

Vatican II

Summary and Reflection of Vatican II Documents

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Vatican II *Sacrosanctum Concilium* The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

The Second Vatican Council had four aims: to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call all mankind into the Church's fold.

Liturgy, the primary subject of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, is the work of the people in praising God, and it is the liturgy through which, especially in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, the work of our redemption is accomplished. The liturgy is seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. It involves the presentation of man's sanctification under the guise of signs perceptible by the senses and its accomplishment in ways appropriate to each of these signs. In its full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members.

As this document stated so beautifully, Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the Sacrifice of the Mass not only in the person of his minister, but especially in the eucharistic species. By his power he is present in the sacraments so that when anybody baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. Lastly, he is present when the Church prays and sings, for he has promised "where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18.20).

This council document showed a change in the understanding of the liturgy, first in regards to the faithful and their call to active participation in liturgical celebrations; second, in the liturgical life of the parish and its relationship to the bishop; and third, in the efforts made to encourage a sense of community within each parish, above all in the common celebration of the Sunday Mass.

According to this document, the changes mentioned above were to be promoted in several ways. There was to be a liturgical commission set up by the competent territorial ecclesiastical authority. This commission was to be assisted by experts in liturgical science, sacred music, art, and pastoral practice. The task of this commission was to regulate pastoral liturgical action throughout the territory and to promote studies and necessary experiments whenever a question of adaptations was proposed to the Holy See.

The primary aim or consideration regarding the restoration of the liturgy concerned the rite of the Mass. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* called for revisions affecting the intrinsic nature and purpose of several of the parts of the Mass and the connection between them, so that these connections would be more clearly manifested and so that devout and active participation by the faithful could be more easily achieved.

As stated in this document, the regulation of the sacred liturgy depends solely on the authority of the Church, that is, on the Apostolic See, and, as laws may determine, on the bishop. The regulation of the liturgy within certain defined limits also belongs to various kinds of

bishops' conferences which are legitimately established in given territories.

A number of norms for reform were provided in this document. The general norms dealt with the matter of authority and responsibility for the liturgical reforms, and these were outlined in the previous paragraph.

- A second set of norms dealt with the hierarchic and communal nature of the liturgy, and these stated firmly that liturgical services are not private functions; they pertain to the whole Body of the Church. These norms emphasized that rites which are meant to be celebrated in common, with the faithful present and actively participating, should be celebrated in that way rather than by an individual and quasi-privately. To promote active participation, the people were encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons, hymns, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes.

- Thirdly, there were norms based on the educative and pastoral nature of the liturgy. As this document explained, much instruction can be gained by the faithful, not only through that which is read, but also through the prayers, hymns, and actions -- the visible signs which the sacred liturgy uses to signify invisible divine things.

- Fourthly, there were norms for adapting the liturgy to the temperament and traditions of the people. In this document the competent ecclesiastical authority was granted certain leeway regarding adaptations and variations for different groups, regions, and peoples, especially in mission countries. Provided that the substantial unity of the Roman rite was preserved, adaptations became permissible in regards to the administration of the sacraments, sacramentals, processions, liturgical language, sacred music, and the arts. Adaptations considered useful or necessary were to be submitted to the Holy See, by whose consent they could then be introduced.

On the local level, which is the level of the diocese, a commission on the sacred liturgy under the direction of the bishop was to be established. Its purpose was to promote the liturgical apostolate. Permission was granted for dioceses to form commissions in common. In addition to the commission on sacred liturgy, every diocese, as far as possible, was directed to have commissions for sacred music and sacred art, and these could be combined into one single commission.

The liturgical reforms called for by Vatican II took into account the treasures of the Bible, which were to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare could be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word. In this way a more representative part of the sacred scriptures could be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years. This document called for the homily to expound on both the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life found in the sacred text.

- The liturgical reforms also called for the prayer of the faithful to be restored after the gospel and homily, especially on Sundays and holidays of obligation. Intercessions were to include prayers for holy Church, civil authorities, for those oppressed by various needs, for all mankind, and for the salvation of the entire world.

- The vernacular was admitted in Masses, with the stipulation that care should be taken to ensure that the faithful may also be able to say or sing together in Latin those parts of the Ordinary of the Mass which pertain to them. Communion under both kinds was granted, not only to clerics and religious, but also to the laity, at the discretion of bishops.

Liturgical reforms also dealt with the sacraments, sacramentals, the divine office, the

liturgical year, sacred music, and sacred art and furnishings. Using the vernacular in the administration of the sacraments and sacramentals was deemed helpful, and so it was permitted wider use, especially in readings, directives, and in some prayers and chants. This document stipulated that all translations from the Latin must be approved by the competent territorial ecclesiastical authority.

- The catechumenate for adults, comprising several distinct steps, was restored and brought into use at the discretion of the local ordinary. Directives for the inclusion of various rites, now part of the RCIA process, were provided in this document. A rite for converts who have already been validly baptized and which clearly recognizes that such individuals are already members of the Body of Christ was recommended. Today this rite is often celebrated in the form a combined rite in which those seeking full initiation through Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist are first received into the Church, followed by those who, already validly baptized, are brought into full communion through Confirmation and Eucharist only.

