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The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Its Impact on the Social Teaching of the U.S. Bishops

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I appreciate this opportunity to return again to the University of Notre Dame. Besides being a pleasant experience, it gives me another occasion to acknowledge the contribution of this University and, in a particular way, of its President, Father Hesburgh, to the life of the Church in the United States. In providing Cardinal O'Connor and me a common platform to examine the social ministry of the Church in the post-conciliar era, Notre Dame continues its long history of service to the Church. This convocation is another in an already lengthy list of events in which the intellectual, spiritual and physical resources of this campus have been used to help the Church in the United States, at every level, reflect upon the meaning and the challenge of being Catholic in the twentieth century.

Cardinal O'Connor and I will give two presentations which are designed to address a single theme. The setting for my lecture is the particular moment of ecclesiastical history in which we find ourselves: it is twenty-five years since the convocation of the Second Vatican Council and twenty years since the promulgation of one of the Council's major documents, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. In this setting, it is worthwhile to examine the role and impact of *The Pastoral Constitution* on the social ministry of the Church, and particularly on the bishops of the United States. My lecture will serve as a background for Cardinal O'Connor’s examination of one example of the bishops’ social teaching: the pastoral letter on *Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*.

In examining the content and consequences of *The Pastoral Constitution*, I will focus on three themes: first, Vatican
II as the source of *The Pastoral Constitution*; second, the content and style of *The Pastoral Constitution*; and third, the post-conciliar consequences of this document in the ministry and teaching of the U.S. bishops.

I. THE CONCILIAR EVENT: AN INTERPRETATION

By calling an Extraordinary Synod this November, Pope John Paul II has invited and urged the Church to reflect upon the meaning of Vatican II and its implications for the life of the Church and the world during the last fifteen years of this century. Ecumenical councils are powerful events in the life of the Church. In the two thousand year history of the Church, only a few generations of Christians have experienced the event of a council, but every generation has been shaped by the work of the twenty ecumenical councils. With the privilege of being a conciliar generation comes the responsibility to appropriate its meaning, interpret its content, and share its significance with future generations. The calling of the Synod helps to focus attention on the last twenty-five years since Pope John XXIII called us to a profound renewal of Christian life and witness for the world.

In the post-conciliar period, a voluminous corpus of commentary on Vatican II has appeared. Quite appropriately, most commentaries have focused upon one aspect or document of the Council and have sought to explain its meaning and press forward its implications. In the last five years, another kind of commentary has appeared which I think is particularly helpful in preparing for the Synod and in evaluating any single aspect of Vatican II. It is an assessment which seeks to interpret the conciliar event in its *totality* and to evaluate its place in the historical and theological development of the Church.

Two examples of this kind of analysis are Karl Rahner’s essay, *Toward a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II*,¹ and John W. O’Malley’s essay, *Developments, Reforms and Two Great Reformations: Toward a Historical Assessment of Vatican II*.²

It is neither my purpose nor my role to provide a commentary on these extensive articles, much less to offer a systematic interpretation of my own. I cite them in an address

on social ministry in the post-conciliar era because they provide the kind of broad framework we need to connect the conciliar and post-conciliar periods of Catholic life and ministry. Such a perspective helps us to dispel the popular notion that the Council suddenly dropped from heaven (or emerged from Hades) in finished form. Interpreting the conciliar event means identifying its historical roots, evaluating its theological content, and recognizing that the implementation of the Council has been complex and even a bit untidy, but still a blessing. On several recent occasions, the Holy Father has referred to the Council as a positive event in the life of the Church.

By examining the event of the Council, we can show that it follows the law of development in Catholic thought—that is, what the dynamic Father John Courtney Murray used to call "the growing edge of tradition." The Catholic style admits of change—indeed requires change, but it is change rooted in continuity. Anyone familiar with Catholic history knows that Vatican II was a surprise but not an aberration from the law of development.

In areas as diverse as liturgy, ecumenism and social thought, a basic pattern is visible in the Council. Everything said in the Council documents had a history in nineteenth and twentieth century Catholic authors and movements, but both the authors and movements had been relegated to the edge of the Church's life. The movements (in the fields of liturgy, ecumenism, and social action) and the authors (Cong, deLubac, Chenu, Murray and Rahner) had been in the Church but not at the center of attention. They had lived on the growing edge, saying and doing things which made some uncomfortable and others hostile. It was not a question of bad will, but the dynamic of a growing community and institution with its attendant tensions.

