

***GAUDIUM ET SPES REVISITED:* CHRISTIAN ENGAGEMENT AND ETHICS IN THE MODERN WORLD**

Ingeborg G. Gabriel♦

Vienna University, Austria

Abstract:

The article reviews *Gaudium et spes* sixty years later showing – despite some additions needed, its ongoing relevance for the social and political engagement of Christians worldwide. Its analysis its basic outlook as a hermeneutics of recognition which aims at the inclusion of all human beings and shows its application in post-conciliar realities, particularly in the words and deeds of the present pontiff.

Key Words: *Gaudium et spes*, salvation history, recognition, social ethics, interreligious dialogue, inculturation, Pope Francis

1. Introductory Remarks

Gaudium et spes (GS) has been hailed as the theologically most innovative document of Vatican II. It covers amazing territory, giving an overview of the concerns of humans in this particular epoch of modernity. It owes its existence to a personal wish of Pope John XXIII.

♦ **Ingeborg G. Gabriel** is a professor emerita of Social Ethics at the Faculty of Roman-Catholic Theology at Vienna University. She holds Masters' degrees in social sciences and international relations and a PhD in Catholic theology. Before her academic career, she was an expert with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the US and Asia. She was named a full professor in 1996, the first woman ever at her faculty. Her publications focus on Catholic Social Teaching, political ethics and human rights, ethics of economics, and ecology, with a particular emphasis on ecumenical and interreligious dialogues. She has been Director of Justice and Peace Austria and Vice-President of the European Justice and Peace Commission as well as Special Representative of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) against discrimination, particularly of Christians. For publications, see www.se-ktf. Email address: i.gabriel@univie.ac.at

and its conceptualization to French and Belgian theologians.¹ Its main intention was to regain the dynamic dimension of a Christian faith inserted into the history of salvation. This is denoted by the subtitle of the Pastoral Constitution, “The Church in the Modern World.” It constitutes its main theological characteristic as compared to pre-conciliar annunciations of the magisterium as well as in theology and theological ethics. Already its introductory sentences show the interrelatedness of the Church and the world. They may constitute a programme for Christian engagement and ethics today. “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted,” are also those of the followers of Christ sixty years later. The text then continues: “Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.” The Church herself is a community of humans “united in Christ,” “led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father” carrying a mission of salvation “which is meant for every man.” The final sentence underlines this with great clarity: Thus, they are “truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds” (GS 1). The text, in its richness encapsulates a theology of a truly universalist approach with a clear vision of the mission of the Church in this age, thus overcoming a so-called two-story model which was thought to be able to clearly separate the natural from the supernatural. GS has therefore rightly been called a “Charter of Christian Humanism,” reincorporating this term into the orbit of Christian theology.² Seeing the Church as inserted into history, which in fact it is, also opens the door for a fresh perspective on the modern world and helps to overcome a principled and therefore ideologically negative view of its developments. Such self-ghettoization did not allow for the exploration of common grounds with those outside the Church. It made it difficult to bring the good news to this world, which is the true mission of the Church as “a leaven and a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God’s family” (GS 40). More concretely, the paragraph spells out, that it is to strengthen the dignity of the person, the good in human societies, and to help people lead more humane lives, which has

¹ Particularly Marie-Dominique Chenu and Yves Congar, Cf. Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press 2012) as a fascinating account of the story of the Council.

² The term “humanism” has practically been occupied by atheists; GS thus twice speaks of a humanism hostile to religion (GS 8; 56). Mostly, however it is used positively (GS 12; 40; 55) following Jacques Maritain’s notion of Christian humanism.

a material as well as an immaterial side, giving them direction and purpose (GS 40).

