

LUMEN GENTIUM

An Orthodox Critique of the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

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Definition and Scope

This paper does not presume to deal with all aspects of this, one of the richest and most significant of the documents produced by Vatican II (1965-65). It will deal with three aspects. What does the document say about:

1. the ministry of the laity?
2. the form of the unity of the church?
3. the Papacy and Episcopal Collegiality?

Other aspects like Missiology, Mariology and the Sacramental Theology of the document are intentionally left out for the sake of brevity.

1. What is the ministry of the laity in the Church?

The document recognizes that there is no positive definition of the laity which would exclude all the clergy. The structure of the document is very significant at this point. There is a logic to the placing of the second chapter regarding "The People of God" before the 3rd chapter regarding the Hierarchical Structure of the Church and the Episcopate. The People of God is regarded as the more inclusive understanding of the church within which the hierarchy have their own function. Previously it was customary to assume that the hierarchy was the Efficient Cause of the church. The laity had only a passive role in the ministry of the church.

The choice of the term the People of God rather than the Body of Christ as the basic image for the church is itself significant. This is partly the consequence of a desire to emphasize the importance of the laity as the People of God. It was also partly due to the desire to find a term that is more acceptable to the western separated brethren rather than one that is more acceptable to the East. The East does not regard the People of God as the central image for the Church for three reasons:

One, it does not distinguish and point out the distinction between the people of the new covenant and the people of the old covenant.

Two, it has no historical or Christological reference while the other term the Body of Christ makes clear that the church is the consequence of the historical event of the incarnation and relates it to the person of Christ.

Three, the People of God does not directly indicate the unity of the church as one indivisible reality

Despite these objections which weigh against the term the People of God, one welcomes its use as emphasizing the primacy of the ministry of the whole people over the ministry of the hierarchy. The preference given to the term “the People of God” over the term “the Body of Christ” was deliberate and intentional precisely because the drafters wanted to give a prominent place to the ministry of the laity.

The weakness of the document however is in its groping efforts to formulate the distinction between the ministry of the laity and the ministry of the clergy. Para 10 (b) for example says

“Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated. Each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, molds and rules the priestly people. Acting in the person of Christ, he brings about the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people. For their part, the faithful join in the offering of the Eucharist by virtue of their royal priesthood. They, likewise, exercise that priesthood by receiving the sacraments by prayer and thanksgiving, by the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity.”

This passage does several things. It makes the difference between the ministry of the clergy and that of the laity essential or substantial rather than functional. But it also relates them to each other by stating that each in its own way is a participation in the priesthood of Christ. But it sees the clerical priesthood as being distinguished by the sacred power to rule the priestly people. This is the question to discuss further—the degree to which and the manner in which the clergy rules the people by sacred power.

I venture to suggest that there is a basic misunderstanding implied here of the nature of the sacred power. The same para also makes the priest the “bringer-about” of the Eucharistic sacrifice and the offerer. The next sentence however concedes that the people also offer. In what then consists the difference between the two priesthoods in the offering of the Eucharist? The last sentence of this para is also theologically questionable. To make the reception of the sacrament an exercise of the priesthood seems to me a bit far-fetched.

All the New Testament instances of *Laos Theou* occur in quotations from the Old Testament. It has been my contention for the last 10 years that this is the key ecumenical question—the

distinction between the general ministry of the whole church and the ministry of the specially ordained clergy. The nature of the ministry of the laity itself cannot be clearly worked out without this distinction being adequately formulated. Neither can we visualize the form of priestly nor its ministerial training for clergy and laity alike until we have seen this distinction more clearly. The document itself wavers between the older conception of the ministry of the laity as receiving the Eucharist and prayer and good works and a newer one which is really the more-ancient one and which affirms that it is the whole church which exercises the ministry including the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the word.

The document still smacks of a pseudo-hierarchicalism and condescension towards the laity. For example in para 12, there is a strange expression “from the Bishops down to the last member of the Laity”. The document is weak in its treatment of the ministry of the laity in transforming society. Only towards the end of the second chapter, we have a treatment of this transforming role in society. Of course one recognizes that the Pastoral Constitution on the church in the modern world (*gaudium et Spes*) deals more adequately with this aspect. But perhaps the Dogmatic Constitution itself could have more clearly and fully brought out this aspect of the ministry of the church in which the laity play a very important role. Compared with what was previously the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning the ministry of the laity, the second chapter of *Lumen Gentium* marks definite progress. It lays the foundation for what is said clearly in the decree *On the Laity* that the laity have a ministry from God by their baptism and not through the mandate of the hierarchy.

2. What is the form of the visible unity of the church?

The document recognizes what is authentic Eastern theology namely that one manifestation of the unity of the Church is the local community living in Eucharistic communion with their bishop. The document is again acceptable to the eastern tradition in its position that the consecration to the episcopate expresses the plenitude of the ministry of the church, that there is no higher order from that of bishop and that with his people he constitutes the living presence of Christ. In the matter of the unity of the church at the local level the document clearly says

“Nor are they to be regarded as vicars of the Roman Pontiff, for they exercise an authority which is proper to them, and are quite correctly called “prelates,” heads of the people whom they govern. Their power, therefore, is not destroyed by the supreme and universal power. On the contrary it is affirmed, strengthened, and vindicated thereby, since the Holy Spirit unfailingly preserves the form of government established by Christ the Lord in His Church.”