- The sacraments of Confirmation, Penance, Extreme Unction, Ordination, and Marriage received recommendation for reform. Revisions to the rite of Confirmation called for a clear connection between this sacrament and the whole of the Christian initiation, especially Baptism. Revisions to the rite and formulae of Penance called for a clearer expression of the nature and effect of the sacrament. Extreme Unction, now called the Anointing of the Sick, admitted to its benefits and blessings those who are ill, even if only at the first stages of being in danger of death. Both the ceremonies and texts of the Ordination rites were sited for revision, allowing for increased use of the vernacular, and allowing for the laying on of hands in the consecration of a bishop to be carried out by all the bishops present. Revisions to the Marriage rite called for the language used in the rite to more clearly signify the grace of the sacrament, placing greater emphasis on the spouses' duties.

- *Sancrosanctum Concilium* revitalized the divine office, providing norms for its practice by clerics and religious, stating that all who take part in the divine office are not only performing a duty for the Church, but are also sharing in what is the greatest honor for Christ's Bride. The laity, too, were encouraged to recite the divine office, either with the priests, or among themselves, or even individually.

- *Sancrosanctum Concilium* called for reforms in the liturgical year so that the traditional customs and discipline of the sacred seasons would be either preserved or restored in ways suitable to modern times. Great emphasis was placed on the obligatory privilege of coming together once a week on the Lord's Day for participation in the Eucharistic Liturgy. A reform for the Lenten season included the recalling of baptism and the preparation for it, as well as penance, and these were to be given greater emphasis in the liturgy and in liturgical catechesis.

Emphasizing the importance of sacred music in liturgical worship and reemphasizing the role of the traditional pipe organ, a broader use of other instruments was permitted. Encouragement was offered to those whose vocation it is to cultivate sacred music, as well as to composers of sacred music, with the aim of increasing the Church's store of musical treasures.

In regards to sacred art, *Sancrosanctum Concilium* stated that the Church and her bishops, not having adopted any particular style of art as her own, but having admitted and preserved art from all periods, must make an effort to encourage a wide range of art, provided that such works express the reverence and honor due to the sacred buildings and rites. Likewise, this document urged that sacred furnishings, while admitting changes in material, style, or ornamentation prompted by the progress of technical arts with the passing of time, must worthily and beautifully serve the dignity of worship.

Vatican II *Gravissimum Educationis* Declaration On Christian Education

The Second Vatican Council gave careful consideration to the importance of education in people's lives and its ever-growing influence on the social progress of the age. The Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis*, stated that all people of whatever race, condition, or age, in virtue of their dignity as human persons, have an inalienable right to education. This education, the document explained, should be suitable to the particular destiny of the individuals, adapted to their ability, sex and national cultural traditions, and should be conducive to fraternal relations with other nations in order to promote true unity and peace in the world.

All Christians, the document stated, have a right to a Christian education which develops the maturity of the human person in view of his or her final end and the good of that society to which he or she belongs. Christian education should be particularly directed towards ensuring that those who have been baptized, as they are gradually introduced to a knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become daily more appreciative of the gift of faith which they have received. Through a Christian education, they should learn to adore God the Father in spirit and in truth, especially through participation in the liturgy. They should be trained to live their own lives, justified and sanctified through the truth. Thus they should grow into adulthood as members of the Body of Christ who are willing to make their contribution to the growth of the Mystical Body and who are able to contribute to the good of the society as a whole.

Gravissimum Educationis placed great emphasis on the responsibility of parents, as it is they who have given life to their children, and because of this, have the gravest obligation of educating their family. This declaration stated that the role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute. Calling for parents to create a family atmosphere inspired by love and devotion to God and their fellowman, a pattern for providing integrated, personal, and social education for their children was established. *Gravissimum Educationis* named the family as the principal school of the social virtues which are necessary to every society. It proposed the family as the most appropriate context for children to experience a well-balanced human society. Finally, the document explained that it is through the family that children are gradually initiated into association with their fellowman in civil life and as members of the people of God.

According to *Gravissimum Educationis*, while the task of imparting education belongs primarily to the family, it also requires the help of society as a whole. Therefore, as outlined in this document, it is the duty of the state to ensure that all its citizens have access to an adequate education and are prepared for the proper exercise of their civic rights and duties. Accordingly, the state should safeguard the rights of children to an adequate education in schools; it should be vigilant about the ability of the teachers and the standard of teaching; it should recognize the rights of parents and their wishes regarding the education of their children.

The Catholic school was named for playing an essential role in the life of the Church, for in such schools an atmosphere animated by a spirit of liberty and charity based on the Gospel can both stimulate and invigorate education. Such an atmosphere enables young people, while developing their own personality, to grow at the same time in that new life which has been given to them in

baptism, thus orienting students to live in a social context illumined by faith. The Catholic schools were directed to take into consideration the contemporary developments in technology and pedagogical practice, especially those that can help prepare students to be effective participators in their society and in the world.