The method of GS may be described as three-dimensional. It starts out with an empirical assessment and analysis of the situation in “the modern world” (GS 4 -10). Through this bold endeavour to give an overview of the world of today, it identifies those overarching trends, which are to be supported by the Church in the “light of the Gospel” (GS 4), an approach that has been programmatically summarised under the term “signs of the times” (GS 4; 11).³ These worldly realities are ethically reflected and theologically interpreted. The “novelty” of this theological method should, however, not be overstated. It rather constitutes an actualisation of the fundamental scholastic dictum *gratia supponit naturam and perficit eam* in accordance with its original meaning. For “nature” here does not refer to a static (or material) reality but to complex social (or personal) situations in their dynamism and concreteness, situated in a specific time and place. The notion of nature in scholasticism, moreover, includes an aim (*telos*) which humanly is the good life and theologically is the completion of the world in the Kingdom of God,⁴ i. e., in a “new heaven and a new earth in which justice reigns” (2 Pet 3, 13). These social realities are, by their very nature, in a process of permanent change and thus cannot be encapsulated in a *philosophia perennis*. This holds true particularly for the “runaway world” of modernity (Anthony Giddens), based on the notion of progress.⁵

In the following, I will analyse GS in the light of the present situation, starting with the post-conciliar debates. Its ethical and theological programme will be recapitulated under the notion of a hermeneutics of recognition, laying particular emphasis on its significance sixty years later under the present pontificate. I will conclude with some remarks on its importance for the future of the Church and her mission.

³ Originally put forward in Marie-Dominique Chenu, “Les Signes des Temps:” NRTTh 97 (1965) 29-39.

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes between a *beatitudo imperfecta* and *beatitudo perfecta*, cf. Summa Theologica, I-II q. 1-6.

⁵ The assumption of progress underlies liberalism as well as Marxism. It has been deeply engrained in our self-understanding and has been globalized. Originally it is a transformed of Christian eschatological belief. It is being rejected by nationalist, Fascist and National-socialist ideologies, for which the good times lie in the past.

2. *Gaudium et spes* in the Post-Conciliar Controversies: Optimism vs. Hope

In the debates over the Council, GS played a prominent role. It has even been said that the different (often polarised) interpretations of Vatican II may be identified by whether *Lumen gentium* over *Gaudium et spes* was given priority. Such an opposition between two major Constitutions is, however, theologically dubious. Those who devalued GS as purely pastoral (and in fact unimportant) tended to hold a neo-Platonic view, rejecting a theology which regards the Church as embedded into human history with its ever-changing “signs of the times” and thus in need of adaptation. This view was often accompanied by the suspicion that GS and, with it the Council had succumbed to the overly optimistic liberal *zeitgeist* of the 1960s. Such an outlook, however, was as unjustified at the time of its promulgation as it is sixty years later, when the prophets of doom again play a prominent role, this time more in the world than in the Church, so it seems. There are without any doubt, grave evils threatening the lives of people and humanity. But that had already been the case in the 1960’s, which were characterised by nuclear threats, deep ideological polarisations, colonialism (which was just coming to an end) as well as grave social injustices, particularly vis-à-vis workers, women, and less developed countries (GS 9). What needs to be added today are ecological threats, an increase in regional and civil wars and conflicts, as well as a general sense of social and post-colonial frustration. There is even more personal and political engagement than was the case some decades ago, so as to improve the situation (NGO’s). The aim to mitigate human suffering and strengthen the unity of mankind is likewise one of the ultimate goals of the Church (LG 1, cited in GS 41).

For Pope Francis, GS serves as a blueprint, taking up some aspects with particular vigour that had been underrepresented previously. His main focus of engagement is the “poor and afflicted,” for whom Church carries primary responsibility. If her humanism is not to remain formal, she needs to advocate for those most in need. Moreover, with *Laudato si’* (LS) the Pope has taken up an issue that was not on the screen in the 1960’s but had been mentioned in the Bishops’ Synod *De iustitia in mundo* of 1971 (IM 4). Thereafter, the ecological question and the responsibility for the common home of the earth became secondary in the Church. Francis in his encyclical combines it with the social issue (LS 46). Six decades later, the global situation seems to be more unstable and more prone to conflicts, particularly civil wars, which have already been erupting in many places.

