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**VATICAN II AFTER 50 YEARS: THE
EVANGELIZING MISSION OF THE POST
VATICAN II CHURCH**

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Introduction

The Second Vatican Council has been the historic event that helped the Church to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to the people of God in a way that responds to their deepest needs and hopes. The Council Vatican II in its pastoral approach has fostered the relation of Christians to one another and opened the Church to the world. As the new people of God, the post Vatican II Church is a visible and spiritual community of the disciples of Jesus Christ called and taught by the Holy Spirit and sent forth to proclaim the Good News of the Kingly rule of God. As the reconciling body of the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, the post-Vatican II Church at the service of the world, has penetrated social and public life in a way that has changed societies through: liberation, integral development and commitment to care for the protection of the environment.

I will divide my theological reflection on the Church in the world in three parts. First, I will briefly mention some of the pastoral issues discussed at Vatican II which seem relevant to the post-Vatican II Church especially the Church as a brotherly and sisterly community of equals; and dialogue as the best way to unite human beings into God's people. Secondly, I will assess some achievements of the post-Vatican Church and thirdly, I will highlight the responsibility of all

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the faithful for the Church evangelizing mission in today's world. My theological reflection on the Second Vatican Council after fifty years will assess the contemporary situations of the Church's identity and actions and will suggest some new areas of concern in the post-Vatican II Church.

1. The issues discussed at Vatican II which seem to be relevant to the Post-Vatican II Church: the Church as a brotherly and sisterly community of equals and Dialogue as the best way to unite human beings into God's people.

The Council Vatican II has perceived the Church simultaneously as a human and divine reality. As a human reality, the Church is a visible society in the world; as a divine reality, the Church is Trinitarian. She originated from the Son and the Holy Spirit realizing in human history the purpose of the Father.¹ The Church is the mystery of communion of people united with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

...the Holy Spirit makes holy the people, leads them and enriches them with his virtues. Allotting his gifts according as he wills, he also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts he makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church... Whether these gifts be very remarkable or more simple and widely diffused, they are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation since they are fitting and useful for the needs of the Church.²

Every member of the body of Christ receives from God's life giving Spirit special gifts and tasks related to the building up of the community and its evangelizing mission. All the members of the body of Christ are entitled to the right and duty of exercising their spiritual gifts and tasks in the Church and in the world for the good of God's people (I Cor 14:26). They are expected to share ecclesial responsibility in solidarity as they are led by the same divine Spirit (1 Cor 2:4-6). The pastors of the Church as servants of God's people have the responsibility to recognize the spiritual gifts and tasks of the faithful so that they may be encouraged to use them for the good of the Church in her evangelizing mission. All the disciples of Jesus Christ, whether they are involved in a leadership role or in secular

¹*Ad Gentes*, II

²*Lumen Gentium*, 12

ministries are brothers and sisters equal in dignity irrespective of their ecclesial ranks. The Vatican II balanced vision of the Church as an institution and communion, makes her the herald of the message of salvation and the servant of the deepest needs of God's people in various cultural contexts. The post-Vatican II church is invited to use the methodology of theological dialogue in expressing the deposit of faith in different human situations and cultures.³ This methodology implies a critical analysis of human situations to keep up with the Vatican II vision of the Church as the pilgrim people of God journeying in human history towards the final purpose of creation; which is the full stature of Christ in the members of his mystical body. The reading of the "signs of the times" has become with Vatican II, the pastoral approach leading to the practical transformation of the human condition. This methodology used in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* is existentially inspiring.⁴ It deals with the identity of the Church and her activities discerned through lived experience in the midst of God's people. By interpreting and analyzing human situations in the light of the Word of God, tradition, the teaching of the Church and the contributions of theologians in history, Vatican II has called for a new way of looking at the world with the inner eyes of Jesus Christ. The starting point of the self-actualization of the Church is the real life situations of God's people, submitted to the light of divine revelation for concrete actions transforming human beings into fully alive people. Thinking ecumenically, the Council Vatican II has re-defined the Church as the community of brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ beyond denominational traditions. Interfaith dialogue has become a necessity for the credibility of the Church's evangelizing mission. Interfaith dialogue is based on the person of Jesus Christ, "the only begotten Son of God," head of the Church as his mystical body. Jesus Christ unites all human beings as the perfect image of the invisible God dwelling in all who observe the commandment of radical love of one's neighbour; and forming a brotherly and sisterly community of equals. This practice of radical love of one's neighbour is made effective in the Church by the active presence of the Holy Spirit, the giver of brotherly life, transforming all believers into the bearers of the Spirit of God. In this perspective, Jesus Christ is the "first born among many brothers and sisters" (Rom 8:29). In the Church, the