The sacred Synod declared that the services of Catholic school teachers constitute an active apostolate, one which is admirably suited to our times and is very necessary. Teachers in Catholic schools should be prepared for their work with special care, the document said, and they should have appropriate qualifications and adequate learning, both religious and secular. They should be trained in accordance with correct pedagogical methodology. Catholic school teachers were called in this document to be charitable both towards each other and towards their pupils, to be inspired by an apostolic spirit, and to be willing to bear testimony by their lives and their teaching to the one Teacher, who is Christ.

Catholic parents, the document stated, have a particular duty to send their children to Catholic schools whenever this is possible, as well as to give Catholic schools all the support in their power, cooperating with them in their work for the good of their children.

Within the Church structure itself, the education of her own children plays an essential role and was highly supported by *Gravissimum Educationis*. Pastors were directed to provide much needed catechesis to all, especially those young people being educated in non-Catholic schools. The Church likewise was called to devote considerable care to higher-level education, especially in universities and faculties. In this document, the sacred synod recommended the establishment of Catholic universities and faculties in strategic locations throughout the world, calling for them to be noteworthy not so much for their numbers as for their high standards. Special considerations and allowances for students of great promise but of modest resources were prescribed, especially for those from newly developed countries.

Gravissimum Educationis called for a greater measure of coordination in the sphere of academic institutes. University faculties were encouraged to assist each other insofar as their particular provinces permitted, and universities were encouraged to undertake joint enterprises, such as organizing international congresses and allotting scientific research among themselves. Increased communication between institutions and interchange of professors on a temporary basis were among the collaborative measures suggested by the document.

The sacred Synod concluded by affirming its deep gratitude to those priests, religious, nuns, and laity who in a spirit of evangelical dedication have devoted themselves to the all-important work of education and schools of all kinds and grades.

Vatican II *Dei Verbum* Dogmatic Constitution On Divine Revelation

Divine Revelation can be defined as God's activity in making himself and his purposes known to mankind through Christ, the prophets, and apostles. The content of this activity of "making himself and his purposes known" is communicated and handed on through Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. The task of authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church -- the Magisterium.

According to this document, Revelation can be found in several contexts.

- God, who creates and conserves all things by his Word provided men with constant evidence of himself in created realities.
- Jesus Christ, sent as a man among men, spoke the words of God and accomplished the saving work which the Father gave him to do.
- Christ the Lord, in whom the entire Revelation of the most high God is summed up, commanded the apostles to preach the Gospel. In preaching the Gospel they communicated the gifts of God to all men.
- The apostles and other men associated with them, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to writing.
- The full deposit of what was revealed is guarded and expounded faithfully through the Church's Magisterium.

Dei Verbum clearly stated that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures. Furthermore, God acted through chosen individuals and employed them in the task of revelation by making full use of their powers and faculties. In this way, the sacred authors used their own skills and abilities to consign to writing that which God wished to give to the world.

This document prescribed careful exegesis of the sacred writings, calling for the interpreters to carefully search out not only the meaning which the sacred writer had in mind, but also to ascertain the meaning which God manifested through the medium of the author's words. To avoid fundamentalism, *Dei Verbum* directed that attention must be paid to the various literary forms used in the Scriptures so that the exegete could accurately determine the meaning of the author, a meaning most certainly affected, at least in part, by the circumstances of his time and culture. Attention must also be given, the document explained, to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech, and narrative which prevailed at the age of the sacred writer and to the conventions which the people of his time followed in their dealings with one another. Additionally, attention to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, as well as to Tradition of the entire Church and the analogy of faith, must be considered.

Tradition encompasses that which the apostles transmitted to their successors both orally and in writing; it takes into account all that was handed on by the apostles which serves to make the People of God live their lives in holiness and increase their faith. In this way, the council document explained, the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits

to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes.

Dei Verbum articulated the important relationship that exists between scripture and tradition. “Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound, and spread it abroad by their preaching. Thus it comes about that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence. Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church.”

Scripture scholarship was given a place of extreme importance by this council document. It stated: “The study of the sacred page should be the very soul of sacred theology. The ministry of the Word, too -- pastoral preaching, catechetics, and all forms of Christian instruction, among which the liturgical homily should hold pride of place -- is healthily nourished and thrives in holiness through the Word of Scripture.”

Dei Verbum provided several directives regarding scripture in the life of the Church:

- The Church must see to it that suitable and correct translations are made into various languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books.
- Under the watchful eye of the Magisterium, the Church should set about examining and explaining the sacred texts in such a way that as many as possible of those who are ministers of the divine Word may be able to distribute fruitfully the nourishment of the Scriptures to the People of God.
- All clerics, particularly priests of Christ and others who, as deacons or catechists, are officially engaged in the ministry of the Word, should immerse themselves in the Scriptures by constant sacred reading and diligent study.
- Bishops in particular must instruct the faithful in the correct use of the divine books, especially of the New Testament, and in particular of the Gospels. The need for translations equipped with necessary and really adequate explanations was noted in this directive.
- Editions of sacred Scripture, provided with suitable notes, should be prepared for the use of even non-Christians, and adapted to their circumstances.