It was clear to the Fathers of the Council that a world analysis as presented in GS 4-10 requires ongoing updates (GS 91), given the dynamic character of social, political, and intellectual developments to which the Church needs to respond so as to give orientation and preach the good news of the Kingdom. The interpretation of the “signs of the times” in the light of the Gospel thus remains a task for each generation, which, in view of the limitedness of knowledge, will always remain fragmentary (1 Cor 13, 9f). Thereby, an adaptationist attitude, which regards the present as too rosy, has to be avoided, as must a rejectionist view, overstressing its apocalyptic dimension. This discernment is, of course, not always easy. It, therefore, requires an inner-Church pluralism and tolerance as well as the readiness to listen to the arguments of others so as to arrive at a balanced outlook, which needs, moreover, to be nourished by the results of the social sciences. Thereby, humans and Christians are confronted in every epoch with the ambivalence of earthly realities. Thus, GS states: “The modern world is at once strong and weak, capable of doing the best or the worst (...). For it, the way is open to freedom or servitude, progress or regression, brotherhood or hatred” (GS 9). The Council’s vision was to regain contemporaneity to communicate the Christian faith to all, stressing its life-saving and humane qualities. Its emphasis on ethics, e. g., on questions concerning human life directly, is seen as an important part of this mission of the Church, which is “a religious and therefore, in the highest sense, humane one” (GS 11).

Neither optimism nor pessimism are Christian categories. The discovery of the “not so few signs that very well give hope,” which Pope John XXIII called for when announcing the Council remains a major task some decades later.⁶ Hope thereby constitutes not a vague feeling or a mood but a Christian virtue of the highest rank to be practiced and developed. This hope constitutes the *cantus firmus* of GS (cf. GS 1, 4f; 18; 20ff; 38; 48; 56; 82; 91; 93). It seems of even greater importance today when there is an evident and palpable loss of hope and growth of anger worldwide.⁷

⁶ Gaudet mater ecclesia. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council.html, accessed 3/07/2023.

⁷ Cf. for an example one the most prominent anti-colonialist intellectuals, the Indian Pankraj Mishra, *Age of Anger. A history of the present* (London: Penguin 2018).

3. A Hermeneutics of Recognition: Ethics, Inculturation, and Dialogue

The recognition and active promotion of the good, wherever it can be found, constitutes the golden thread of the major texts of Vatican II (GS, DH, NA, UR). One may speak with Paul Ricoeur of a “hermeneutics of recognition.”⁸ It signals an epochal change in the Church, which over centuries in her official documents had focussed on condemning wrong and false doctrines (*anathema sit!*). This change of direction has seemingly not been sufficiently reflected upon until now. To recognise the good, true, and just, in and outside the precincts of the Church, constitutes a quiet revolution after centuries characterised by a logic of demarcation. It has profoundly shaped Catholic self-understanding and is not easy to change. Such a reversal of outlook, however, is a precondition for dialogues with others based on the recognition of their equality as human beings. Criticism is not excluded, but critical judgments do not stand at the beginning, which – one may add, is so in all human relations one wants to develop. Whoever, on meeting a person, points out his/her shortcomings with an attitude of superiority, will not get very far. The aim must rather be to find commonalities as a basis for working together so as to improve a defunct human reality and to learn from each other. The basis of this Christian approach, which is also that of the Church, is a recognition of the dignity of all humans, who are to be supported in word and deed. Christians are called to overcome the evils of violence and suppression through the good (Romans 12, 21) together with all humans of good will. This is to contribute finally to the unity of mankind and its unity with God, for which the Church is a sacrament, e. g. a “sign and instrument” in Christ (LG 1; cited GS 41). All humans need recognition and redemptive love. At the same time, in the contemporary world, the pluralism of its cultures and religions has become more evident. It is one of the stunning insights of re-reading GS that, in politics as well as intellectually, and also echoed in the documents issued by the present pontificate, we are confronted with a focus on variety. I want to take up three points in greater detail since they seem to be of particular significance.