³*Gaudium et Spes*, 53

⁴*Gaudium et Spes*, 62

disciples of Jesus Christ as God's children belong together to the new people of God. They are one in Jesus Christ forming the new covenant community of God's people (Gal 3:26-28). Communion with Jesus Christ in the Spirit makes the holy people of God a brotherly and sisterly community of equals. A personal call from Jesus Christ, special gifts from the Holy Spirit and fellowship with the Father constitute the Church as the community of love brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.⁵ Vatican II has renewed the understanding of the Church as the living beginning of God's kingly rule. Christians inspired by their Trinitarian experience of God are brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ who have received the universal mission to bring about a more peaceful and just world based on unity, equality and cooperation. This world hoped for is possible when committed Christians make known the precious treasure of the Gospel everywhere. The Second Vatican Council has urged Christians to put the Gospel on the candlestick of the world so that it may light all people of good will in search of meaning, beauty and divine greatness. What then, is the Gospel the Church was invited to preach at Vatican II?

2. The Achievements of Post-Vatican II Church: The message of the Trinitarian Fellowship with God in the Church updated for the Modern world

The post Vatican II Church preached the Gospel originating from the experience of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a message of God for us revealed in Jesus Christ, his love for the whole of creation and the unique way to experience it in community. The love of God shines in the person of Jesus Christ, true God in the flesh sent to express God's solidarity for the whole creation by living among us through an extraordinary selfless life dedicated to the welfare of the human family. After the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ to the right hand of God, the Spirit of God was given at Pentecost to dwell permanently in the heart of the world through the Church. The mysterious and incomprehensible personal reality which is the basis of everything that exists, announced by the inspired people of Israel became flesh in human history in a man who incarnated and personified his life. This man, Jesus of Nazareth, heir of the Jewish monotheist religious tradition; was revealed through his life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension and gift of his Spirit as

⁵*Lumen Gentium*,4

the perfect image of the personal reality called God. As the eternal self-expression of God, the Logos became man by uniting his divine nature to his human nature in a way that as a true human being, he remained closely connected with the single entity of divine being dwelling in him in the community of three distinct persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As a person in full possession of two distinct natures, one human and the other divine, Jesus of Nazareth through his kenotic existence mirrors the kind of life human beings have been called to: the Trinitarian experience of the fellowship of the Church (Jn 17: 21). Jesus Christ, the perfect image and reflection of the sovereign God of creation is also by his incarnation the new Adam who is one with God by participating in his inner life which is the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son in the Spirit. In Jesus Christ, God has expressed decisively and irrevocably his will to make a new covenant with human beings by calling them to be his sons and daughters. By assuming an individual human nature, the Logos is God's self-communication in grace to all men and women invited to share the holiness of God (Mt 5:48; Lk 6:36). Jesus Christ is the embodiment of the final purpose of God for human history and for the whole creation.⁶ Through him an intimate relationship with the three divine persons is granted graciously to human family. In Jesus Christ, the Word of God, human beings created in the image and likeness of God can effectively realize their most profound call to be in communion with God by becoming brothers and Sisters of Jesus Christ and friends of the three divine persons through the new covenant.⁷

The Second Vatican Council acknowledged Jesus Christ as the new Adam who brought God's will for the salvation of the whole creation to its climax (Col 1:15-18; Heb 1:1-4; Rev 1:8, 11, 17, 18). In him, God who is mysteriously present and active in human history has finally fulfilled his purpose in dwelling among men and women called together to be the radiation of his glory. Through repentance, baptism and the reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's children are called to form the new Israel, the true people of God (Acts 2:38-39; Mk 16:15-16). After the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus

⁶*Gaudium et Spes*, 45: "The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of desires of history and civilization, the centre of mankind, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfillment of all aspirations".

⁷*Gaudium et Spes*, 22: "In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear".