Vatican II *Inter Mirifica* Decree On The Means Of Social Communication

Defined primarily in the broad terms of the “means” of social communication, this decree set out to offer direction regarding the methods and tools of modern media, which, even since the publication of this decree, has expanded exponentially in ways the council fathers had not yet conceived. For these reasons the broad discussion of “means” rather than of “instruments” proved a brilliant and, no doubt, an inspired approach.

At the time of this decree only the main means of social communication characteristic of that particular period were mentioned: “the press, the cinema, radio, television, and others of a like nature.” Who knew then that the press would one day become a twenty-four-hour-a-day multi-billion dollar business? Who knew then that the movie industry would proliferate into so much more than movie houses of that day could offer? Who could, in that earlier day, foresee the incredible reach of the technological age of computers and digital media. Could the internet, as we know it today, have been more than a vague possibility, only an unimaginable concept, except to a mere handful of early *techies*?

Inter Mirifica stated that “it is the Church’s birthright to use and own any of these media which are necessary or useful for the formation of Christians and for pastoral activity.” Later the document proposed that it would be a great misfortune and a terrible oversight -- (The document called it *shameful*.) -- for pastors of souls to ignore the modern means of media for announcing the good news of salvation. For that reason, although this comes up later in the document, there was a sizeable discussion regarding the need for establishing training programs, either within already existing educational institutions or through the establishment of additional facilities. There is no doubt that Catholics -- clergy and laity alike -- were urged both to master the modern means of social communication themselves and to provide avenues for “instruction and practical experience tailored not merely to the character of each medium but to the needs of each group.” *Inter Mirifica* further instructed that “schools, institutes, or faculties must be provided in sufficient number, where journalists, writers for films, radio and television, and anyone else concerned, may receive a complete formation, imbued with the Christian spirit and especially with the Church’s social teaching. Actors should also be instructed and helped so that their gifts too can benefit society. Lastly, literary critics and critics of film, radio, television and the rest should be carefully prepared so that they will be fully competent in their respective spheres and will be trained and encouraged to give due consideration to morality in their critiques.”

Responsibilities fall to those who receive the means of social communication. Noted in this decree was the need for selectivity by the viewer or user. A properly motivated selectivity, this document explained, would gravitate toward those means that excel in virtue, culture, and art and avoid whatever might be a cause or occasion of spiritual harm to oneself or others; “it would avoid whatever might hinder the communication of the good and facilitate the communication of what is evil.” Additionally, recipients of the means of social communication were directed to obey the moral law and “to keep themselves informed about assessments arrived at by the authorities with competence in this sphere and to conform to them as a right conscience would dictate.” Moderation and discipline in the use of the means of social communication were called for, especially in the young.

Inter Mirifica saw the civil authorities as particularly responsible for the proper use and regulation of the means of social communication. “It is for the civil authority, in its own domain, to defend and safeguard -- especially in relation to the press -- a true and just freedom of information, for the progress of modern society demands it.” The document went on to say that “the civil authority should foster religious, cultural, and artistic values. It should guarantee to those who use the media the free exercise of their lawful rights. It is, further, the duty of the civil authorities to give assistance to those projects which, although very useful, especially for the young, could not succeed otherwise.” In conclusion, *Inter Mirifica* expressed its concern that the civil authorities ensure that public morality and social progress are not gravely endangered through the misuse of the media. Special mention was made of the danger of certain types of publications in the hands of adolescents and the responsibility of civil authorities to protect the young from such exposure.

Vatican II *Apostolicam Actuositatem* Decree On The Apostolate Of Lay People

“In the Church there is diversity of ministry but unity of mission. To the apostles and their successors Christ has entrusted the office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing in his name and by his power.” According to this document, however, the laity also share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ and have their own assignment in the mission of the whole People of God. By this decree, the laity were called to lead a life in the midst of the world and of secular affairs while at that same time being called by God to make of their apostolate, through the vigor of their Christian spirit, a leaven in the world. This decree went on to say that in the concrete, the lay apostolate is exercised when the faithful work at the evangelization and sanctification of others, as well as when they endeavor to have the Gospel spirit permeate and improve the temporal order, going about it in a way that bears clear witness to Christ and helps forward the salvation of men.

Apostolicam Actuositatem offered a beautiful description of the lay apostolate. “Christ, sent by the Father, is the source of the Church’s whole apostolate. Clearly then, the fruitfulness of the apostolate of lay people depends on their living union with Christ.... This life of intimate union with Christ in the Church is maintained by the spiritual helps common to all the faithful, chiefly by active participation in the liturgy. Laymen should make such a use of these helps that, while meeting their human obligations in the ordinary conditions of life, they do not separate their union with Christ from their ordinary life; but through the very performance of their tasks, which are God’s will for them, actually promote the growth of their union with him.” This is the path along which lay persons were called by *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, a path in which family cares are not foreign to their spirituality, nor any other temporal interest.

