

THE RECEPTION OF GAUDIUM ET SPES: AN EASTERN REASSESSMENT

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Abstract

This article offers a theological and ascetical reading of *Gaudium et Spes*, arguing that the Pastoral Constitution represents not simply an aggiornamento but a profound resourcement of patristic anthropology. The study examines how the Council's teaching on human dignity, sin, freedom, and communion arises from a retrieval of the biblical and patristic vision of the human person as *imago Dei*, called to participate in the divine life. The article places this renewed anthropology in dialogue with Orthodox theology and spirituality, highlighting convergences in Christocentric anthropology, therapeutic understandings of sin, synergy between grace and freedom, and Trinitarian personalism.

Drawing upon the ascetical wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Orthodox spiritual writers, it argues that the pastoral mission envisioned by *Gaudium et Spes* requires a corresponding recovery of ascetical praxis, through humility, discernment, repentance, and purification of heart, without which ecclesial engagement risks devolving into cultural accommodation.

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The study concludes that a fuller understanding of patristic humanism as lived reality may benefit from greater engagement with the apostolically rooted Syriac liturgical and ascetical practices of the St. Thomas Christians of Kerala. By integrating patristic theology, Orthodox ascetical wisdom, and the pastoral aims of Vatican II, this article proposes a “patristic humanism” as a framework for shaping contemporary Christian witness in a secular age.

Keywords: Anthropology, Patristics, *Theosis*, Discernment, Asceticism

1. Introduction

Sixty years ago, Vatican II’s pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et Spes* represented a pivotal recovery of patristic anthropology within Catholicism, converging deeply with Orthodox theology in a synthesis that demands corresponding ascetical praxis. The *ressourcement* movement brought Catholic anthropology into remarkable proximity with Eastern Christian understandings of the human person, yet the Constitution’s pastoral optimism presumes a depth of spiritual formation that Western Catholicism had noticeably relaxed. The Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches of Kerala embody unique expressions of this synthesis, preserving unbroken liturgical and ascetical ties to Oriental Christianity. Authentic reception of *Gaudium et Spes* also requires listening to shared patristic heritages of prayer, fasting, and discernment sustained in Orthodox and Oriental traditions. Vatican II recognised the need to recover a patristic conception of the human person and took significant theological steps in that direction. Yet the Fathers’ theology rests upon a deeper foundation that also demands engagement with the ascetical and spiritual life that animated the Patristic vision of the world.

2 Anthropology from Pre-Conciliar Synthesis to Patristic Renewal

2.1 Catholic anthropology before the Council

In the centuries preceding Vatican II, Catholic anthropology was shaped by a synthesis of Thomistic and Augustinian thought, refined through post-Reformation controversy. The Augustinian tradition stressed the profound wound of sin, humanity’s absolute dependence on Divine grace, and the interior restlessness of the heart for God: “You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless

until they rest in You."¹ Augustine conceived grace as healing rather than as elevating.²

Thomas Aquinas, in contrast, clearly affirmed that while grace is necessary to heal wounded nature, its primary function is to elevate nature to a share in the Divine nature.³ His understanding reflected the classic Thomistic axiom, *gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit* ("grace does not destroy nature but perfects it")⁴, which views the human person whose natural capacities, though wounded by sin, are perfected rather than destroyed by grace.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the ressourcement movement, led by theologians such as Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, Jean Daniélou, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, sought to renew Catholic theology by returning to Scripture and the Church Fathers.⁵ They proposed a more holistic, Christocentric, and communion-oriented anthropology, emphasising the primordial dignity of the human person as *imago Dei* and humanity's ultimate vocation to union with God.

Catholic anthropology stood between an established, defensively oriented neo-scholastic synthesis and an emerging movement calling for a return to a more biblical and patristic vision of the human person. These theologians brought this renewed spirit into the Council, where their developing insights took form in *Gaudium et Spes*, laying the foundation for a transformed Catholic vision of humanity and the world within God's salvific plan.⁶

2.2 Renewal: Dignity of the image of God

Gaudium et Spes, promulgated in December 1965, represented a decisive development in Catholic anthropology, wherein traditional theology was renewed through a return to the ancient sources that

¹ Felix Gabriel Zombobah, "Augustine's Anthropology: *Homo Capax Dei*," *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* 3, no. 7 (2020): 132.

