured fashion, while the sense of the faithful develops ideas (e.g., popular prayers and devotions, innovations in charity and education) on a more informal and popular level. But the two must be seen in unison, not opposition
4. Section 13 discusses the royal role of the People of God. The Church unites people of every time and place, not eliminating their differences, but rather bringing all “people’s “abilities, customs, and resources” together to be purified, strengthened and elevated. The people of so many different times, places and walks of life are meant to share their gifts with each other in anticipation of the full peace of God’s kingdom

C. Sections 14-16 balance two truths: (1) that salvation is available only through the Church; and (2) that those outside the Church can be saved.

1. Section 14 begins with the first truth, saying that Jesus, the only mediator of salvation, made the Church necessary for His saving mission. Full membership in the Church is available to those who accept her full structure, teaching and sacraments, including the leadership of the Pope and the bishops. But external membership is not enough; one must persevere in charity to be saved.
2. Section 15 then describes how other Christians are “joined to the Church” by the common faith in Christ, belief in the Scriptures, Baptism and often other sacraments, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and much of the spiritual life. Some other Christians (most notably members of the Orthodox churches) also share the Eucharist, Marian devotions and other elements of the Catholic faith. Jesus wished that all of His people unite together in His Church both for their sakes and

for the Church's witness to the truth. This theme is developed at greater length in Unitatis Redintegratio, the Decree on Ecumenism.

3. Section 16 then describes how other people can be connected to the Church and enjoy progress toward salvation. It begins with Jews, and then proceeds to Muslims and other monotheists, and finally to others who believe in many gods or no god. The section says that whatever is good in other world views can be seen as a preparation for the Gospel. But the section also warns of the dangers of sin, deceit and despair. It thus calls for a proclamation of the Gospel so that all people can realize its cleansing and healing power. These themes are developed more in the Nostra Aetate, the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions.

D. Section 17 builds upon this call by describing the Church's need to promote the Gospel and so fulfill the command of Christ. This proclamation is burden on cultures, but rather the way in which all goodness in any culture is "not only saved from destruction, but is purified, raised up and perfected for the glory of God, the confusion of the devil and the happiness of humanity.

IV. Chapter 3 describes the hierarchy, with particular focus on the bishops. There is a balancing between describing the role of each bishop, the role of the bishops together and the role of the Pope. The chapter then addresses briefly the callings of priests and deacons, with the clearest change that this chapter brought about being the restoration of the permanent diaconate in the Latin tradition of the Church.

A. Section 18 begins by restating, as an infallible dogma, that Jesus Christ Himself instituted the role of the bishops as the successors to the Apostles and the Pope as succeeding St. Peter, who together unite the Church throughout the world. This teaching was simply a reaffirmation of historic teachings, but was needed due to some popular doubts about the divine institution on the episcopacy. Sections 19 and 20 then elaborate on that teaching, describing how Jesus Himself appointed the Apostles as the first leaders of His Church and how they in turn received the authority to hand on their office to others, both in fullness to the episcopacy and to priests and deacons as assistants. The point is again that, through an unbroken succession of ordinations, current bishops have the role given to the Apostles at the beginning of the Church, and bishops will continue that role until the end of time.

B. Sections 21-24 discuss the unity of the bishops throughout the world under the guidance of the Pope.

1. Section 21 describes the bishops and priests as bringing Christ's presence into the world. It describes the episcopacy as the fullness of priesthood, the highest level of Holy Orders. The Council thus resolved the issue of whether episcopacy is a separate sacrament, affirming that it is. (This view was clearly the majority one. But up to this point, some theologians had argued that priesthood is the fullness of Holy Orders, with the episcopacy being simply a higher office.) The section also emphasizes that the authority of bishops by its nature must be exercised in communion with other bishops.

2. Section 22 reflects on the role of the Pope, the Successor to St. Peter. This section points out that it is the Pope who unites the bishops, maintain the collegiality that is at its essence. It reaffirms that no council of bishops can define a doctrine, except with the consent of the Pope, and that their authority flows from Him. This sections thus repudiates what is called conciliarism, the idea that a council of bishops can exercise authority apart from, or even in opposition to, the Pope.

3. Section 23 draws a balance between the local duties of bishops and their universal duties. On the one hand, the section says that each bishop must care for his own flock and unify the. On the other hand, it also says that they must cooperate together to promote the faith and the apostolates of the Church throughout the world. The local bishop brings about unity in his diocese, and the college of bishops brings forth unity of the Church throughout the world. The section also emphasizes that the 22 Eastern churches who are in union with the Catholic Church bring out this unity. The decree Orientalium Ecclesiarum describes the Eastern Catholic churches at more length.