Apostolicam Actuositatem laid out the objectives of the lay apostolate in terms of the temporal order. “The mission of the Church, consequently, is not only to bring men the message and grace of Christ but also to permeate and improve the whole range of the temporal. The laity, carrying out this mission of the Church, exercise their apostolate therefore in the world as well as in the Church, in the temporal order as well as in the spiritual.”

Apostolicam Actuositatem set out to show that a complimentary state exists between the lay apostolate and the pastoral ministry, and lay persons were exhorted by this decree to utilize the countless opportunities for exercising the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification that the very witness of a Christian life well lived makes possible. But according to this decree, the witness of Christian living is not the only element of lay apostolate, although it has always been and still is a very important one. *Apostolicam Actuositatem* established another very important element for lay persons when it stated that “the true apostle is on the lookout for occasions of announcing Christ by word, either to unbelievers to draw them towards the faith, or to the faithful to instruct them, strengthen them, incite them to a more fervent life.” The Council earnestly exhorted the laity “to take a more active part, each according to his talents and knowledge and in fidelity to the mind of the Church, in the explanation and defense of Christian principles and in the correct application of them to the problems of our times.”

The temporal order was described as including “all that goes to make up God’s design for the world: personal and family values, culture, economic interests, the trades and professions,

institutions of the political community, international relations, and the developments that occur in each of these.

Called by this decree, it is the work of lay persons to assist pastors in passing on and clarifying the proper scale of values on the temporal order and direct it towards God through Christ. An additional exhortation to lay persons was established: “Laymen ought to take on themselves as their distinctive task this renewal of the temporal order. Guided by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church, prompted by Christian love, they should act in this domain in a direct way and in their own specific manner. As citizens among citizens they must bring to their cooperation with others their own special competence, and act on their own responsibility; everywhere and always they have to seek the justice of the kingdom of God. The temporal order is to be renewed in such a way that, while its own principles are fully respected, it is harmonized with the principles of the Christian life and adapted to the various conditions of times, places, and peoples. Among the tasks of this apostolate Christian social action is preeminent. The Council desires to see it extended today to every sector of life, not forgetting the cultural sphere.”

Apostolicam Actuositatem outlined only the chief fields open to the lay apostolate: Church communities, the family, the young, the social environment, national, and international spheres. An added dimension was brought to bear upon the increasing activity of women in the whole life of society, and the decree called for the same opportunity for participation of women in various sectors of the Church’s apostolate.

Of particular mention in *Apostolicam Actuositatem* was the apostolate of “like towards like,” which called Christian laity to develop that blend of conduct and faith which makes them the light of the world and gradually brings to bear upon the society in which they live the principles of the Gospel. The document stated: “There the witness of their life is completed by the witness of their word. It is amid the surroundings of their work that they are best qualified to be of help to their brothers, in the surroundings of their profession, of their study, residence, leisure, or local group.”

Apostolicam Actuositatem also went on to describe the different forms of the lay apostolate, providing guidance to those who choose the individual apostolate or the group apostolate, the latter being available in various forms of communities or associations within the Church.

There was considerable discussion of what constitutes authentic “Catholic Action.” The following characteristics were offered:

- The immediate end of organizations of this class is the apostolic end of the Church.
- The laity, cooperating in their own particular way with the hierarchy, contribute their experience and assume responsibility in the direction of these organizations.
- The laity act in unison after the manner of an organic body, to display more strikingly the community aspect of the Church and to render the apostolate more productive.
- The laity, whether coming of their own accord or in response to an invitation to action and direct cooperation with the hierarchical apostolate, act under the superior direction of the hierarchy, which can authorize this cooperation, besides, with an explicit mandate.

The decree stated in regard to the above characteristics that “organizations which, in the judgment of the hierarchy, combine all these elements should be regarded as Catholic Action, even if they have forms and names that vary according to the requirements of localities and peoples.

Direction was offered regarding the relationship of the Lay Apostolate to the hierarchy. First, the document stated that “the lay apostolate, individual or collective, must be set in its true place within the apostolate of the whole Church.” Second, “no enterprise must lay claim to the name “Catholic” if it has not the approval of legitimate ecclesiastical authority.” Third, ecclesiastical authority may pick from among various lay apostolates one or a few which it will foster in a particular way. “Finally, the hierarchy entrusts the laity with certain charges more closely connected with the duties of pastors: in the teaching of Christian doctrine, for example, in certain liturgical actions, in the care of souls. In virtue of this mission the laity are fully subject to superior ecclesiastical control in regard to the exercise of these charges.”

Additional direction was offered regarding the relationship of the Lay Apostolate to the clergy and religious. Priests who have the ability and appropriate training for helping special forms of the lay apostolate should be chosen and assigned to this task. Among the responsibilities of these clergy, the document noted these:

- They will promote good relations between laity and hierarchy.
- They will devote their energies to fostering the spiritual life and the apostolic sense of the Catholic associations confided to them.
- They will advise and encourage those involved in the apostolate.
- They will maintain constant dialog with the laity, with the intention of searching out methods capable of making apostolic action more fruitful.
- They will develop the spirit of unity within the association, and between it and others.