² L. Matthew Petillo, "The Theological Problem of Grace and Experience: A Lonerganian Perspective," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 594.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 95, a. 4, ad 1.

⁴ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christ the Saviour*, trans. Bede Rose, O.P. (St. Louis: Herder, 1956), 303.

⁵ Brian E. Daley, "The *Nouvelle Théologie* and the Patristic Revival: Sources, Symbols and the Science of Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 4 (2005): 362-78, at 364.

⁶ Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 291.

preceded the medieval synthesis.⁷ Rather than beginning with sin and restoration, customary in post-Tridentine thought, it begins with creation and human dignity, addressing believers and unbelievers alike.⁸ The human person is affirmed as created in the image of God, possessing an inherent dignity that derives from being both body and soul, created for communion with God and with others.⁹ This dignity is grounded in humanity's capacity for reason, conscience, freedom, and self-giving love, all of which mirror divine attributes.¹⁰

Human dignity is not merely an abstract principle but a dynamic call to communion with God and self-transcendence through higher knowledge and humbler probing.¹¹ The importance of conscience as the "most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God" speaks of a capacity for prayer as the dignity of man.¹² The human person is presented not as an isolated individual but as a being-in-relation within the one family, open to God, to others, and to the world.¹³ This relational anthropology rejects both materialist reductionism, which denies the spiritual dimension of human existence, and spiritual dualism, which denigrates the body and material world.¹⁴ Instead, the text integrates Thomistic realism regarding the unity of nature and grace with Augustinian interiority regarding the heart's restlessness for God, within a framework that coheres profoundly with the Greek Fathers.¹⁵

2.3 Conciliar Christocentric anthropology, sin and communion

The leitmotif of this renewed anthropology appears in a passage of remarkable theological density: "The truth is that only in the mystery

⁷ Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, trans. Paul Philibert, O.P. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 286

⁸ Joseph Xavier, "Theological Anthropology and *Gaudium et Spes* and Fundamental Theology." *Gregorianum* 91, no. 1 (2010): 128.

⁹ Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes (GS)*, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996), 12, 14.

¹⁰ GS 15–17.

¹¹ GS 19, 21.

¹² Massimo Faggioli, "Reading the Signs of the Times through a Hermeneutics of Recognition: *Gaudium et Spes* and Its Meaning for a Learning Church." *Horizons*. 2016: 346–367, at 346.

¹³ GS 24.

¹⁴ GS 14.

¹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama II: The Dramatis Personae: Man in God (Man and Nature, b. Spirit and Body)* Trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 267.

of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light."¹⁶ Here, the Constitution articulates a thoroughly Christocentric anthropology. St. Ephrem the Syrian captures this patristic vision in liturgical praise: "Glory be to Thee Who didst clothe Thyself in the body of mortal Adam and didst make it a fountain of life for all mortals. Thou art He that livest ..." ¹⁷ Human identity and destiny are fully revealed in Christ, the New Adam, who shows what it means to be authentically human. The Incarnation bears universal anthropological significance; Christ has "united Himself in some fashion with every man," extending the salvific horizon to all people of goodwill in whom grace works invisibly, even if unrecognised. This affirmation tilts the Catholic understanding toward a cosmic vision of the Incarnation's transformative power, wherein the Son of God's assumption of human nature elevates and heals all humanity.

The Constitution develops a therapeutic understanding of sin, explaining how man "suffers from internal divisions."¹⁸ This experiential and therapeutic language resonates with the patristic account of sin as a wound requiring healing rather than as primarily a matter of guilt requiring punishment. Sin disrupts man's proper relationship to his own ultimate goal as well as his whole relationship toward himself and others, and all created things, leading to existential anxiety.¹⁹ Yet this realism about human woundedness is balanced by confidence in the power of grace to restore and transform. Freedom, though damaged by sin, remains genuine; "only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness."²⁰ Grace does not coerce but restores and empowers human freedom for cooperation with divine purposes, echoing the patristic notion of synergy between divine initiative and human response: "Grace has been given mystically to those who have been baptised into Christ."²¹

Most significantly, the text roots human community and social nature not only in natural law or rational necessity but in the very

¹⁶ GS 22.

¹⁷ St. Ephrem the Syrian, "On Our Lord," §9, in *Ephraim Syrus, Gregory Thaumaturgus*, trans. A.E. Johnston, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 13 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, reprint. 1994), 533.

¹⁸ GS 10.