3.1. Ethics as a Bridge to the Modern World

Besides the notion of progress, the main characteristic of enlightenment is an ethical-normative impulse, focussing on the improvement of institutions, so as to overcome or at least mitigate

⁸ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Parcours de la Reconnaissance. Trois Etudes* (Paris: Stock 2004), the English translation has been published under *The Course of Recognition* (Harvard: Harvard University Press 2007).

human suffering.⁹ It is this immanent humanism which GS recognised in one of its most important, at the Council also most contested, sentences in the opening sentences of its first chapter: “It is the almost unanimous opinion of believers and non-believers that everything on earth is to be ordered toward man as its middle and summit.” (GS 12). The Church and the modern world are thus placing man at the centre of their concern wanting to influence the future of mankind in a positive way. The result is an ethical programme not specific to Catholic Christians, but which should be acceptable to all people of good will. An anthropological foundation (GS 13-18; 19-21), followed by ethical reflections on society (GS 22-32) and the importance of work (GS 33-44) are its central pillars.¹⁰ The second part of the Constitution contains chapters on applied ethics (marriage and family, culture, economy, politics, and the international order) on the basis of the insights of its first part. The comportment of the individual thereby constitutes the foundation of the whole edifice. “All the imbalances of the present time have their origin in the heart of man” (GS 10). Therefore, one of the attitudes to be rejected most firmly is a ritualistic and self-serving kind of spirituality which is not empathetic to others and loses sight of the Christian call to realise the Kingdom of God. The climax of GS’ ethics is Christological. Human life, knowingly or unknowingly, finds its completion in Christ. “Whoever follows Christ, the perfect man, also becomes more human himself” (GS 41). This humanist approach, which stresses the communalities between immanent and Christian humanism, may today seem somewhat too idealistic in view of our imperfections as experienced in a world where ethics no longer seem to play a major role (cf. EG 57). The media we consume daily often shape our worldviews.

At the Council, a group of Fathers were disappointed that poverty was not given sufficient attention. They issued the so-called *Pact of the Catacombs*.¹¹ Pope Francis has put this issue at the centre of his pontificate, thus completing an unfinished matter.¹² Retrospectively, it

⁹ Charles Taylor, *Quellen des Selbst. Die Entstehung der neuzeitlichen Identität* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt 1994), p. 17. (English Version: Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity* (Harvard: Harvard University Press 1992).

¹⁰ This has been elaborated in the encyclical *Laborem exercens* of Pope John Paul II. (1981) also as a countermodel against the Marxist focus on work.

¹¹ cf. Kurt Appel/Sebastian Pittl, “Das Konzil am Grab. Das Grabmal Pauls VI. und der Pakt der Katakomben” in: Jan-Heiner Tüek (ed.), *Erinnerung an die Zukunft. Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil* (Herder: Freiburg 2012), 303-316.

¹² Ingeborg G. Gabriel, *Das humanistische Credo des Zweiten Vatikanums und seine Neuinterpretation durch Papst Franziskus Von Gaudium et Spes zu Evangelii*