“Lastly”, the decree stated, “religious Brothers and Sisters will hold lay apostolic works in high regard; and will gladly help in promoting them in accordance with the spirit and rules of their institute; they will strive to support, assist, and complete the ministrations of the priest.”

Attention was given to the matter of education and formation in regards to the lay apostolate. Besides spiritual formation, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* exhorted a solid grounding in doctrine: in theology, ethics, and philosophy, proportioned to the age, condition, and abilities of each one. But theoretical teaching is not enough, the document explained. It noted the importance of practical and technical training, as well. Further, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* explained, there is much need for helping the laity to “learn gradually and prudently to see all things in the light of faith, to judge and act always in its light, to improve and perfect oneself by working with others, and in this manner to enter actively into the service of the Church.”

Vatican II *Dignitatis Humanae* Declaration On Religious Liberty

A general principle of religious freedom was put forth by this document: The human person “has a right to religious freedom. Freedom of this kind means that all men should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups, and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his convictions nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in associations with other. The Council further declares that the right to religious freedom is based on the very dignity of the human person as known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself.”

The freedom of human persons originates from the principle of human dignity, a dignity born of their being endowed with reason and free will and therefore bearing personal responsibility to seek the truth, especially religious truth. “Therefore,” *Dignitatis Humanae* stated, “the right to religious freedom has its foundation not in the subjective attitude of the individual but in his very nature.” The declaration went on to explain that the right to immunity from coercion exists even for those who do not live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it.

The civil authorities play an important role in religious freedom since the purpose of such authority is the care of the common good in the temporal order which must recognize and look with favor on the religious life of the citizens. At the same time, *Dignitatis Humanae* went on to explain, if the civil authority presumes to control or restrict religious activity it must be said to have exceeded the limits of its power.

Those who have the right to religious freedom include people who act in community, such as religious communities. These have the right not to be hindered by legislation or administrative action on the part of the civil authority in the selection, training, appointment, and transfer of their own ministers, in communicating with religious authorities and communities in other parts of the world, in erecting buildings for religious purposes, and in the acquisition and use of the property they need. Families were also noted in this declaration as being among those who have the right to religious freedom and should be free from coercion in religious matters. *Dignitatis Humanae* stated: “Every family, in that it is a society with its own basic rights, has the right freely to organize its own religious life in the home under the control of the parents. These have the right to decide in accordance with their own religious beliefs the form of religious upbringing which is to be given to their children. The civil authority must therefore recognize the right of parents to choose with genuine freedom schools or other means of education.”

“The protection and promotion of the inviolable rights of man is an essential duty of every civil authority,” the declaration proclaimed, stating further that “the civil authority must see to it that the equality of the citizens before the law, which is itself an element of the common good of society, is never violated either openly or covertly for religious reasons and that there is no discrimination among citizens.” *Dignitatis Humanae*, while outlining the responsibilities of civil authority for the protection of citizens from religious coercion of any kind, also stated that it is wrong for public authority to compel its citizens by force or fear or any other means to profess or repudiate any religion or to prevent anyone from joining or leaving a religious body.

There was discussion in this declaration regarding the connection between revelation and reason as a means of establishing the right of persons to religious freedom. *Dignitatis Humanae* put it this way: “Although revelation does not affirm in so many words the right to immunity from external coercion in religious matters, it nevertheless shows forth the dignity of the human person in all its fullness. It shows us Christ’s respect for the freedom with which man is to fulfill his duty of believing the word of God, and it teaches us the spirit which disciples of such a Master must acknowledge and follow in all things.” Furthermore, the declaration explained, “one of the key truths in Catholic teaching, a truth that is contained in the word of God and constantly preached by the Fathers is that man’s response to God by faith ought to be free, and that therefore nobody is to be forced to embrace the faith against his will.”

Vatican II *Nostra Aetate* Declaration On The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions

A very important question arises at the beginning of this declaration: Do all religions have a single origin? After reading through this document, one would answer yes! *Nostra Aetate* stated: “All men form but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth (cf. Acts 17:26), and also because all share a common destiny, namely God.”

The declaration went on to explain that people look to their different religions for answers to the unsolved riddles of human existence. Anthropologists, having studied the various cultures throughout the world, have discovered that among different peoples there exists some form of religious belief system, “a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life.”

The Catholic Church remains ever respectful of other religions and of the people who hold to them, and as *Nostra Aetate* explained “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions.” Furthermore, “she has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.” The declaration went on to say that the Church “proclaims and is duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn. 1:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Cor. 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life.”