¹⁹ GS 13.

²⁰ GS 17.

²¹ St. Mark the Ascetic, "On Those who Think that They are Made Righteous by Works, 226 Texts," § 61, in *The Philokalia*, vol. 1, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 131.

nature of God. "A certain likeness exists between the union of the Divine Persons and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity."²² Human community is thus presented as a participation in Trinitarian communion, an image of the mutual self-giving love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This represents a profound re-anchoring of Catholic social anthropology in revealed theology, moving beyond the predominantly juridical and natural law framework that had characterised much of pre-conciliar social teaching. Personal identity emerges not through isolation but through communion.

2.4 Eschatology of human activity

In unison with St. Antony the Great, "He created man to apprehend them [animals] and their actions and to appraise them gratefully. Man should therefore strive not to die ... without having attained some apprehension of God and His works,"²³ the Constitution articulates a theology of human work and creativity, presenting human labour, science, and culture as genuine participation in divine creativity when oriented toward the good of humanity and the glory of God.²⁴ Rather than viewing the world as merely fallen or dangerous, it affirms human activity as part of the ongoing unfolding of creation, a cooperation with divine providence, a *locus theologicus* where the Church learns from the world even as she proclaims the Gospel. This positive evaluation of human progress is balanced by eschatological realism; human advancement, though real, remains incomplete and ambiguous without reference to ultimate fulfilment in Christ and the Kingdom of God. The text integrates a modern sense of historical development with traditional eschatological hope, rejecting both naive progressivism and world-denying pessimism, "earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom," yet both "contribute to the better ordering of human society."²⁵

2.5 Convergence with Orthodox Anthropology

From an Orthodox perspective, the Constitution converges toward patristic anthropology. The Constitution's Christocentric core resonates profoundly with the Orthodox conviction that Christ, the

²² GS 24.

²³ St. Antony the Great, "On the Character of Men and on the Virtuous Life, 170 Texts," §47, in *The Philokalia*, 1:336.

²⁴ GS 34–36.

²⁵ GS 39.

New Adam, reveals true humanity²⁶ and that the Incarnation bears cosmic significance for all creation.²⁷ The affirmation that Christ "united Himself in some fashion with every man"²⁸ reflects the Eastern understanding of the Incarnation as the foundation for *theosis* (participation in divine life through grace).²⁹ Its therapeutic language regarding sin, aligns closely with the Orthodox account of ancestral sin as interior disintegration, broken communion, and distortion of the image of God rather than juridical guilt (*reatus*).³⁰

The Constitution's emphasis on freedom and its cooperation with grace reflects the Orthodox notion of synergy, the cooperation of human freedom with divine energies.³¹ Both traditions affirm personhood as relational freedom oriented toward communion with God and neighbour.³² Most significantly, the Constitution's emphasis on human community as reflecting the union of the Divine Persons³³ mirrors classic Cappadocian personalism: persons are constituted in relation as the Divine Persons exist in eternal perichoresis.³⁴ This vision, articulated and preserved in Orthodox liturgical and theological tradition,³⁵ entered Catholic social anthropology through *Gaudium et Spes*, re-anchoring it in revelation rather than natural law alone.

2.6 Points of Divergence

Despite this profound convergence, certain differences remain. *Gaudium et Spes* maintains a conceptual distinction between nature and grace.³⁶ Orthodox theology views deification (*theosis*) as the natural end of human existence, that is, the fulfilment of what

²⁶ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, Chapter XXV, NPNF, 2.5:927-927.

²⁷ St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, §9.4, NPNF 2.4:299.

²⁸ GS 22.

²⁹ St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, §54.3, NPNF 2.4:361.

³⁰ GS 10, 13, 22.

³¹ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua ad Ioannem* 7, in *Patrologia Graeca* (PG) 91, col. 1088A.

³² GS 17, 19.

³³ GS 24.

³⁴ St. Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration XL On Holy Baptism*, NPNF, 2.7:747.

³⁵ Robert Taft, S.J., "Eastern Presuppositions" and Western Liturgical Renewal, 2, *Eastern Eparchy*, <https://eeparchy.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Taft-Eastern-Presuppositions.pdf>, accessed 05/11/2025.

