

THE KINGDOM OF GOD: EVER ANCIENT EVER NEW:
REFLECTIONS UPON THE VATICAN II COUNCIL: PRESENTATION 6A
LUMEN GENTIUM, THE CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH, THE LIGHT OF NATIONS,
CHAPTERS 4 - 8: UNITY AND VARIETY, MARY AND THE SAINTS

I. Chapter 4 focuses on the Laity, which here means everyone who is not a priest or in religious life. There is a separate decree Apostolicam Actuositatem, on the apostolate of the laity. However, this chapter sets out the overall themes of lay roles in the Church.

A. After a short introduction, the chapter begins by describing the importance of the lay apostolate in the world.

1. Section 31 describes how the laity should bring the kingdom of God into the secular world and be witnesses of the Gospel in the midst of the secular world. It introduces the theme of the laity having a priestly, prophetic and royal role in the Church, a theme that will be taken up in sections 34-36.

2. Section 32 celebrates the fact that the laity can have such a vast variety of gifts for the Church and for the world, unifying all of them under Jesus Christ. The unity of the Church does not suppress the fact that there is a great difference in people's gifts and roles.

3. Section 33 emphasizes the call of the laity in bringing holiness to the world around us. It calls for the hierarchy in the church to support lay apostolates in the world.

C. Building upon section 31's calling to sanctify the world, sections 34 – 36 then phrase this calling in terms of the priestly, prophetic and royal callings of the faithful.

1. In particular, section 34 says all the prayers and good works of the laity, in the family, in the Church, and in the world, and even sufferings patiently borne can be "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God" and thus fulfill the office of the priesthood of believers.

2. Section 35 describes how the laity participate in the prophetic office of Christ by manifesting their faith through their lives and their struggles with the powers of the world. It describes how married couples are called to witness to faith and family especially in the raising of children. It describes the liturgical and missionary work of laity with positions in the church. But it also calls for an understanding that evangelization is not only for the rare few, but for all of the faithful.

3. Section 36 describes how the laity bring the kingdom of God more into the world by lives of service and holiness. It emphasizes that the laity should ensure that the world develops in a just manner to the benefit of all people. The section encourages the laity to unite together in improving the world and remember that the faith should consecrate even secular fields. This section acknowledges that secular realms must be run according to their own principles, it condemns any notion that faith should be excluded from these fields.

D. Section 37 then describes the cooperation between the laity and the pastors of the Church. It says that the laity should tell pastors about needs and desires, as well as ideas about how the Church should conduct her affairs. The laity should also be ready to accept the governing decisions of the hierarchy. Pastors should listen to the laity and encourage them to use their creativity for the apostolates and to make this world a better place.

E. Section 38 concludes this chapter with a calling for all of the faithful to be witnesses to the world and sanctify it as the holiness of the soul does for the body.

II. Chapter 5 then discusses the universal call to holiness. While this point was always there in the Catholic tradition, it often did not receive the emphasis it should, with people often thinking that only the select few are really called to holiness.

A. Section 39 launches the chapter by saying that the Church is holy as the Bride of Christ and that all of her people are called to holiness whatever their state in life. The section does add that those who live in full the evangelical counsels (i.e. poverty, celibacy and obedience) do give “a striking witness and example of that holiness.”

B. Section 40 cites numerous passages from the New Testament that call for all people to be perfect and holy, which is fulfilled in the call to love. It describes the saints as models of this holiness.

C. Then Section 41 describes how the call to holiness is lived out through the different states of life, whether among the clergy, religious, families, the widows, and those who are suffering hardships.

1. It describes bishops and priests as becoming holy through their ministry, prayers, and even struggles. Deacons and laity who have official positions in the church likewise grow through their prayer, work and good example.

2. Married couples become holy through establishing their families as part of the Church and by witnessing to the faith. Likewise, widows, single people and laborers become holy in consecrating the world around them.

3. Those who are suffering advance in holiness by being drawn closer to Jesus Christ and bringing Him to the world.

C. Section 42 describes the means of attaining this holiness, including works of charity, listening to the word of God, benefitting through the sacraments and liturgies, being inspired by the martyrs, seeing the good example of those in religious and consecrated life. The section concludes by calling all people to the self-disciplines and poverty of spirit that is necessary for true holiness.

III. Chapter 6 discusses Religious Life, i.e., the life of religious brothers and sisters in religious orders. Although there is a separate document on religious life, namely Perfectae Caritatis, as there are with bishops, priests, and the laity, the Council fathers wished to address the religious in the document on the Church.