The Catholic Church has its roots in Judaism and acknowledges that “in God’s plan of salvation the beginning of her faith and election is to be found in the patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets. She professes that all Christ’s faithful, who as men of faith are sons of Abraham (cf. Gal. 3-7), are included in the same patriarch’s call and that the salvation of the Church is mystically prefigured in the exodus of God’s chosen people from the land of bondage.” Additionally, the Church is very conscious of have received the revelation of the Old Testament through the covenant God established with the Israelite people, and that the Gentiles have been grafted to the vine which nourishes with eternal life. Furthermore, *Nostra Aetate* stated: “The Church believes that Christ who is our peace has through his cross reconciled Jews and Gentiles and made them one in himself (cf. Eph. 2:14-16).

Of significance is the Church’s insistence for respect for all people and her stern warning against persecution against whomsoever it may be directed. “Remembering, then, her common heritage with the Jews and moved not by any political consideration, but solely by the religious motivation of Christian charity, she deplores all hatreds, persecutions, displays of antisemitism leveled at anytime or from any source against the Jews.” Since Hinduism and Buddhism both seek a relationship with God, each in their own unique way, *Nostra Aetate* also directs the faithful to respect that which is good in these religions. “So, too, the declaration went on to explain, “other religions which are found throughout the world attempt in their own ways to calm the hearts of men by outlining a program of life covering doctrine, moral precepts, and sacred rites.” As Catholics, then, these also claim our respect.

Vatican II *Lumen Gentium* Dogmatic Constitution On The Church

Lumen Gentium began with an explanation of Church as “mystery.” The Church is the visible body of the great mystery of the incarnation of Christ -- the Son, sent by the Father to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven on earth, individual members gathered together as one, as the mystical body of Christ, the visible representation of the great invisible goodness of God. “The mystery of the holy Church is already brought to light in the way it was founded,” this constitution explained. “For the Lord Jesus inaugurated his Church by preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of the kingdom of God, promised over the ages in the scriptures.”

Lumen Gentium spoke of the Holy Spirit’s role in the Church in this way: The work which the Father gave the Son to do on earth was accomplished, and the Holy Spirit was sent that he might continually sanctify the Church. Those who believe have access to the Father through Christ in this one Spirit. “The Spirit is for the Church and for each and every believer, the principle of their union and unity in the teaching of the apostles and fellowship in the breaking of bread and prayer.”

Lumen Gentium presented a picture of how the Church is related to the Kingdom of God. Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, he appeared to his disciples and poured out on them the Spirit promised by the Father. “Henceforward the Church, endowed with the gifts of her founder and faithfully observing his precepts of charity, humility and self-denial, receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is, one earth, the seed and the beginning of that kingdom. While she slowly grows to maturity, the Church longs for the completed kingdom and, with all her strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with her king.”

Lumen Gentium outlined how Christ is at the center of the understanding of the Church. “For by communicating his Spirit, Christ mystically constitutes as his body those brothers of his who are called together from every nation.” As members of his mystical body, believers live in Christ, called through Baptism into the one Spirit. “Really sharing in the body of the Lord in the breaking of the eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with him and with one another.” Though many members make up the body, the document explained, the body is formed into one body of the faithful of Christ. “Also, in the building up of Christ’s body there is engaged a diversity of members and functions.”

The Church recognizes Christ as the head of the body, and as the “image of the invisible God” in whom all things came into being. “He is before all creatures and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body which is the Church All the members must be formed in his likeness, until Christ be formed in them” (cf. Gal. 4:19).

Christ loves the Church as his bride, *Lumen Gentium* explained, and the Church recognizes her relationship with Christ as being modeled after a man loving his wife as his own body. Likewise, “the one mediator, Christ, established and ever sustains here on earth his holy Church, the community of faith, hope, and charity, as a visible organization through which he communicates truth and grace to all men.”

As “*The People of God*” is the way *Lumen Gentium* described the Church, and the document used vivid language in this description. God has “willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness.” God established a covenant with the Israelites, and Christ instituted a new covenant, a covenant sealed with his own blood. He “called a race made up of Jews and Gentiles which would be one, not according to the flesh, but in the Spirit, and this race would be the new *People of God*.”

Lumen Gentium brought forth the term “common priesthood of the faithful,” distinguishing this priesthood from the ministerial priesthood. All the faithful belong to the common priesthood, whereas only those consecrated by Holy Orders belong to the ministerial priesthood. The common priesthood was also referred to as “the royal priesthood,” a term used when the faithful participate in the offering of the Eucharist. “They exercise that priesthood, too,” the document explained, “by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, abnegation, and active charity.”

Within the common priesthood of all the faithful *Lumen Gentium* spelled out the reality of the universality of the Church and the acceptance of cultural diversity and pluralism when it said, “the Church or People of God which establishes this kingdom does not take away anything from the temporal welfare of any people. Rather she fosters and takes to herself, in so far as they are good, the abilities, the resources and customs of peoples. In so taking them to herself she purifies, strengthens, and elevates them.” Within the universal context of the Church and “in virtue of this catholicity each part contributes its own gifts to other parts and to the whole Church, so that the whole and each of the parts are strengthened by the common sharing of all things and by the common effort to attain to fullness in unity.”