³⁶ GS 36.

humanity was always created to be.³⁷ Both affirm that humanity's completion lies in communion with God, but their metaphysical grammars differ.³⁸ The Council approaches the idea of deification when speaking of "restores the divine likeness" and "as sons in the Son."³⁹ Yet it does not articulate deification as the reason for creation itself as Eastern theology does.

Regarding sin and its effects, the text interprets sin as moral and relational alienation, healed through restored communion with God. Orthodox theology, however, views sin as the ontological corruption of human nature and salvation as its cosmic healing and transfiguration through participation in divine life.

The Constitution's theology of human activity and historical progress introduces a dimension less prominent in Orthodox thought. The Constitution presents history as mediating participation in divine creativity, "prolonging the work of the Creator" and "a sharing in the light of the divine mind"⁴⁰ suggesting that cultural and scientific development contributes to the coming Kingdom. Orthodox theology tends to treat history as the arena of salvation but does not typically articulate a theology of progress wherein historical development itself constitutes spiritual advancement.⁴¹ Human transformation in Orthodox thought remains ascetical and liturgical rather than historical and developmental.

2.7 Theological Synthesis: A Patristic Humanism

Gaudium et Spes represents a patristisation of Catholic anthropology, a recovery of first-millennial sources.⁴² By grounding human dignity in the *imago Dei* and articulating a Christocentric understanding of human identity, fulfilled through participation in divine life, Catholicism presents sin therapeutically, as woundedness requiring healing. In this vision, the synergy of freedom and grace is affirmed, rooting human communion in Trinitarian relations that overcome the partial obscurity of medieval Latin theology.

³⁷ Nicholas J. Healy, "Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace," *Communio* 35 (2008), 536-564; Paweł Kiejkowski, "Theology of God's Energies in George Florovsky," *Poznańskie Studia Teologiczne* 45 (2024), 43-55.

³⁸ St. Gregory Palamas, "Topics of Natural and Theological Science, 150 Texts" §26, in *The Philokalia* 3:357.

³⁹ GS 22.

⁴⁰ GS 34, 36.

⁴¹ John Zizioulas, *Priests of Creation*, (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 33.

⁴² Faggioli, "Reading the Signs," *Horizons*, 343.

This renewal brings Catholic anthropology remarkably close to Orthodox sensibility, concerning humanity's created dignity, vocation to *theosis*, and relational constitution through relation.

Remaining differences concern metaphysical language about nature and grace versus participation in uncreated energies, and theological emphasis on the role of historical progress versus the primacy of liturgical and ascetical transformation. Yet the fundamental vision converges: the human person is created in the divine image, called to communion with the Trinity, wounded by sin but restored through Christ, and destined for transfiguration through grace.

The Constitution's anthropology is not an innovation but a recovery, a return to traditions' deepest sources, illuminating the mystery of the human person in the light of Christ, the perfect Image of the invisible God. This theological approach invites not merely intellectual assent, but transformative praxis rooted in prayer, fasting, and spiritual direction.

Herein lies a critical pastoral challenge: The patristic vision rejuvenated in *Gaudium et Spes* transformed Catholic theology from suspicion of the world to kenotic engagement with it. This shift to Patristic theology requires corresponding lived spirituality. The call to read "the signs of the times" and engage culture presumes the spiritual discernment that Eastern Christianity has preserved through lived ascetical discipline. Without this ascetical foundation, this theological optimism risks accommodating to secular culture rather than evangelising it.

3. Communion and Witness

3.1 Kenosis as Church

The anthropological vision of *Gaudium et Spes* culminates in an ecclesiology of communion. Its theology sees human sociality as a reflection of Trinitarian life: "there is a certain likeness between the union of the Divine Persons and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity."⁴³

This communion finds its meaning in the Incarnation as the definitive kenotic act. As "man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself," the Church finds her identity in self-emptying service, as "a sacramental sign and an instrument of

⁴³ GS 24.

intimate union with God, and of the unity of the whole human race."⁴⁴ No longer conceiving itself primarily as a fortress against the world, the Church embraces its missionary identity as present within the world to sanctify and call it to Christ.

In this kenotic role, the Church sees the divine image in all humanity and, sharing in "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age,"⁴⁵ fully identifies with the world to sanctify it. Catholic ecclesiology is transformed from a separate "holy of holies" into a missionary servant, following the example expressed in the words of St. Irenaeus, "the Word of God ... become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."⁴⁶ In *Gaudium et Spes*, the world is understood not as a mere natural order, but as a creation destined for transfiguration.