Christ, God is active in his people through his Spirit that gives them God's knowledge and a new quality of life perceptible in their bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood (Jn 15:26; 16:13). The gift of the Spirit breaks the distinctions of gender, age and social class. All in Jesus Christ are brothers and sisters and share through his Spirit the intimate knowledge of God and a new religious consciousness enabling them to witness to the risen Christ. In Christian assemblies, the earliest disciples of Jesus Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit recognized their master as Lord who could hear their prayers (1 Cor 16:22; Phil 2:5-11). They prayed to Jesus as if they were praying to God. The risen and exalted Jesus Christ sharing the glory of God and receiving God's unique name of Lord and subject to divine worship is for Vatican II the central figure of human history (1 Cor 8:5-6). The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ made him the divine Savior of the world (Acts 4:11-12; 1 Thes 5:8, Rom 1:16; Phil 3:20; Lk 2:11; Mt 1:20-23; 1 Jh 4:13-14). As Emmanuel, God with us, Jesus Christ, the son of man and the divine wisdom has made known God as if he were God (Jn 1:18). Jesus Christ broke the power of sin by assuming the authority to forgive sin and to cleanse human hearts from the root causes of evil (Mk 2:1-12). He triumphed over death and gave a new hope to human beings to overcome social threats, crises and all forms of dehumanization. This Vatican II vision of God for us, God with us and God in us is an attempt to convince human beings to make room for God. To construct human society without God may lead to dehumanizing situations such as materialism, consumerism, heartless competition for the control of resources, widespread poverty and wars. The aim of Vatican II was to update the message of Trinitarian fellowship with God lived by the earliest Christians in Acts 4:32-37. Jürgen Moltmann describes this community in these terms:

...the unity of the triune God shows just such a unity of person and community in which the persons have everything in common apart from their personal characteristics and differences. So a human community that corresponds to the triune God, and lives in it, must consequently be one without privileges, and one where liberties are not infringed. The persons can be persons only in community; the community can be free only in its personal members. It ought to be possible to harmonize personal liberty and just community if we look at the triune God and his resonance in the Church, provided that the church, ecumenically united, can come to understand and present

itself as the vanguard of the redeemed humanity which has been liberated from its divisions and enmities.⁸

Vatican II has preserved intact the message of Trinitarian fellowship with God by updating his content to the difficulties, challenges and providential opportunities of the modern world. In today's world, the Trinitarian fellowship with God is lived through fraternal communities, ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, vernacular liturgies, fruitful dialogue between the Church and the world, contextualization, concrete issues of justice, peace, reconciliation and harmony within the whole creation of God. Benedict XVI expressed beautifully the mood and feelings of the bishops fifty years ago:

The Council is a Pentecost - that was the thought that corresponds to our experiences at that time;... it reflected what we experienced on our arrival in the city of the Council; meetings with bishops of all countries, all tongues, far beyond what Luke in Acts 2 could have imagined and, thus, a lived experience of real Catholicity with its Pentecostal hope.⁹

3. All the Faithful irrespective of their Ecclesial Ranks are together Responsible for the evangelizing Mission of the Church

In the post-Vatican II Church, to evangelize is:

To bring the good news of Jesus Christ into all areas of humanity, and through its impact to transform that humanity from within, making it new... The Church evangelizes when it seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the message which it proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and lives and concrete milieus which are theirs.¹⁰

Evangelization as the mission of the post-Vatican II Church seeks to bring a change in the conscience of God's people helping them to live the transformation of their integral humanness through the proclamation of the message of Trinitarian love. This radical interior change occurred first in the individual person called to follow the way of Jesus Christ open to the poor, the marginalized and the weak. This change is concretely lived in an evangelized Christian community attuned to the way of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh

⁸Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise!*: God's Future for Humanity and the Earth, translated by Margaret Kohl, Minneapolis, First Fortress Press, 2010

⁹Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building stones for a Fundamental Theology*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987, p.367.