must be said that this lack of attention has been a major shortcoming. The world Church should indeed have been far more attentive to the “signs of the times,” pointing towards the neglect of social and ecological global issues by a neoliberalist ideology during the past decades. Alarming facts concerning hunger and extreme poverty, illiteracy, and the discrimination of women, minorities, and marginalised groups, as well as migrants, would have needed stronger social responses and a more pronounced witness of the Church. It is not surprising that according to the *Instrumentum laboris* for the Bishops’ Synod in October 2023, Catholic Social Teaching has been marginal (IL B.3.3.). Such a social engagement could have contributed decisively so as not to “halve” human rights, insisting only on freedom and participation right and neglecting social human rights which originally an integral part of human rights (cf. UDHR Art. 22-27). Pope Francis’ criticism of global economics has often been contested, but it has also given new impulses to many debates. His attempt to enrich economics through social debates through his programme “Economics of Pope Francis” would deserve greater attention.¹³ A world where a small minority of people has become obscenely wealthy through globalisation and where parts of the population in richer countries own far more than needed to lead a good life and others die of malnutrition, not knowing how to fulfil their basic needs, is an unjust world that urgently requires systemic changes.

Despite some theological weaknesses, which as Yves Congar once stated, arose due to a lack of time, the dense theology of GS remains a (largely undiscovered) theological treasure. It remains inspiring to compare it with its re-interpretation by Pope Francis and his focus on the community of humans, as also developed in his social encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (2020). His focus on religions and cultures thereby, is complementary to GS, for which the modern world seemed by far more homogeneous. The modern world, as it refers to it, is in effect the Western context. Thus, modernity remains a cultural context of specific importance. It is secular but has been shaped decisively by Western Christianity. Particularly, its legal side continues to constitute the backbone of the international community and its institutions, which GS treats as a positive sign of the times (GS 83-90). Although these, as well as other institutions, are under pressure, they should not be neglected but rather strengthened. After all, they constitute the only

Gaudium und Laudato si, Jan-Heiner Tück, *Erinnerung an die Zukunft. Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil*, 2. Aufl., (Herder: Freiburg im Br. 2013, 605-621.

¹³ <https://francescoeconomy.org/> (accessed 02/07/2023).

means we have to work together for the global common good (GS 29) in an interconnected, globalised world, which without them would be totally anarchic. These structures can neither be replaced by individual ethical behaviour nor by the positive impact of cultures and religions.

3.2. The Many Cultures and Religions in the One World: Inculturation as a Must

When I first came to Asia in 1976, I vividly remember seeing many neo-gothic churches. I was surprised and wondered what was driving Christian communities to build in a European style. Even today, this seems puzzling, despite knowing more about the interlinkage of mission and colonialism. In this situation, the call from GS for inculturation was of particular importance. It constituted a specific expression of a hermeneutics of recognition, which needs to be directed not only towards individuals, but also towards cultures and religions. It should recognize their potential to enrich humanity as a whole and contribute to a truly universal humanism (GS 56). The chapter on cultures (GS 53-62) was truly innovative, having been written well before the so-called “cultural turn” in the social sciences in the 1980’s. This new also led to oscillation between different notions of culture. It laid the groundwork for later developments in the world Church, as did liberation and other contextual theologies, albeit under great difficulties.¹⁴ Its approach to salvation history follows GS, requiring the Christian message to be inculturated in time and place, not only in the modern world. Thereby, however, the relationship between Christianity and modernity may be understood as *sui generis*, with modernity standing on the shoulders of Christianity as its “runaway son” (Karl Rahner).¹⁵ What we experience today, after all, is not the existence of different cultures side-by-side, but their interconnectedness and interpenetration and, in the best case, their cross-fertilisation in the context of globalisation,¹⁶ which GS calls *socialisatio* leading to “mutual interdependencies and dependencies” (GS 25). It considers it the central ethical task to transform its dynamics into the personalization

¹⁴ Georges de Schrijver (ed.), *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: a Clash of Socioeconomic and Cultural Paradigms* (Leuven: University Press 1998).

¹⁵ Ingeborg G. Gabriel: *Kenosis and Crisis. Christianity’s Inculturation into Modernity*. In: Daniel Munteanu und Sorin Selaru (Hgg.): *Holding fast to the Mystery of the Faith*. Paderborn 2022, 97-113.

¹⁶ Cf. The already classical studies of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Multiple Modernities* (London: Routledge 2002); Peter L. Berger / Samuel P. Huntington, *Many Globalizations. Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002).