The question of the possibility of salvation outside the Church was discussed in this document. “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience -- those too may achieve eternal salvation.” Earlier in the document another statement relating to this topic of the possibility of salvation outside the Church was offered: “All men are called to this catholic unity which prefigures and promotes universal peace. And in different ways to it belong, or are related: the Catholic faithful, others who believe in Christ, and finally all mankind, called by God’s grace to salvation.”

A sizeable section of this document dealt with the nature of the hierarchical Church, a structure dating back to Jesus himself who drew to himself the twelve apostles from whom one was called forward and named as leader. Called also by Jesus were those who formed themselves around the twelve -- disciples -- followers. Within these ranks there is evidence even in New Testament Scriptures of levels of disciples, those serving more intimately and those following at greater distance. *Lumen Gentium* explained how this hierarchical nature of the Church has been transmitted through the apostles, who were endowed by Christ with a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit coming upon them, and, by the imposition of hands, pass on to their auxiliaries the gift of the Spirit, which is transmitted down to our day through episcopal consecration -- the high priesthood. Furthermore, the document made it abundantly clear that “by the imposition of hands and through the words of the consecration, the grace of the Holy Spirit is given, and a sacred character is impressed in such wise that bishops, in a resplendent and visible manner, take the place of Christ himself, teacher, shepherd and priest, and act as his representatives.

In speaking of the relationship of the bishops to the Pope this document stated that “the order of bishops is the successor to the college of the apostles in their role as teachers and pastors, and in it the apostolic college is perpetuated. Together with their head, the Supreme Pontiff, and never apart from him, they have supreme and full authority over the universal Church; but this power cannot be exercised without the agreement of the Roman Pontiff. Later the document added further explanation of the relationship of the bishops to the Pope. “The individual bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches, which are constituted after the model of the universal Church; it is in these and formed out of them that the one and unique Catholic Church exists. And for that reason precisely each bishop represents his own Church, whereas all, together with the pope, represent the whole Church in a bond of peace, love, and unity.”

Priests, in relation to bishops were described as “prudent cooperators of the episcopal college and its support and mouthpiece, called to the service of the People of God.” Priests, together with their bishop, constitute “a unique sacerdotal college (*presbyterium*)” dedicated to a variety of distinct duties. “In each local assembly of the faithful they represent in a certain sense the bishop, with whom they are associated in all trust and generosity; in part they take upon themselves his duties and solicitude and in their daily toils discharge them.”

Deacons, which reside at a lower level of the hierarchy, receive the imposition of hands “not unto the priesthood, but unto the ministry.” The permanent diaconate was restored by Vatican II, and in *Lumen Gentium* the ministerial duties pertaining to this office were presented. Deacons may administer Baptism solemnly, they may be the custodian and distributor of the Eucharist, they may, in the name of the Church, assist at and bless marriages, they may bring Viaticum to the dying, they may read the sacred scriptures to the faithful, instruct and exhort the people, and preside over the worship and the prayer of the faithful, and they may administer sacramentals and officiate at funerals and burial services.

The vocation of the laity was discussed in this document, and since there was also a Council document specifically on that topic, I will not mention at length this aspect of *Lumen Gentium*, but state briefly what the document itself stated: “Gathered together in the People of God and established in the one Body of Christ under one head, the laity -- no matter who they are -- have, as living members, the vocation of applying to the building up of the Church and to its continual sanctification all the powers which they have received from the goodness of the Creator and from the grace of the Redeemer.... The apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the salvific mission of the Church.... The laity, however, are given this special vocation: to make the Church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she can become the salt of the earth.”

Lumen Gentium put forth a “call to holiness.” It stated: “It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love, and by this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society.” Bishops, priests, ministers of lesser rank, Christian married couples and parents, widows and single people, those engaged in human work, those weighed down by poverty, infirmity, sickness and other hardships -- in effect, all Christians -- were called to holiness.

Religious are deeply appreciated and respected by the Church, and this was spelled out in this

document when it stated: “Mother Church rejoices that she has within herself many men and women who pursue more closely the Savior’s self-emptying and show it forth more clearly, by undertaking poverty with the freedom of God’s sons, and renouncing their own will: they subject themselves to man for the love of God, thus going beyond what is of precept in the matter of perfection, so as to conform themselves more fully to the obedient Christ.”

Mary, Mother of God, holds a special and exalted place in the Church, but *Lumen Gentium* called for the faithful to honor her within the context of the true doctrine and teachings of the Church regarding her. The document exhorted the faithful in these words: “The various forms of piety towards the Mother of God, which the Church has approved within the limits of sound and orthodox doctrine, according to the dispositions and understanding of the faithful, ensure that while the mother is honored, the Son through whom all things have their being and in whom it has pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell is rightly known, loved, and glorified and his commandments are observed.” *Lumen Gentium* while cautioning the faithful in regards to the cult of the Blessed Virgin, also encouraged the clergy to promote devotion to her, preserving those decrees which were given in the early days regarding the cult images of Christ, the Blessed Virgin and the saints, and also asking for restraint from exaggeration.