A. Men and women in religious orders take vows of prayer, obedience to superiors, and celibacy, as well as vows of poverty. Religious life takes different forms according to the different spiritualities of the various orders, such as Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, Ignatian (Jesuit), Salesian, or Carmelite, and the rules governing each order.

B. Section 43 begins the chapter with a reflection on religious life and how those in religious life imitate Jesus' mission in poverty, chastity and obedience. The section describes religious life a glorious tree planted in the vineyard of the Lord, which has since branched out in numerous directions reflecting the glory of God in many varied ways. It also refers to the religious orders as families of God, mutually supporting each other on the path to holiness.

C. Section 44 presents as central to religious life the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience that give religious brothers and sisters a particular ability to be witnesses of Christ in the world. The evangelical counsels help religious brothers and sisters to bring this kingdom into the world in several ways. They make religious brothers and sisters more free from worldly cares for the service of the Church. They live more like Jesus Christ and the saints as a first promise of the greater realms.

D. Section 45 briefly outlines the relationships between religious orders and the hierarchy. It is a local bishop (or Eastern patriarch) who would first recognize a religious order and approve of its rule. The Vatican may also grant religious orders recognition, which means that they are no longer under the direct control of the local prelate. However, even then they should work with the local church and local bishop or patriarch, who both guides liturgies and receives vows.

E. Section 46 describes the fact that religious orders show forth Christ to the world in the various ways that are central to their calling, such as teaching, healing, missionary work, and works of charity. Even contemplative religious brothers and sisters, who have little physical contact with the world, ground all activities of the world in the only enduring foundation, Jesus Christ and the grace He won for us.

F. Section 47 then concludes with a ringing call for all in religious life to carry out their vocations with ever greater fervor for the Church and for the glory of God.

IV. Chapter 7, entitled The Pilgrim Church, then focuses on the how Church on earth struggles through this world and is united to the saints in heaven and souls in purgatory. The phrase "the church militant" is still a valid description of the Church on earth, but here the emphasis is more on the image of a pilgrimage through this world

A. The lengthy section 48 describes the paradox of a Church, who at the same time brings forth the glorious presence of Christ to earth, but also suffers and struggles in this world. She, like each of the faithful, is a pilgrim people who advances toward salvation in the midst of suffering.

1. The section describes how Jesus Christ is at work in the world now, especially through His Church and how the Church on earth reflects the holiness of heaven, even through imperfectly.
2. There is a longing for the greater kingdom, but also an eagerness to glorify God and serve neighbor now that makes us able to enter into that realm.
3. The chapter does not use it, but there is an Italian phrase “gia e non ancora,” “already and not yet,” which expresses this theme.

B. Section 49 describes the three states of the Church, those on earth, those in heaven and those in purgatory. There is a great emphasis on the fact that we all pray together and are all in one Church together, helping each other in our progress to the fulfillment of all things. There is a sense of the “exchange of goods,” in which we help each other in our prayers and efforts.

C. Section 50 reflects at length on the Church’s teaching that there is a vibrant and enriching the communion of the living and dead.

1. The section begins with a brief affirmation of prayers for those in purgatory. There has been some criticism that there was not enough of an emphasis on this subject. See Kenneth Whitehead, The Church Renewed 115.
2. It then describes how the first saints to be honored as such were usually martyrs, along with Mary and the angels. But as time went on others were added to the ranks of those recognized as saints. We both learn from their example and recognize them as our friends and companions, urging us onto victory.
3. The section recalls that the liturgy is the greatest means of uniting us with the ranks of the faithful who have gone before us.

D. Section 51 then strikes a balancing note. It warns against excesses in devotions that would be either superstitious or focus primarily on externals. But it affirms the great value of this communion of the saints and prayers for the souls in purgatory. The chapter ends with an eloquent description of how, in prayer and charity, we anticipate even now the day in which we hope to join with the saints in eternal glory.

E. There was a great debate about this chapter, with some bishops criticizing the lack of much reference to the traditional “Four Last Things,” i.e., judgment, death, heaven and hell. In response, there were some references added to section 48 that reaffirm that we will all be judged and that salvation is not guaranteed. See Whitehead at 114-117.

V. Lumen Gentium then concludes with a chapter on devotion to Mary. There is a great effort to explain Marian devotion in a positive sense to the world.

