

Dear Friends:

Last week I found myself again teaching summer school at the graduate School of Theology at St. John's in Collegeville. I love the diversity of the student body that I always encounter there. This year's class has students ranging from about age 25 to about age 70, from places as diverse as China, Australia, Virginia, Louisiana, and, of course, Stearns County, MN. There are lots of lay professional church ministers, a couple of permanent deacons, and a few Benedictine monks in the mix. The manifold perspectives of the students are a rich blessing.

In the course of my teaching I have occasion to appeal heavily to the documents that were produced by the bishops at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), and I am regularly refreshed by the vision of church that is contained in those important writings. One of the documents, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (also known by its Latin title, *Gaudium et spes*) is well worth regular rereading. It can be accessed with ease and without charge at the [Vatican web site on the internet](#). I am always struck by at least three affirmations that are made repeatedly in that document.

One is the acknowledgement that our Catholic church is always situated in history, which means that it is forever in need of reform and correction in its visible structures, even though we rightly insist that the church is holy (because Christ is holy, and it is he upon whom we depend to sustain us, and not we ourselves). We strive for perfection in our way of living, praying, organizing, and witnessing to the faith together, but at any given moment in time we aren't arrived at a place of perfection. That fact need not cause us to despair, but merely to face honestly our ongoing need for conversion and growth.

A second and directly related teaching from this document is that the church is not all-knowing in every facet of our shared life, and that other realms of existence have their own integrity and wisdom from which the church itself can stand to be enriched. Culture, politics, government, economics, the sciences, the arts, etc. are all parts of human existence that have their own purviews of knowledge and insight, and it need not (and ought not) fall to churchy people to trump the practitioners of those various endeavors with any alleged omniscience that purports to derive from God himself.

From all this flows a third teaching from the document, which proclaims that "the modern world" is a good place, not a fundamentally evil one. The world is where

most Catholics live most of the time, and it is the context where we rightly expect to meet God and to experience God's grace in our daily activities. Culture is not something to be despised or set over and against the gospel, at least not as Vatican II sees it.

I mention all this because so much of what I encounter in contemporary "Catholic" media and teaching promotes a message that is quite at variance with this. Far too often one can see, read, and hear of Catholics these days who presume to believe that our church is already a perfect community that floats over and above real daily life, unaffected by the turbulence of time and history, or that we believers know better than do the professionals how to be a "real" scientist, artist, or politician, or (most frequently) that our world and culture are categorically bad and bereft of God's presence.

Ironically, such dispositions are much more historically Protestant (among some, not all denominations) than they are Catholic. And even more ironic (and wrong) are the claims that such perspectives can be grounded in the teachings of Vatican II. You will search in vain for any such sentiment in a document like *Gaudium et spes*. You may find yourself pleasantly refreshed by having a look at that document again.

Fr. Mike Byron