¹⁰Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Evangelization in the Modern World, 1975, n. 25.

who dwelt among men and women (Jn 1:14). Then the evangelized community reaches out those who are outside its boundaries. Evangelization in the post-Vatican II Church requires individual witness, Christian community involvement in living Trinitarian love through liturgy, fellowship, service, collective reaching out, explicit proclamation of the Gospel, dialogue with cultures and other religious traditions, and contextualization of faith which does justice. All the faithful irrespective of their ecclesial ranks are responsible for the evangelizing work by striving to imitate the divine Master, Jesus Christ in his concern for God's people. By bearing witness to Jesus Christ, through concrete daily actions of compassion the disciples of Jesus Christ in the post-Vatican Church develop a generous and unselfish character in contrast to human self-absorption. Bearing witness to Jesus Christ's way of life is the mark of the post-Vatican II Church less involved in doctrinal issues such as "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers."¹¹ Christian witness flows from a strong relationship with the divine persons of the Holy Trinity made manifest through brotherly or sisterly love respecting the dignity of all the children of God. Christian salvation in the post-Vatican Church is understood as communion with God and God's people. Christian community reflecting the Trinitarian love consists of people of various backgrounds living in harmony with their differences and overcoming divisions and mimetic rivalries. Human beings experience salvation in the post-Vatican II Church when they feel secure and safe in their healthy relationships within their evangelized community. They then extend the benefits of salvation to their neighbours in need in whom they recognize Jesus Christ (Mt 25). The post-Vatican II church has renewed the way Christians explicitly proclaim the lordship of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the world. Jesus Christ is more than an inspired prophet or an outstanding teacher. He is God made man who died and rose from the dead through whom all human beings are drawn to the divine persons of the Holy Trinity (Jn 6:44). In their evangelizing work, the Christians of post-Vatican Church favour dialogue, presence, solidarity as means of communicating the message of Jesus Christ in a respectful way, imitating the triune God who offers graciously salvation through mysterious mind-blowing mediations. Finally, the post-Vatican Church has strongly encouraged the contextualization of the

¹¹*Evangelii nuntiandi*, n.31.

Christian faith that does justice during the Synod of Bishops of 1971 by expressing the relationship between justice, liberation and evangelization:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel, or in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.¹²

In the post-Vatican II Church, the Gospel is not proclaimed in a vacuum. Local Churches are aware of the social and cultural contexts which help or hinder the practice of living the Gospel that is proclaimed. They proclaim a Gospel that takes deep root among people. They are concerned with the issues of liberation from oppressive forces that prevent the children of God from living a decent life worthy of human beings. The social concern for God's people as brothers and sisters implies the permanent dimension of justice requiring human promotion, sustainable development and protection of the environment. The post-Vatican II church has been prophetic by boldly becoming the voice of voiceless and by creating all over the world 'The Justice Peace Commissions'. The popes of post-Vatican Church have produced social encyclical letters which have stressed the social concerns, human rights and duties of Christians and people of good will. Young people are cared for and women have an equal share in church's evangelizing mission.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ has been the centre of the issues raised at the Second Vatican Council. The post-Vatican II Church was born and developed with the modern understanding of the good news of the victory Jesus Christ brought on earth through his kenotic life and his triumph over sin, ritualism, legalism and death. Vatican II has interpreted Christian hope as the constitution of a brotherly and sisterly community of equals originating from the Trinitarian inner life of God and transforming the creation of God through the evangelizing mission of the post-Vatican II Church. Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead is the beginning of the new creation of all things. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the power of death is the promise of a new humanness free from sin, ritualism, legalism and death. First

¹²*Justice in the World*, 1971.

born of the new creation through his resurrection, Jesus Christ is present and active in the Church through his life-giving Spirit inspiring a better understanding of his mission, reforming the internal life of the church and healing the wounds of divisions and the culture of death in the world.

Vatican II has understood the mission of Jesus Christ as the revelation of the Trinitarian love of God without which a brotherly and sisterly community of equals is impossible. Vatican II has reformed the internal life of the Church by making liturgy comprehensible in the mother tongues of local assemblies. Participation of lay people in church activities, Ecumenism, Interreligious dialogue, commitment for justice, peace and reconciliation, dialogue with the modern world have been proposed as remedies for a divided and wounded humanity. Paradoxically the renewal of the Church hoped for did not take place everywhere. After fifty years of the opening of the Second Vatican Council we observe positive changes in ecclesial life with a quality of Church presence in the world. We can also notice the decline of religious practices in secularized and urbanized societies.