At the same time, the Council recognised an autonomy of earthly realities. Human culture, science, and politics possess their own legitimate laws; yet their ultimate meaning is fulfilled only when ordered to the Creator. St. Anthony the Great teaches, "God is spiritual; and though He is invisible, He is clearly manifest in visible things, as the soul is manifest in the body. And just as it is impossible for a body to subsist without a soul, so it is impossible for anything that is visible and has been to subsist without God."⁴⁷

The Constitution's pneumatology is similarly important. It recognises that the Holy Spirit operates beyond the Church's visible boundaries, "the Holy Spirit ... offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery."⁴⁸ These words reflect the words of St. Basil, "Through the Holy Spirit comes restoration to paradise, the ascent to the kingdom of heaven, the return to sonship, the freedom of calling the Father, becoming a partaker of God by the grace of Christ."⁴⁹ This pneumatological vision, far from relativising Catholicism, speaks of the Church's universal mission as a sign and an instrument of divine love active within creation. The Church reads the "signs of the times" not as threats but as invitations to assist people in

⁴⁴ GS 42.

⁴⁵ GS 1.

⁴⁶ St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Book V, Preface 1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint. 1981), p. 526.

⁴⁷ St. Anthony the Great, "On the Character of Men," §54, in *The Philokalia*, 1:337.

⁴⁸ GS 22.

⁴⁹ St. Basil the Great, *de Spiritu Sancto* 15.36, PG 32:131-132.

struggles to choose Christ and in discerning where the Holy Spirit renews the face of the earth.

3.2 Engagement with Science, the World, and Culture

Although not explicitly mentioned, the metaphysical transcendentals of Thomism, Unity, Truth, and Goodness⁵⁰ common to all things that had marked Catholic thought for centuries are now given a pastoral meaning in this Constitution. It is in this sense *Gaudium et Spes* speaks of "the legitimate autonomy of human culture and of the sciences," encouraging rigorous methods proper to each discipline while insisting that freedom of inquiry be ordered to truth, moral norms, and the common good.⁵¹ This is not a capitulation to secular thought but rather an invitation to sanctification. For the Council, faith and reason are not opposed to each other, something expressed by St. Peter of Damascus, "Thus there is, first, the ordinary faith of all Orthodox Christians, that is to say, correct doctrinal belief concerning God and His creation, both visible and invisible, and there is, second, the faith of contemplation or spiritual knowledge, which is not in any way opposed to the first kind of faith; on the contrary, the first gives birth to the second, while the second strengthens the first."⁵² In this way, scientific work can be a preparation for the Gospel and compatible with Christian wisdom, and can be enriched by it.⁵³

This call to engagement is expressed as an essential aspect of the ecclesial vocation. The Church summons especially lay professionals to enter their fields responsibly, fostering dialogue with philosophy, the arts, social sciences, and technology so that culture may be purified, elevated, and evangelised from within. This vision is later echoed in papal catechesis that describes Vatican II's mission, formulated in i, as bringing the enduring truth of the Gospel into fruitful conversation with contemporary questions through patient dialogue and confident witness.

The Fathers whose theology inspired *Gaudium et Spes* were formed by ascetical disciplines that purified their perception. If Catholic engagement with the world is to authentically embody the Council's vision rather than deteriorate into accommodation, a parallel recovery of ascetical praxis becomes essential.

⁵⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate* 1.1-3.

⁵¹ GS 57, 59, 61.

⁵² St. Peter of Damaskos, "The Two Kinds of Faith," in *The Philokalia*, 3:213.

⁵³ GS 5, 36, 62.

4. Patristic Vision Requires Patristic Praxis

4.1 Ascetical Foundation

The text calls the Church to illuminate human life with the light of faith while remembering St. Paul's warning against conformity to darkness (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 6:14). The Patristic Fathers recognised that Christians are susceptible to various spiritual challenges, pointing to the danger of dialogue without spiritual preparation. The world needs sanctification by the Church, not the Church's secularisation by the world. The faithful need grace and guidance, lest "a veil of darkness, the fire of the worldly spirit, surrounds the heart, preventing the intellect from communing with God and the soul from praying."⁵⁴