The significance of Vatican II, viewed through the history of these movements and authors, is not that it said brand new things, but that it took these ideas from the edge of the Church's life and located them in the center. In the process, the Council gave new legitimacy to the growing edge of the Catholic tradition and also added its own content to the ideas and movements. The Council authenticated and also created. Precisely because it followed the law of continuity and change, Vatican II was an event which summarized a previous process of development, becoming at the same time the

starting point for a new process of growth. Once the growing edge had been taken into the center of Catholic thought, it was time for new growth at the edge.

This dynamic of receiving from the past, adding to it in Council, and opening the road for new growth is particularly clear in The Pastoral Constitution. By examining this document, we will see the dynamic of the Council at work.

II. The Pastoral Constitution of Vatican II: An Analysis

Many of the major themes of Vatican II had their roots in the previous one hundred years; one theme was the emphasis on social teaching and social ministry. Leo XIII inaugurated the tradition of papal social encyclicals in 1891 and Pius XI pressed the organizational dimension of social witness in his program of Catholic Social Action of the 1930's. The U.S. bishops used this social teaching to address a broad range of issues from labor questions to race relations to war and peace. In both teaching and development, therefore, the social dimension of the Church's life had a history in the twentieth century. This is why it is surprising to find that, in preparing for the Council, no provision was made for a document on the role of the Church in the world. When the first session of Vatican II opened in 1962, there was no thought of a document in the style of The Pastoral Constitution. There were social themes running through the draft documents on the liturgy and the Church, but no explicitly theological reflection on the Church's presence in the secular arena.

Assessing the Council from the perspective of 1985, it is clear that The Pastoral Constitution, along with the dogmatic Constitutions on the Church and Divine Revelation, stands as one of the key texts of the Council, yet no one thought so at the beginning. It is also significant that the call for a document on the Church in the world emerged directly from the experience of the Council. When the bishops addressed the task of defining the nature and mission of the Church, it became evident that an explicit, extensive interpretation of the role of the Church in the political, economic, cultural and international arena was a theological fact which required expression. Few guessed, I think, how powerful a force such an expression would be in the post-conciliar ministry of the

5. Pius XI, Quadragesimo Anno (1931).
Church. In recognizing the impact of *The Pastoral Constitution*, it is important at Notre Dame to remember the contribution of Monsignor Joseph Gremillion to the development of this document.

The contribution of *The Pastoral Constitution* to the Church’s social ministry has been a threefold gift: in theological style, ecclesiological substance and pastoral spirit. I will comment briefly on each. The theological style of *The Pastoral Constitution* is symbolized and represented by its use of the phrase “the signs of the times.” Father Marie-Dominique Chenu, O.P., one of the great precursors of the Council, has said of this phrase that “it might well be considered as one of the three or four most important formulas used by the Council, one which served as a source of its inspiration and guided its progress.”

The phrase implied both a principle of theological method and a basic posture of the Church toward the world. The method is that theological assessment of secular history and reality should begin with an evaluation of empirical data. In carrying out the social ministry, the Church is not to impose *a priori* solutions. Rather, it is to join with others, of all faiths and no faith, in seeking to understand the scope and depth of the secular challenge faced by the world. When the empirical challenge has been honestly evaluated, it should then be “interpreted in the light of the Gospel.” This methodological position does not simply equate theology with a secular discipline, nor does it imply moral relativism, but it does determine a pastoral posture for the Church. This posture respects the contributions of the scientific, social and humanistic disciplines, and promises that the Church will have the humility and the seriousness to face the modern world in all its complexity and ambiguity.

The drafting of the pastoral, “The Challenge of Peace,” brought all the U.S. bishops face to face with this pastoral posture. The arcane complexity of deterrence had to be probed in all its dimensions before we could address its moral meaning. Now, after three years of work and the publication of the letter, we recognize that the danger of deterrence and

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8. *Gaudium et Spes*, supra note 6, no. 4.
the difficulty of containing the arms race mean that our moral surveillance is not finished. There has to be continual scrutiny of the technical ‘signs of the times’ of the arms race and of the adequacy of the moral judgments we made in 1983.

The theological contribution of _The Pastoral Constitution_ is not limited to methodology. The fundamental breakthrough of the conciliar text is that it provides an ecclesiological foundation for social ministry. Prior to the Council, the papal encyclicals had provided a solid philosophical and moral doctrine centered on human dignity and human rights and applied to problems as diverse as war, labor-management relations, agriculture and trade policy. But this extensive moral teaching was often regarded as a secondary concern of the Church. Those who took the social teaching seriously often had to defend their work and ministry against charges that it secularized the Church or was devoid of truly religious content.

_The Pastoral Constitution_ addresses these claims forthrightly. The document ties the entire Catholic tradition’s defense of the human person directly to the very center of the Church’s life. The vision of the Church which emerges from the Council is that of a community of faith committed to public defense of the person, to advocacy for the least and most vulnerable in society, and to the protection of human society in the face of the awesome technologies of war which this century has spawned. It is impossible to support the conciliar teaching and not support a socially engaged Church, for that is the theological mandate of _The Pastoral Constitution_.

