

## Session 5

# Our Mission: Bringing Heaven to Earth

**T**he title of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965) comes from its first words in Latin, *Gaudium et Spes*, in English *Joys and Hopes*. This document transformed the spirituality of Catholics, refocusing us from heaven to earth, from enduring suffering as Jesus did to alleviating it in our world.

“The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these, too, are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ” (#1).

*Gaudium et Spes* is the Church’s most authoritative, inclusive source of Catholic social teaching, approved by council and pope together. It calls the People of God to solidarity with the people of our world. It passed on the last day of the Council, 2309 to 75.

This document defines the common good, a concept Catholics have brought into our public, political life as a goal for just legislation:

“The common good is the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily. Every group must take into account the needs and legitimate aspirations of every other group, and even those of the human family as a whole” (#26).

Wisely in this document the bishops listen to the signs of our times. They call the People of God to put their faith into action and take responsibility for transforming poverty and suffering. Their words call us to reflect on our own time in history and identify the signs of the times that call us to action.



Reflect on each excerpt from the Church in the Modern World below. What touches your experience and challenges you to action?

### OUR AGE

“In no other age has humankind enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources, and economic wellbeing; and yet a huge proportion of the people of the world is plagued by hunger and extreme need while countless numbers are totally illiterate. At no time have human beings had such a keen sense of freedom, only to be faced by new forms of slavery in living and thinking. There is on one hand a lively feeling of unity and of compelling solidarity, of mutual dependence, and on the other a lamentable cleavage of bitterly opposing camps” (#4).

### EQUALITY

“The hungry nations cry out to their affluent neighbors; women claim parity with men in fact as well as of right, where they have not obtained it; laborers and agricultural workers insist not just on the necessities of life but also on the opportunity to develop by their labor their personal talents and to play their due role in organizing economic, social, political, and cultural life” (#9).

## CONSCIENCE

Deep within our consciences humans discover a law which we have not laid upon ourselves but which we must obey. This voice, ever calling us to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells us inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For we humans have in our hearts a law inscribed by God. Our dignity lies in observing this law, and by it we will be judged. Conscience is a human's most sacred core and sanctuary. There we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths. By conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in love of God and of one's neighbor (#16).

## HUMAN RIGHTS

"There must be available to all human persons everything necessary for leading a truly human life, such as food, clothing, shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy, and to rightful freedom in matters religious" (#26).

## DUTIES TO OUR NEIGHBORS

"Today there is an inescapable duty to make ourselves the neighbor of every individual without exception, and to take positive steps to help a neighbor whom we encounter, whether that neighbor be an elderly person abandoned by everyone, a foreign worker who suffers the injustice of being despised, a refugee, an illegitimate child wrongly suffering for a sin of which the child is innocent, or a starving human being who awakens our conscience by calling to mind the words of Christ: 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me'" (Matthew 25.40; #27).

## NO TO DISCRIMINATION

"With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent. For in truth it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are not yet being universally honored. Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right and freedom to choose a husband, to embrace a state of life, or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men" (#29).

## WE LIVE IN HISTORY

"The Church, at once a visible organization and a spiritual community, travels the same journey as all of humanity and shares the same earthly lot with the world: it is to be a leaven and as it were the soul of human society in its renewal by Christ and transformation into the family of God" (#40).

## LAITY

"The council exhorts Christians, as citizens of both cities, to perform their duties faithfully in the spirit of the Gospel. It is a mistake to think that because we have here no lasting city, but seek the city which is to come, we are entitled to evade our earthly responsibilities; this is to forget that because of our faith we are all the more bound to fulfill these responsibilities according to each one's vocation....The laity are called to participate actively in the entire life of the Church; not only are they to animate the world with the spirit of Christianity, they are to be witnesses to Christ in all circumstances and at the very heart of the human community" (#43).

In concluding, *Gaudium et Spes* beautifully summarizes its message: "Hold to the Gospel, join forces with all who love and practice justice" (#92).

## Reflect

- With whom do you join forces to love and practice justice?
- Whose joys have you shared in your life? Whose hopes? Whose griefs and anxieties? How have these bonds changed you?