Holy tradition teaches that authentic transformation flows not from programs or institutional presence but from holiness, from persons so transfigured by grace that they transfigure whatever they touch. The fourth-century Syriac father, Mar Aphrahat, counsels, "Let us be a sweet odour, that our fragrance may breathe forth to all around. Let us be poor in the world and let us enrich many by the doctrine of our Lord."⁵⁵ As St. John of Kronstadt similarly wrote, "he ought to be a light himself, in order to enlighten others."⁵⁶

4.2 Distinguishing Good and Evil

Gaudium et Spes reads human history as a dramatic struggle between light and darkness that runs through every heart and every society.⁵⁷ Goodness is fidelity to conscience, "which summons man to love the good and avoid evil." Through the free choice of good, obedience to divine law, love of God and neighbour, and authentic freedom strengthened by grace, man achieves true dignity as an image of God, "emancipated from all captivity to passion."⁵⁸

Evil, on the other hand, is a privation, a rupture within the created order that originates in the wound of sin. It springs from pride and disordered self-love, by which man, at the urging of the Evil One, turns from God and seeks fulfilment apart from Him. This turning disfigures both persons and social and cultural structures, producing

⁵⁴ St Symeon Metaphrasis, *Paraphrase of the Homilies of St Makarios of Egypt III*, Patient Endurance and Discrimination, § 37, in *The Philokalia*, 3:300.

⁵⁵ Mar Aphrahat Demonstration VI.1, NPNF 2.13:606

⁵⁶ St. John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, II, § 839, 2nd ed. (St. Petersburg: V. Erofeev Press, 1893).

⁵⁷ GS 13.

⁵⁸ GS 16, 17.

alienation, injustice, and the misuse of human powers intended for communion and service.⁵⁹ Evil darkens the intellect, disorders desire, and weakens conscience, yet it never extinguishes the divine image.

Clinging to the good, the Council insists, requires "strenuous efforts" aided by grace, and its decisive answer is found in the power of Christ's cross and resurrection.

4.3 How the Constitution Understands Discernment

The Constitution teaches that discernment is communal and ongoing: the Church must "scrutinise the signs of the times. "With the help of the Holy Spirit, the People of God, especially pastors and theologians, should hear, distinguish and interpret the voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word."⁶⁰

Discernment, for *Gaudium et Spes*, is not an intellectual exercise but participation in divine wisdom. It presumes that truth and goodness are revealed in Christ and accessible through faith enlightened by reason.⁶¹ Theology, moral wisdom, and interior disposition towards truth and goodness are essential foundations for judgment. In practice, discernment requires consciences "dutifully conformed to the divine law," docility to the Church's teaching and attention to the common good.

Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit continually purify human judgment, restoring capacity to discern, choose the good and avoid conformity to the world. The document warns against naïve accommodation to the world: "Be not conformed to this world" (Rom 12:2), for "that spirit of vanity and malice... transforms into an instrument of sin those human energies intended for the service of God and man."⁶²

Discernment thus requires purification of heart, conversion of mind, and continual openness to the Spirit. It reflects the teaching of St. John Climacus that discernment is "the assured understanding of the divine will on all occasions, in every place, and in all matters," found only "in those who are pure in heart, in body, and in mouth."⁶³

⁵⁹ GS 13–14; 37.

⁶⁰ GS 4, 11, 44.

⁶¹ GS 15.

⁶² GS 37.

⁶³ St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), Step 26:1.

4.4 Practical principles in *Gaudium et Spes*

In the document, discernment of a proper adaptation or engagement with the world is first judged by whether it is Christocentric. Secondly, teaching and practice ought to be carried out with and in communion with and under the guidance of the bishops and the Pope,⁶⁴ implying with the living Tradition of the Fathers. A third essential criteria is respect for the *imago Dei*, respect for human dignity, marriage and the family; respect for moral law, religious freedom, justice for the poor, and authentic freedom.⁶⁵ The desired fruits of *Gaudium et Spes* are evangelisation, sacramental life, moral coherence, charity, unity and the elimination of confusion, division, degradation and loss of faith.⁶⁶ It is by the fruits you shall know them!

Within Catholicism, many lay groups, following their calling as encouraged in *Lumen et Gentium*, witness to the world in the pastoral light of this Constitution. Such lived examples seek to evangelise culture and society while remaining faithful to the deposit of faith and a deepening spiritual life.

