

DOGMATIC CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH

LUMEN GENTIUM

November 21, 1964

Although *Sacrosanctum Concilium* had a tremendous influence on the Church's worship, *Lumen Gentium* was in many ways the centerpiece of the entire Council. Many of the documents produced in the Council's final session build on concepts found in *Lumen Gentium*.

In this document, the Council Fathers totally rethink the meaning of "Church," as a mystery that transcends the hierarchical institution and as the messianic "People of God." As a result, they also must rethink all of the relationships within the Church (among the clergy, religious and laity) and the relationships between the Catholic Church and those outside the Church.

The "Church of Christ" as a mystery both human and divine

Previous Church teaching had identified the "Church of Christ" with the institutional Catholic Church. The Council Fathers describe the Church of Christ as a mystical reality that is both human and divine, visible and invisible, and which cannot simply be identified with the Catholic Church. Although the fullness of the Church of Christ "subsists" in the Catholic Church, elements of it also exist outside the Catholic Church. (#8)

The Church as the People of God

Previously, "the Church" generally referred to the Pope and the Bishops, and the Church's mission was confined mostly to the salvation of its members. Throughout this document and subsequent Council documents, the Church is described as the "People of God," a messianic people whose dignity and mission derive from their communion with Christ. Their mission is to be a light to the whole world. (#9)

Common priesthood of the faithful

The pre-Vatican II Church was extremely clerical. Priests celebrated the sacred mysteries, and the faithful passively received the grace of the holy sacrifice offered on their behalf. The Council Fathers introduce the radical idea that all the baptized share in the priesthood of Christ, although not in the same way as ordained priests. (#10) Even more radical, the assembly taking part in the Mass truly participates in the Eucharistic sacrifice, offering Christ to the Father and offering themselves along with Him. (#11)

Collegial nature of the episcopate

Previously, the Church functioned like a monarchy. The Bishops served as vassals of the Pope, with some autonomy over their own fiefdoms. The Council Fathers emphasize that all Bishops should work together in communion with each other and with the Pope, similar to the way that

St. Peter and his fellow apostles functioned as “one apostolic college.” (#22) If this communion is realized, then each bishop will be able to represent the universal Church in his own diocese, and a gathering of the Bishops will truly represent a gathering of the universal Church. (#23)

Reinstatement of the permanent diaconate

The permanent diaconate, open to married or single men, had been a part of the Church since its earliest days, but had later disappeared entirely. The Council Fathers, seeing a pastoral need, call for its restoration. (#29)

The laity

Prior to Vatican II, the laity had no particular role in the work of the Church. The Council Fathers completely re-envision their role and their dignity.

- The laity are called by God to “work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven,” making Christ known “by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity.” (#31) They make the Church present and operative wherever they go, thus expanding the reach of the Church’s mission. They can also be called to serve certain ecclesiastical functions, cooperating directly with the Hierarchy. Hence, the ordained clergy should afford them all of these opportunities to participate in the saving work of the Church. (#33)
- When the spiritual shepherds of the Church allow the laity to exercise their proper role, a number of benefits accrue for both sides. The laity grow in personal responsibility and enthusiasm, while the shepherds gain wisdom from their lay collaborators’ expertise and advice, allowing them to make better decisions in spiritual and temporal matters. (#37)

Marian devotion in the Church

A chapter on Mary was added late in the revision process. Marian devotion was strong in the pre-Vatican II Church, but it was often separated from the sacraments, and even from Christ. The Council Fathers strongly affirm proper Marian devotion, which leads to Christ and to growth in Christian virtues. (#63-65) But, they also warn against superstition and exaggerated claims about Mary, which lead to empty sentimentality instead of genuine “filial love and contemplation of her virtues.” (#67)