4. Section 24 concludes this call to unity by describing the office of bishop as central to the mission and service of the Church.

C. Section 25 describes the teaching role of the bishops, with particular emphasis on the critical issue of the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the bishops and the Pope.

1. It describes the office of preaching the Gospel and being “heralds of the faith” as having “pride of place” in the role of the bishops.

2. The section makes clear what had always been understood to be the case, namely, that when the bishops in union with the Pope, or even the Pope himself, proclaims a teaching as authoritative the faithful should adhere to it and give it “religious obedience of mind and will.” Such is the case even if the teaching is not infallible. The document says that a teaching, called a doctrine, can be known by the formality and emphasis of a particular proclamation or by the repeated nature of the teaching in a formal fashion. As explained in the 1990 instruction Donum Veritatis (On the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian) by the Vatican Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith, the idea is that the faithful should adhere to Church doctrine even if it is not proclaimed infallibly. This teaching is contrary to a popular belief that non-infallible teachings are not binding.

3. The section describes how the bishops gathered together in union with the Pope, or the Pope himself ex cathedra, can define a teaching as infallible, and thus to be held with compete certainty as the truths revealed by God. Such infallible doctrines are called dogmas. The bishops in union with the Pope can define such a dogma either by their consistent teaching together throughout time and space, or when gathered together in an ecumenical council, as Vatican II was. These three ways of defining infallible dogma (or even non-infallibly but still authoritative

doctrine) are often called papal infallibility, ordinary infallibility, and conciliar infallibility respectively.

- D. Sections 26 and 27 focuses in the sanctifying and governing of bishops.
1. Section 26 describes the sanctifying role of bishops, with a particular focus on the administration of the sacraments, most particularly the Mass and the Eucharist. The section also says that the bishop should by his example of prayerfulness and way of life set the model for holiness.
  2. Section 27 describes the governing role of bishops. There is a focus on guiding both the prayers and apostolates of the area, which in most cases is the diocese. The section says that this governing office is given directly by Jesus Christ and not merely by the Pope. And in fact, while the Papacy and universal legislation does govern what a bishop can do, the main role of the Pope and the universal church is to strengthen, preserve and uphold the rightful use of this office. The section describes the importance of the bishop listening to the people and setting a good example, and the importance of loyalty to the bishop.
- E. In response to concerns that this chapter (and particularly section 27 and the overall emphasis on collegiality) downplayed the role of the Papacy, Pope Paul VI instructed the Council to include in the document a lengthy footnote, which re-emphasized the fact that the collegiality of bishops does not diminish the primacy of the Pope who guides them and acts continually as their head. See A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II (1996) 51-52.
- F. Section 28 describes the role of priests as co-workers with the bishop.
1. The central role of a priest is to be an image of Christ.
  2. The section develops this role in the context of sharing in the sanctifying, teaching and governing roles. The main focus is on the sanctifying role of the priest, with a particular emphasis on the celebration of the Eucharist and the other sacraments, as well as teaching and guidance.
  3. There is also a strong notion of the priests in an area (most likely a diocese) forming a united presbyterate under the bishop, who in turn should see them as sons, assistants and friends.
  4. There is also a call for priests to be father figures, not only to Catholics, but also to non-Catholics, and to seek out those who have strayed from the faith.
- G. Section 29 describes the diaconate as at the service of bishops and priests in the liturgy, in proclaiming the word and in charity.
1. There is a particular focus on the liturgical duties of deacons, although the section also describes the role of deacons in teaching and administration of charity.

2. In what is probably the most substantial change this document makes, it authorizes local bishops' conferences (e.g., the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) to work with the Pope to re-establish a permanent diaconate in the Latin tradition of the Church.
  - a. Transitional deacons are men who are preparing for the priesthood. A permanent deacon is a man who intends to remain a deacon. The permanent diaconate had largely vanished from the Latin Catholic Church, with some exceptions such as St. Francis of Assisi. The permanent diaconate had continued in the eastern Catholic Churches.
  - b. The document also gave authority in the Latin tradition of the Church to allow married men to become deacons, as is also the case in the eastern Catholic churches. However, it said that permanent deacons would not marry after ordination.
  - c. In the 1967 Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem (1967) Pope Paul VI authorized the Latin Catholic Church to reestablish the permanent diaconate.
  - d. The anticipation was that this office would be more common in mission countries, where at the time there were fewer clerics. However, due largely to the availability of educational resources, the permanent diaconate has primarily been concentrated in the United States and Western Europe.