4.5 When Approaches Veer from True Discernment

Yet, *Gaudium et Spes*'s reception has not been uniform. Some Catholics, invoking the Constitution, have accommodated to philosophies contrary to Christianity whether liberationist ideologies, gender theory, New Age syncretism.⁶⁷ Pope Benedict XVI attributed such misreadings to a “hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture.”⁶⁸ The philosophies or social theories behind these groups can easily become a controlling lens, leading them to interpret Revelation and Tradition to fit their ideologies. Ecclesial communion is treated as optional; the exigence for “development” contradicts revealed doctrine; and new pastoral practices divorce humanism from the truth. As Pope Francis has said, faith can be reduced to rhetoric, simplicity can be left behind while foreign rationalities are imported.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ GS 43, 44.

⁶⁵ GS 26–31; 47–52; 92–93.

⁶⁶ GS 39–41; 43.

⁶⁷ Wilibaldus C. Gaut and Danilo V. Agustin Jr., “Revisiting the Reception of *Gaudium et Spes*'s Vision of the Church-World Relationship,” *Asian Horizons* 19 no. 2, 2025:13.

⁶⁸ Benedict XVI. “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia Offering Them His Christmas Greetings.” December 22, 2005, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.htm, accessed 10/11/25.

⁶⁹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, §232.

The participation of Catholic clergy and laity in such movements has been an inversion of the Constitution's order of the primacy of the Gospel over culture. In such instances, conscience erodes, catechesis becomes marked by confusion, and sacramental life is weakened. Accommodations of Christianity to the 'world' tend to result in a loss of missionary vitality.⁷⁰ Despite instances of failure, a guiding light is found in the shared ascetical tradition of East and West, which may shed new light on the realisation of *Gaudium et Spes* within the Catholic Church.

4.6 Two Spiritual Dangers: Knowledge and Conformism

Orthodox theology is inseparable from an ascetical way of life.⁷¹ The Orthodox Church has never conceived theology as an abstract system, but as a mode of life shaped by prayer, humility, obedience, repentance, and self-denial through fasting. While the Latin tradition maintained a gentler ascetical regimen, relaxations accompanied the Council. This raises the question whether the missionary witness envisioned by the Council can flourish without a committed emphasis on prayer and ascetical discipline.

The crisis of accommodation to the world and in missionary vitality appears to be spiritual rather than intellectual or theological. Two spiritual dangers emerged in the post-conciliar implementation: intellectualism without a spiritual foundation and conformism to cultural pressures.

Regarding the first, both Catholic and Orthodox intellectual traditions both recognise that engagement with culture and the sciences requires inner purification as well as learning. The Council insists that intellectual work cannot be separated from grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁷² Each person is vulnerable to the temptation to think, teach, or write without prayer, and the ascetical tradition warns that knowledge must be held in humility. St. John Climacus affirms that repentance and contrition are the indispensable beginning of humility, which dissolves self-esteem and makes the soul receptive to God.⁷³ St. Maximus the Confessor writes that the "one

⁷⁰ GS 16, 37, 43, 62.

⁷¹ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 192, 218.

⁷² GS 15.

⁷³ St. John Climacus, *The Ladder*, Step 25, 35.

who uproots self-love with God's help ... learns to love every person while rejecting their passions."⁷⁴

Second, conformity to certain cultures and philosophies can threaten the Christian Faith. The Lord warned, "For wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it." (Mat. 7:13-14). St Maximus, addresses this "In everything we do God examines our motive ... we should have God as our goal, so that, with our gaze always fixed on Him."⁷⁵

4.7 The Spiritual Path: Stages of Transformation

Pope Paul VI identified the core challenge: "the split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time."⁷⁶ The implementation of *Gaudium et Spes* requires understanding evangelisation as a spiritual path.⁷⁷ St. Mark the Ascetic reminds us that "no one can become a true Christian unless he gives himself up completely to the cross in a spirit of humility and self-denial."⁷⁸ Josef Ratzinger, referring to the Constitution, is recorded as critically noting that "an orientation of the Church towards the world which would mean a turning away from the Cross would lead not to a renewal of the Church but to its decline and eventual decay."⁷⁹

The eleventh-century mystic, St. Nikitas Stithatos, summarises the spiritual path to Christ in three stages: "The purgative, the illuminative and finally the mystical, through which we are perfected."⁸⁰ The purgative stage consists of recognising sin and one's state before God; repentance, contrition and a change of heart are the beginning of this path.⁸¹

Although inherently present in *Gaudium et Spes*, its flow and depth can lead one to drift into theoretical theology rather than practical apostolate. Without a call to the spiritual pilgrimage from the state of

⁷⁴ St. Maximus the Confessor, "Four Hundred Texts on Love, Second Century, §8," in *The Philokalia*, 2:66.

