LEO XIV

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 2 September 2026
[**Multimedia**]

Catechesis. The Documents of the Second Vatican Council. IV. Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et spes (GS 1–10) 1. *The Church: Listening to and Serving the World*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

With today's meeting, we will begin to reflect on the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, with which the Second Vatican Council intended to focus on a fundamental theme, namely the relationship between the Church and the contemporary world. Saint John XXIII as early as his inaugural address of 11 October 1962, had sought to take issue with the "prophets of doom" who, "though burning with zeal for religion [...] go about saying that our times, when compared with past centuries, are entirely worse; and go so far as to behave as if they had nothing to learn from history" (Address *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, 11 October 1962, 4.2). Hence the task entrusted to the Council Fathers: "In the present state of human events, in which humanity appears to be entering a new order of things, one must rather see the mysterious plans of Divine Providence, which are brought to fulfilment in due course through the work of men, and often beyond their expectations, and which, with wisdom, arrange everything, even adverse human affairs, for the good of the Church" (*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, 4.4).

Three years later, the promulgation of *Gaudium et Spes* recognized in this discernment an essential element of the nature of the Church, describing her pastoral character as constitutive; hence the definition of "pastoral Constitution". It is not a question of naïve optimism, but rather a renewed fidelity to the Mystery of Christ who, by becoming incarnate, chooses to share our life: He made Himself "like His brethren in every respect" (*Heb* 2:17; cf. 4:15) and took upon Himself the consequences of sin, dying "as a ransom for all" (*1 Tim* 2:6). This sharing in our humanity is the path that Christ calls the Church to follow; hence, the Conciliar Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* begins by declaring that the Church makes her own "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" (*GS* 1).

It is a sharing that calls on us to leave behind all passivity and indifference in the face of current events, history and people's lives, especially in the face of the rapid and profound changes we are experiencing today. We cannot remain as unengaged spectators; rather, we must listen with our hearts, allow ourselves to be challenged, and become involved. With Christ and sustained by the power of His Spirit, believers are called to take on the burdens of their brothers and sisters, especially those who are crushed by injustice, discrimination, and violence. Indeed, only in sharing and commitment is it possible to arrive at adequate responses, always supported by the certainty that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (*Rm* 8:18).

In this regard, proximity towards humanity opens the way to a deeper understanding of events and of Revelation itself; and, in the same vein, *Gaudium et Spes* recalls that "the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (*GS* 4). This Conciliar Constitution therefore recalled the Church to an ongoing commitment to conversion, to bear witness that she is not motivated by "earthly ambition", but seeks "a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit. And Christ entered this world to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not be served" (*GS*, 3).

This is not, in fact, merely a moral imperative. Pope Francis reminded us that for the Church, "the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one... We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through the m" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 198).

Christian solidarity commits us to engaging with reality and also to unmasking the contradictions that characterize personal and social life in the contemporary world: for example, scientific and technological progress, which constantly offers new possibilities, but only to some, and which human beings do not always succeed in "subjecting .. to [their] own welfare"; or a clearer understanding of the "laws of society", accompanied, however, by uncertainties "about the direction to give" them; or, again, a greater abundance of "wealth, resources and economic power", which, unfortunately, today as in the days of the Council, leaves "a huge proportion of the world's citizens ... still tormented by hunger and poverty" (*GS* 4); or a shared awareness that the future of the planet is at stake, coupled with an inability to renounce selfish consumption and the illusion that war is an effective means of building peace.

In a time marked by profound changes, giving rise to worrying imbalances, the Church is called to serve the human person, listening to and welcoming the deepest questions of their heart and the longings that dwell within them, pointing to Christ as "the key, the focal point and the goal of ... all human history" (*GS* 10). Therefore, in the Church, at every level and in every age, it is necessary to achieve the merciful *kenosis* of Christ, who "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant ... and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:6–8).

Dear brothers and sisters, may joy and hope – *gaudium et spes* – be the distinctive features of a Church who proclaims and bears witness to the Gospel, drawing close to the women and men of our time.

Special greetings:

I extend a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially those from England, Scotland, Malta, Canada and the United States of America. In a particular way, I welcome the delegation of the Interreligious Platform for Dialogue and Cooperation in the Arab World. In expressing my deep appreciation for the work of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, I offer prayers for the success of your deliberations, together with the assurance of my spiritual closeness in these days. Upon each of you and your families, I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you all!

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear brothers and sisters, in our continuing series of catecheses on the documents of the Second Vatican Council, today we begin our reflection on the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. This Document focuses on the Church's pastoral responsibility to engage with the contemporary world, sharing in its joys and sorrows, and calls for a commitment to conversion, bearing witness to Christ's work, and advocating for the poor and marginalized. The Church is also to be attentive to the signs of the times, interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, thereby addressing pressing issues such as the technological progress that benefits only some and the persistence of widespread poverty. In our own day, marked by profound change and much injustice, each of us, then is called to play our part in welcoming and listening to the deepest questions and longings of the human heart, making present to all the merciful love of Christ our Savior.

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