It is interesting that the document is so forth-right at this point whereas elsewhere in the same chapter it becomes more and more ambiguous. The document tries to do justice to the eastern tradition by this emphasis on the local bishop with his people as the expression of the unity of the

church. But perhaps it goes much farther than the eastern tradition in ascribing infallibility to the bishop in the proclamation of “Christ’s Doctrine”. The eastern tradition of course, would clearly reject the claim of the document that the local bishop has to submit his will and mind “to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff”. In para 25, the document goes into total confusion about the nature of the dependence of the local church on the universal church.

As for the expression of the unity of the church on the universal level, the document wavers between the papacy and the episcopal council as the central manifestation of the unity of the universal church.

The document is more preoccupied with power than with unity; where it does speak of unity that is, in para 23, the document says that the

“Roman Pontiff as the successor of Peter is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity of the bishops and of the multitude of the faithful.”

“The individual bishop, however, is the visible principle and foundation of unity in his particular church, fashioned after the model of the universal Church. In and from such individual churches there comes into being the one and only Catholic Church. For this reason each individual bishop represents his own church, but all of them together in union with the Pope represent the entire Church joined in the bond of peace, love and unity.”

The document makes a desperate effort to reaffirm what the first Vatican council had stated in the dogmatic constitution pastor aeternus. The document has tried to say, though not very clearly, that the local bishop sacramentally makes present the universal church to the local church and the local church to the universal church. But the document is extremely inadequate in formulating the need for an expression of the universal unity of the whole church. This can happen only when the bishops are gathered together in Eucharistic worship and in the teaching of the apostolic tradition of the church. Bishops gathered together in council constitute the visible expression of the unity of the church only when they are eucharistically united not only with each other but also with the church beyond the veil, that is, those who have departed from the life on earth. This is the clear teaching of the East. But Lumen Gentium stops short of saying this in so many words .

The first Vatican Council had debated back and forth the authority of the Pope. It had been contended there that while the powers of the Patriarchs of the East were by ecclesiastical law, the power of the Pope was decreed by divine law. In other words, the papacy is not like the Patriarchates. They are canonically ordained. The papacy is dogmatically ordained. Here our concern is not about the power or authority of the Pope, but about his function in expressing the unity of the church. The first Vatican Council affirms and the second confirms that the papacy is the visible manifestation of the unity. The councils of the church when the Pope is absent do not express the unity of the church.. Only when he comes into the session of the council can

it express the unity of the church. In the eastern tradition, this is totally unacceptable. The first Vatican council was quite right. Eastern Christians do not regard the papacy or the patriarchate as divinely ordained.. Patriarch is only a bishop who has a special function. He doesn't in himself express the unity of the church. But he is the presiding "bishop of the council and the mouth-piece of the council. The council is not held on his authority. Nor does he have authority over the council except as president. The unity of the universal church in the eastern tradition is most characteristically expressed in the sacramental Ceremony of the consecration of the Holy Chrism. Here the .Patriarch, all the bishops, at least one arch-deacon, 12 presbyters, 12 deacons, 12 sub-deacons and the representatives of the laity are gathered together. But even such gathering, even though the manifestation of the universal church, is not a manifestation of the unity of the universal church, It manifests only the unity of the provincial church.

The manifestation of the unity of the universal church has only this much to do with the bishop of Rome. If he is present he has the first rank in protocol. If he cannot come, his delegates occupy his place as was the case in all the early councils. But he is not the expression of the unity of the church. His presence is not even essential for expressing the unity of the church through the council.

3. Papacy and Collegiality

The art of compromise by finding ambiguous or vague formula for resolving theological differences was once a peculiarity of the work of the World Council of Churches. But the Vatican Council has gone even farther in finding the formula which simply puts two contradictory opinions side by side. For example in para 22 it says "For in virtue of his office, that is, as Vicar of Christ and pastor of the whole Church, the Roman Pontiff has full, supreme, and universal power over the Church. And he can always exercise this power freely." Little farther below in the same para it is said that the episcopal order together with the pope has the supreme and full power over the universal church. It is not very clear here whether it is the Pope alone who has the supreme authority or the Pope with the episcopal college. Is the Pope by himself just as powerful as the Pope with the college. The document can be interpreted in that way. This means the college of the bishops adds nothing to the authority of the Pope.

On the other hand, the document says that consecration to the episcopate is the highest fullness of the sacramental power. If this is so, the pope has no more high priestly power than any other bishop. Whatever power he has, is only a power of administration. If this is so, this is definitely ecclesiastical or canonical authority and not dogmatic authority.

In the eastern tradition we would be hesitant to say that the Patriarch, college of bishops, or the patriarch with the bishops has full and supreme power over the church. We could attribute such full and supreme power only to the Holy Trinity.

And even that cannot very well be said without doing violence to the freedom and dignity of man. The supreme power over the church we cannot give to any person or group of persons. The church is a community of people who are free in Christ, and they are not slaves even of God. They are sons and therefore the very concept of supreme authority over the church is theologically unsound.

Conclusion

We ought to be thankful that the 2nd Vatican Council has proposed no new dogma to be accepted by catholic believers. Anyone who has participated in the work of preparing documents for the council knows how unsure, thank God, the experts themselves were about all theological questions. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church is to be seen as an attempt to balance the one-sidedness of Vatican I which proclaimed the doctrine of infallibility of the Pope but had no time to deal with bishops, priests, or laity. As a correction to Vatican I and to Catholic Theology ensuing from that fateful council *Lumen Gentium* has great value. But as an enduring document on Christian ecclesiology its defects outweigh its merits. As a starting point for the development of an authentic doctrine of the church, the document is rich in possibilities.