⁷⁵ St. Maximus the Confessor, "Four Hundred Texts on Love, Third Century §48," in *The Philokalia*, 2:90.

⁷⁶ Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975), §20.

⁷⁷ See GS 57.

⁷⁸ St. Mark the Ascetic, "Letter to Nicolas the Solitary," in *The Philokalia*, 1:149.

⁷⁹ Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Redaction and Reception of *Gaudium et Spes*: Tensions within the Majority at Vatican II," in *Volti di fine Concilio*, ed. Doré and Melloni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000), 115-53.

⁸⁰ Nikitas Stithatos, "On Spiritual Knowledge, Love and the Perfection of Living, 100 texts," §§41-44; in *The Philokalia*, 4:151.

⁸¹ See GS 57.

diminishment in sin to renewal in Christ, this Christocentrism can be reduced to anthropocentrism.⁸²

St. John Climacus, Ladder of Divine Ascent lays out thirty steps that include renunciation of the world, detachment, obedience and repentance; the purification of our passions and the acquisition of virtues. It is only then that love, faith and hope culminate in union with God. It is through prayer, fasting and custody of our senses that we learn to truly pray from the heart.⁸³ Without this spiritual composition of one's soul, dialogue with the world becomes worldliness. The distinction between authentic inculturation and baptized paganism depends not on clever apologetics but on the presence or absence of prayer in those who engage.⁸⁴

5. Conclusion: The Patristic pathway

Because the conciliar text adopts a pastoral rather than ascetical mode, its implementation has at times been interpreted in ways that overlook the indispensable roles of prayer and asceticism. The words of the apostle St. Thomas, "Let us go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16), echo the essential disposition for authentic engagement with the world: self-emptying solidarity unto death. Here the Orthodox tradition speaks with great clarity: the world is evangelised not first by dialogue, but by sanctity; not by accommodation, but by the transfiguration of those who daily take up the Cross. Laissez-faire interpretations of *Gaudium et Spes* need to be challenged by the living witness of the early saints of the first centuries. Their fidelity, purity of heart, depth of prayer, and sacrificial love reveal the true meaning of being a Christian in the world, with the joy (*gaudium*) of martyrdom and the hope (*spes*) of being received by Christ into His Kingdom.

The Fathers of the Church remind us that discernment is not a learned skill but rather is a charism, granted through humility and tested obedience. Spiritual direction from one dedicated to prayer and asceticism is indispensable and cannot be replaced by professionalised counselling based on philosophies that speak only the language of psychology rather than of sin, repentance, and transfiguration. In practice, this means that spiritual growth cannot merely be in intellectual dialogue but must find its basis in a common life of prayer and purification.

⁸² See GS 13, 10.

⁸³ See GS 36.

⁸⁴ See GS 57-59.

Nikitas Stithatos speaks of the Joy and Hope of Christians, their *gaudium* and their *spes*: “When you approach the frontiers of dispassion - attaining a right view of God and the nature of things, and according to your growth in purity ascending to the Creator through the beauty of His creatures - you will be illumined by the Holy Spirit. Entertaining kindly feelings about all men and always thinking good of all.”⁸⁵

The patristic-ascetical synthesis proposed here finds compelling expression in the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches of Kerala. The Saint Thomas Christians’ experience of apostolic faith rooted in Syriac spirituality, their immersion in Sanskritic philosophical culture, and their preservation of ancient liturgical and ascetical practices represent a richness both Orthodox and Western Christianity might learn from. Their tradition demonstrates that the vision of *Gaudium et Spes* as an engagement with sophisticated cultures while maintaining ascetic rigour is not merely theoretical but a lived reality in communities where Syriac liturgy shapes consciousness and fasting remains integral to family spirituality.

The fullest reception of the pastoral Constitution may yet require the whole Church, East and West, to listen more attentively to voices from Edessa, Antioch, and the Malabar Coast, voices that have been proclaiming this integration for centuries.

⁸⁵ Nikitas Stithatos, “On the Practice of the Virtues: 100 Texts,” §90, in *The Philokalia*, 4:103.