The theological grounding of social ministry has produced a pastoral spirit of social leadership for the Church throughout the world. I hasten to add that my point here is hardly to be triumphal, for what remains undone is staggering. But a simple, descriptive account of the changes in the Church on social questions since Vatican II would force any observer to ask what is behind the change. From Soweto to Seoul, from San Salvador to Sao Paulo, from Warsaw to Washington—the Catholic Church is a major social force. The pressure of events in each place has called the Church into the public arena. However, we need to be honest enough to acknowledge that the Church has been challenged by injustice before and did not always respond. Today, we still miss key moments, are timid about key choices, and do not acutely see all the signs of the times. But there has been a
response which is worthy of note. I do not think it is because of random chance that the response has been made in all these places. It is the spirit of *The Pastoral Constitution* which has called forth the social resources of the Church. Today, there is a consensus established by the Council that there can be no retreat from an engaged public ministry. The specific choices and challenges remain to be faced, but the premise of our ministry is clear: a socially active Church is not a distraction from gospel ministry; it is an essential component of that ministry.

III. THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE COUNCIL: AN ASSESSMENT

This conviction that social ministry is a central element of the Church's pastoral ministry is reflected in the post-conciliar record of the U.S. episcopal conference. In his presidential report to the Holy See in preparation for the Extraordinary Synod, Bishop Malone expressed the strong conviction of the U.S. bishops that Vatican II has been a gift and a blessing for the Church in this country. One of the gifts of the Council is the consensus which has been created among our bishops about the significance of social ministry. We debate and disagree on specific choices, of course, but these debates about concrete issues never take the form of questioning whether we ought to be in social ministry. That point is now beyond dispute, and we have *The Pastoral Constitution* to thank for this consensus.

The same document has shaped the way in which the bishops have pursued social teaching and witness. A key passage in *The Pastoral Constitution* states: "[a]nd so the Council, as witness and guide to the faith of the whole people of God, gathered together by Christ, can find no more eloquent expression of its solidarity and respectful affection for the whole human family, to which it belongs, than to enter into dialogue with it about all these different problems."

The U.S. bishops have adopted this theme of dialogue with the world and sought to adapt it to the style of the democratic, pluralistic culture in which we minister. The dialogue theme is at work at two levels.

First, as a general principle, the bishops take positions on

10. *Gaudium et Spes*, supra note 6, no. 3.
a wide range of social issues, from abortion to nuclear war to Central America. Moreover, they do so in forums which guarantee that they will have to defend, explain and argue their positions both inside and outside the Church. By taking concrete positions, rooted in religious and moral values, but applied to contingent realities, the bishops both state a position and stimulate the wider public dialogue.

The range of issues addressed is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the bishops' position. No other major institution in our society joins the defense of innocent human life in abortion with the defense of all life in the face of nuclear war in the way we have joined them. It is to highlight both the scope of our moral concern and the strength of Catholic social teaching that I have focused on the notion of a "consistent ethic of life" in a series of addresses I have given over the past two years.11

Second, this method of dialogue has been at the core of both pastoral letters on peace and the economy. The subject matter of the letters demands that we be in dialogue with relevant disciplines. The process of publishing drafts requires that we listen and respond to a range of commentary on our work. Finally, the specificity of our conclusions requires that we make crucial distinctions in the pastorals between the moral authority of Catholic social and moral teaching and the less authoritative policy conclusions we draw, as bishops, from that teaching.

Committing the bishops to public dialogue in this way has been a demanding exercise in pastoral leadership. But I believe the vast majority of our bishops would agree with my view that it has been an effective method of presenting the social teaching, an important witness to the bishops' concerns about signs of our times, and a contribution to the wider civil dialogue in the United States.

I do not think that we would have developed the method of the pastorals, nor do I believe that we would have shaped the ecclesiastical consensus which is their foundation in the bishops' conference, if the Council had not occurred and The Pastoral Constitution not been written. I am convinced that we express our gratitude for both by continuing the dialogue with the world, solidifying the social ministry in the Church, and standing publicly in our society on a range of social issues

11. Addresses by Joseph Cardinal Bernadin in Cleveland (Oct. 30, 1985), Kansas City (June 7, 1984) and St. Louis (March 11, 1984), and at Fordham University (Dec. 6, 1983).
which bear upon the human dignity of the person. The pastoral on the economy is one way in which we stand publicly today, and Cardinal O'Connor will now discuss that pastoral letter.