

Joy and hope, grief and anguish

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Joy and Hope, Grief and Anguish

'Gaudium et Spes'
40 years later

BY DAVID HOLLENBACH

FORTY YEARS AGO, on Dec. 7, 1965, the Second Vatican Council issued its "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World." This conciliar text laid out the most challenging vision of the church's social mission of the modern era. It proclaimed that the Catholic community should be deeply engaged in promoting the dignity of every person, and this proclamation bore significant fruit in the church's participation in the struggle for human rights in Chile, Poland, El Salvador, Korea, the Philippines and elsewhere. It challenged the church to help forge new bonds of global solidarity, mobilizing the church to lead the Jubilee 2000 campaign to alleviate the debt of the poorest countries and to become one of the world's strongest advocates of multilateral approaches in international politics. It taught that Christian faith reveals the deeper meaning of this-worldly activity, calling believers to transform the workplace and the civic forum into more authentic reflections of the communion God wants all people to share in the heavenly city.

The pastoral constitution presents a hope-filled vision of the human condition and an inspiring call to move forward on the path to realize this vision. It was therefore very appropriate that the first words of the constitution, from which it gets its common Latin name, are *Gaudium et Spes*, "Joy and Hope." I vividly remember the surge of joy and hope I felt while reading it for the first time as a young

Jesuit novice 40 years ago. Its inspiring message described how Christ's grace could energize one's whole life, drawing mind and heart into the service of God and of those who suffer because of social neglect or exclusion.

Since the council, this vision has energized many of the church's most creative initiatives. It led to a deepened appreciation of the crucial role of laypeople in the church's mission in the world, exemplified in the creativity of individual laypeople as well as in such lay movements as the Sant'Egidio community in Rome. It generated innovative work for justice and peace by national and regional bishops' conferences. These included the initiatives of the Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 and Puebla, Mexico, in 1974, that engaged the Latin American church in the struggles of the poor, as well as major pastoral letters on nuclear weapons and economic justice that made the U.S. bishops a strong moral voice in American public life in the 1980's. It arguably made the Catholic community the most pervasive global force for the expansion of democracy in the 1970's and 1980's (see Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 1985). "Joy and Hope" were indeed the right words to describe the message the pastoral constitution brought us.

The council, however, also forecast that the followers of Christ would taste grief and anguish (*luctus et angor*) in pilgrimage along the way of Christ. They will know heartache when they enter into the sorrows of the poor and others who are unjustly afflicted. We have seen many examples of this kind of grief since the council. Employers have felt it when awareness of the needs of their workers

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has led them to create more humane workplaces. Many, awakened to the struggles of women, have been led to work for more just gender relationships in the family and larger society. Most dramatically, some have been led to give their very lives as martyrs through their solidarity with the oppressed. The griefs that arise from these forms of solidarity are gifts of grace and signs that the Christian community is on the path outlined by the council.

There is, however, another kind of grief afflicting the church's social mission today that is not a sign of grace at all. This is the sorrow we feel when the Christian social mission is impeded by the limitations and even the sins of the church itself, both in its members and in its leaders.

In recent years, for example, we have seen the creativity of bishops' conferences significantly reduced by decisions of the Holy See. This has been motivated partly by the Vatican's desire to protect the unity of the church by strengthening central control. It is increasingly clear, however, that complex global organizations are more effective when they grant greater scope for creativity to regional and local decision makers. Effective transnational management calls for decentralization that respects local conditions. The church, however, has been moving in the opposite direction. Indeed, the bishops' conferences that have been most innovative in their social ministries, such as those of Brazil and the United States, have apparently been of particular concern in Rome. Restrictions on these bodies have led to a notable weakening of episcopal leadership in social ministry over the past two decades. Since effective leadership is essential if the Catholic community is to realize the vision of the council, this is a genuine source of grief.

In the United States, the recent scandal of sexual abuse by members of the clergy has also seriously undermined the capacity of the Catholic community to address issues of justice and peace. Through the years since the council, I have been very much involved in preaching, teaching and writing about the church's social mission. In the few years since the scope of the sexual abuse problem has come to light, I have experienced a new tone of skepticism and even cynicism in the response of some to discussions of the council's social vision. Often the first words I hear following a talk on social justice are comments that question whether any church official has the credibility to speak about justice at all. Since clerics themselves have committed grave injustices of abuse against young people, and since bishops have failed to intervene to stop this abuse or sought to cover it up, more than a few feel that church social teaching rings with hypocrisy.