A. While the Council decided to make this chapter a part of the overall constitution, not a separate document, it is unique insofar as it is in turn organized into five parts. After the

introduction, the next four parts focus on the role of Mary in salvation, the role of Mary in the Church, the devotion to Mary, and Mary as a sign of hope.

- B. The introduction, consisting of sections 52-54, says that we are adopted sons and daughters of God and thus Mary is both the Mother of God and our mother as well. The Council intends to explain this idea to the world.
1. Section 52 introduces the idea that Jesus was born of Mary, who is His Virgin Mother. And thus we are called to venerate her.
 2. Section 53 describes how Mary, being the immaculate Mother of God, daughter of the Father, and perfect tempt of the Holy Spirit, is above all creatures. But she is also the mother of the faithful, and joins with us in our lives.
 3. Section 54 sets forth the purpose of the chapter, namely to give an overall description of Marian devotions and duties toward her. It says that the chapter will not be comprehensive, nor attempt to resolve debated points. The section does not describe the debated issues, but examples include whether Mary should be called mediatrix of all graces and advocate of all prayers.
- C. Part II, consisting of sections 55-59, uses many Scriptural references to describe Mary's role in salvation history.
1. Section 55 describes how she fulfills the promises made to Adam and Even about the victory of the woman's offspring over the serpent, the prophecies of Isaiah regarding a virgin mother whose son would be Immanuel, and about the renewed Zion.
 2. Section 56 describes how Mary helped reverse Eve's role in the fall by remaining perfectly free of sin and open to God's will.
 3. Section 57 describes how Mary brought Jesus to people in His early life, especially in the Visitation, the visit of the shepherds and Magi, the Presentation of Jesus, and the finding of Jesus in the Temple.
 4. Section 58 recalls how Mary helped begin Jesus' public ministry in Cana, accepted His preaching about all people being called as His brothers and sisters, and was there at the Cross.
 5. Section 59 then outlines how Mary was with the early Church at Pentecost and, assumed into heaven, is guides the Church as her queen.
- D. Part III, consisting of sections 60-65, describes how Mary and the Church work together.
1. It begins by clarifying that Jesus is the one ultimate mediator between God and man, and that the role God chose to give Mary comes from His love for us, not any requirement of salvation itself.

2. Section 61 describes how Mary is rightfully called the Mother of God by being the Mother of Jesus Christ, true God and true man. Through Jesus she is therefore the mother of grace to all of the faithful.

3. Section 62 then describes how it makes sense to believe that Mary's role of bringing Christ to us would not end with her earthly life, but continues always. This role does not diminish the centrality of Christ, any more than the fact that we all play a role in bringing Christ to others diminishing the fact that salvation is through Him alone. The section describes Mary as our "advocate, helper, benefactrix and mediatrix."

3. Sections 63 and 64 then describes Mary as like the Church insofar as she is both virgin and mother. As Mother, both Mary and the Church bring Christ into the world and unite us as sons and daughters of God. And, as Mary was ever virgin, fully open to the Holy Spirit, the Church is also guided by the Holy Spirit maintain the faith pure and free.

4. Section 65 does say that there is a difference insofar as Mary is now perfectly in heaven and has never been sullied by sin. By contrast, the people of God struggle on earth with difficulties and weighed down. But we look to Mary and become more pure and holy as she is always.

E. Part IV, consisting of sections 66 and 67, both affirms Marian devotions and cautions against erroneous exaggerations. Section 66 upholds the great history of Marian devotion, particularly emphasized at the Council of Ephesus, which taught definitively that Mary is the Mother of God. Section 67 affirms the continuing importance of this devotion, while at the same time warning against excesses that would detract from the true faith, or devotions that are primarily external or overly showy.

F. The chapter and the entire document, then ends with a reflection on Mary as uniting all the faithful together. She is at the same time a model of what we all hope to become, and yet also with us here on earth. And the Church hopes that she will unite, not only all Catholics, but also all Christians and all people seeking God even now on earth and one day in everlasting glory.

G. The Council decided not to add any new Marian title. However, on November 18, 1963, Pope Paul VI gave the closing address for the Second Session of the Council. In that address, he commended the Council for the chapter on Mary and added, "we proclaim the Most Holy Mary as the Mother of the Church, that is to say, of all the People of God, of the faithful as well as the pastors, who call her their most loving Mother." At this reference to Mary as the Mother of the Church, there was long and sustained applause. See Whitehead at 126.