(*personalizatio*) of each and every human being (GS 6). The aim of inculturation is thus the recognition of but not an apotheosis of difference, and the view that each culture has to contribute to the *patrimonium* of mankind and its common good (GS 59).

3.3. Dialogue as a Call to Communicate with All Women and Men of Good Will

A further element of a hermeneutics of recognition is the readiness to conduct dialogue with all who want to contribute to a better understanding of the issues at hand and cooperate in finding more humane solutions. According to a central and truly inspiring theological paragraph in GS, the “Spirit of the Lord guides the Church” and “fills the earth” (GS 11). It leads the Church, together with others “to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires (of the age) ... faith throwing a new light on everything, manifesting God’s design for man’s vocation, and thus directing the mind to solutions which are fully human.” (GS 11) This pneumatological approach opens up new horizons for people inside and outside the Church and encapsulates the task of an ethics of recognition. One of its theological consequences is the importance of a dialogical approach. This was central to Pope Paul VI in his introductory encyclical, *Ecclesiam suam* (1964). It has been vigorously taken up by Pope Francis (cf. LS where a whole chapter is devoted to it LS 163-201). The recognition of the other requires a fundamental change of mind. It demands as much an ecclesial revolution as effective concern for the environment demands a “cultural revolution” (LS 114). The Synodal Process (SP) is to do exactly this. Catholic Christians are to look out for what is good in others in the Church, in our world, in cultures and religions. Such an approach is deeply enriching since it is able to recognise the valuable contributions of others, integrating them in one’s own Christian faith. This approach has often not been appreciated during the decades following the Council, in the false assumption that a clear profile with edgy demarcations of Catholicism would better serve the mission of the Church. Much to the contrary, to convey the message of the Gospel in a credible way, the recognition of others, respect, and dialogue are key from a human as well as a theological point of view. Moreover: in an ever more complex world, our knowledge becomes ever more fragmentary, and our obligation to truly promote peace, justice, and unity in the world and to serve the Kingdom of God ever more in need of the contributions of others. The Church is, as all humans of good will, in a learning process. It is her

task to initiate such processes or to tune in to those already existing (cf. EG 223). Political and economic actors, as well as religious leaders and scientists are valuable dialogue partners. Pope Francis had already pursued such a dialogue program as archbishop of Buenos Aires. He promotes it as *pontifex maximus* on a global scale, e.g., through high level global conferences on social and ecological questions, such as human trafficking. Under his pontificate, the Catholic Church has become a well-respected forum for discussions, e. g., before international conferences, such as the UN General Assembly in September 2015, at which the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) were passed. This could be a model for local churches as well. As I learned through my activities with Justice and Peace Austria, civil society actors with highly different outlooks were ready to discuss social issues side by side. An additional effect of this engagement is that it increases the credibility and visibility of the local and global Church.

A second line of dialogues were and are multiple interreligious dialogues, which have been undertaken since Vatican II, e. g. the Vienna Dialogue Initiative.¹⁷ As a means to further world peace and the global common good, they figure prominently on the agenda of the present Pope. The most important document here is "On Human Fraternity," which led to the establishment of a World Day on Human Fraternity by the United Nations on February 4.

The Pastoral Constitution GS of Vatican II has borne rich fruit during the past sixty years, despite some initial and ongoing doubts about the validity of its approach. It has contributed to inspiring Christians to participate in the re-creation of a world which according to God's intention, is to be good. This has been done in the firm hope of its promised perfection at the end of time. The recognition of whatever is good and furthers human life, the humble willingness to learn from others, and the firm determination to overcome evil through good under the imperfect conditions of the epoch, "sustaining the good will of the many who strive for improvement" (GS 82), are credible contributions to a humanity for which the Church is to be "the nucleus of unity, hope, and salvation" (LG 9).

¹⁷https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html (accessed 02/07/2023).