To cite just one case, in November 2002, when the U.S. government was preparing for war, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops raised "serious questions about the moral legitimacy of any pre-emptive, unilateral use of military force to overthrow the government of Iraq." Their state-

ment was presented to the press by the chair of the bishops' Committee on International Policy, Cardinal Bernard Law. Because of the raging controversy about Cardinal Law's handling of clerical sexual abuse, which led to his resignation as archbishop of Boston the following month, it is not surprising that the bishops' questions about the moral legitimacy of war in Iraq had little influence. This is a tragic example of how the failure of Christians can "conceal rather than reveal the true nature of God" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 19). Deep sadness arises when we see that clerical sinfulness has overshadowed the light of Christ's peace in this way.

The sexual abuse crisis has also raised several questions about the internal governance of the church related to its mission of justice and peace. A few years after the council, in 1971, the World Synod of Bishops met in Rome to consider the church's mission for justice. The synod concluded that "anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes." It is obvious, of course, that the abuse scandal has weakened the Catholic community's voice in the larger society on matters of morality. But the issue goes deeper. The failure of bishops and clergy evident in the scandal are leading many Catholic laypeople to raise basic questions about the mode of church teaching and the structures that support it. They ask whether the official church can continue to reject the relevance of lay experience in its moral teachings on sex, contraception, the role of women and the response to the H.I.V./AIDS crisis, even as the church also teaches that democratic participation and openness to dialogue are essential to good governance in secular political life.

It is also increasingly suggested that the church has much to learn about its own governance from the Catholic lay people who are highly educated and skilled in conducting the affairs of large institutions like business corporations, health care institutions and universities. It is likewise increasingly expected that bishops listen more attentively to laypeople involved directly in political life before issuing declarations on how moral values should be related to civil law and public policy. Educated laypeople in the United States hardly need to be reminded of the council's statement that "pastors will not always be so expert as to have a ready answer to every problem, even every grave problem" (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 43). Insight and wisdom are not gifts reserved to those in the clerical state. Frequent failure to act on this insight of the council has been adding to the sadness that today often marks church efforts in public life.

Rising to the Challenge

How, then, can we recover the joy and hope inspired by the pastoral constitution and reduce the bad forms of grief and anguish that have arisen in recent years? This is a very large

challenge, but one that the pastoral constitution itself requires us to meet. I have three suggestions.

First, *Gaudium et Spes* saw dialogue with the secular world as a key source of the church's development of a deeper vision of its social role. The Catholic community and its leaders must listen to the many voices speaking about the challenges we face, whether these voices come from Rome, from Washington, from the poor in our cities, in barrios or in refugee camps. We need to hear from Catholics and other Christians, from Jews, Muslims and Buddhists, and from those of no explicit faith at all as we seek to develop a more energetic response to challenges of justice and peace today. Indeed *Gaudium et Spes* called on the church to "step up this exchange" in order to formulate a more adequate Christian response to the needs of our world (No. 44). We very much need to pay attention to these words today. Doing so will deepen our hope and even our joy.

Second, the church needs to develop structures to enable clergy and laity to enter into more serious dialogue about how the Catholic community should respond to the challenges of public life today. Laypeople have deep experience of engagement in all facets of our public life, and the Catholic community must learn from this experience. Regrettably, centralization of church governance in recent years has significantly impeded such dialogue. This trend should be reversed. We need structures that support gen-

uine lay participation in our common efforts to discern the contemporary requirements of the Gospel both in civil society and in church life itself. Such questions of church structure have direct implications for the effectiveness of the church's social mission. As *Gaudium et Spes* put it, this mission "requires us first of all to create in the church itself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, and to acknowledge all legitimate diversity" (No. 92). Realizing such esteem, reverence and respect for diversity in action calls for structures that make possible genuine lay participation in shaping the life and mission of the church. Developing such structures will enable us to experience the joy and hope of the Gospel more fully as we pursue the church's social mission. Both the outer dialogue, with the larger society, and the inner dialogue, among members of the church, are essential to effective public engagement.

Finally, both of these forms of dialogue must be sustained by a radical trust that the world we seek to serve is truly God's world. God is the creator of all and is already present laboring in this world. Christ the redeemer and Christ's creator Spirit are already active within this world, beckoning it forward in grace and love. Despite the struggles and wounds of our social life, discerning engagement does not threaten our fidelity to the Gospel. Quite the opposite. Renewing the council's vision that we can really make a difference would once again bring us joy and hope as we work for justice and peace. **A**