

Commemorating *Lumen Gentium*: A Short History of a Ground-breaking Charter

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Abstract: 21 November 2004 marks the 40th anniversary of the publication of *Lumen Gentium*, the central document of the Second Vatican Council. The author summarizes the evolution of the document, which might be regarded as the Church's own Vision Statement. It's timely and relevant to outline this history in order to recall significant life-changing emphases made by the Council in the production of the document, together with their logical implications.

Key Words: *Lumen Gentium* – textual history; Vatican II; ecclesiology; church – nature

The decisions of the Second Vatican Council and their implications, are summarized as follows:

- (1) A focus on the whole Church, and not simply a section of it (what Yves Congar labelled '*hierarchology*');
- (2) The whole Church as a communion of charity, i.e. as an interlocking network of people in a loving relationship with God and one another;
- (3) The whole Church as an expression of the grace of God, of God as love working in human lives;
- (4) All the the faithful, who make up the Church, are the People of God. As baptized believers, both clergy and people belong to the same community of faith, hope and love, and are fundamentally equal. There is no two-tiered membership in the Church, and no justification for the practice of clericalism;
- (5) The People of God as a whole are responsible for the life and growth of the Church;
- (6) The placement of the chapter on the hierarchy, after that on the People of God, suggests that the hierarchy exists only for the service of the community; and
- (7) The collegial and cooperative relationships of the bishops of the world among themselves and with the pope, and their status together as the supreme authority in the Church, called to participate as leaders in Christ's office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing the Church. For this to happen effectively, appropriate structures must be developed.

Four drafts of the document were prepared before the final text was approved and published.¹ On the basis of the information available, it can be said that the text evolved as follows.

First Draft

This was prepared by the pre-conciliar doctrinal commission. Its various chapters dealt with the nature of the Church and its members; bishops; religious; the laity; authority; the teaching office; the tasks of the Church; ecumenism. What stands out is the *'institutional'* approach rather than the Church as a community, and the emphasis on the authority of the clergy, and more especially of the bishops.

When it was presented for discussion by the Council Fathers in the first General Congregation on 1st December, 1962, speakers were quick to complain about its preoccupation with authority and with its juridical outlook. At subsequent sessions such complaints were repeated over and over. From the very first day an appeal was made that a chapter be included on the People of God, so that the functions of the hierarchy might be seen in their true light. Other speakers spoke of the need for the Constitution to speak of the Church as a communion of charity, which is to say, the Church as an interlocking network of people in a loving relationship with God and one another.

So from the very first day of the working sessions, two understandings of the nature of the Church, both valid, both orthodox, both rooted in Christian tradition, were being presented. One stressed the external, the institutional, the organizational features of a community which exists in history and in human society generally. The other emphasized the invisible but real workings of grace. The conflict was about which was to be considered basic and primary.

The final version of the document stands as a victory for those bishops who led the opposition to the first draft. We are in debt to them for this, for no understanding of the Church is complete if this society of people who make up the Church is not first and foremost an expression of the grace of God, i.e. an expression of the mystery of God's love at work in human lives. This view was to prevail in the end, though a real attempt was made to synthesize this spiritual emphasis with attention to the institutional features of the Church. On the subject of the collegial relationship of the bishops of the world among themselves, it may be said that the synthesis has been successful. The relationship between the pope and the bishops, however, is far from being fully worked out. This remains one of the unresolved questions of our time. Bishop Christopher Butler, who was present at the Council, and has been one of its chief interpreters, is quoted as saying about the doctrine of collegiality that *'there was now a moral obligation on the pope to govern collegially – but he did not have to.'*² The Church still awaits effective collegial structures for the full implementation of collegiality.

Towards the end of the first session of the Council, Pope John XXIII set up a new Commission. Its task was to revise the first draft, in the light of the debates on the floor of the Council, and of written submissions from Council Fathers. In fact, in the period between the first and second sessions of the Council, this Commission produced a new draft.

¹ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 21 November 1964.

² In John Wilkins, 'Reformed Church, Unreformed Papacy,' in *The Papacy and the People of God*, ed. Gary MacEoin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 124.

Second Draft

The second draft of the Constitution contained four chapters:

- I. The mystery of the Church
- II. The hierarchy
- III. The People of God and the laity
- IV. Vocation of all to holiness; Religious

It will be noted that the position of the chapter on the hierarchy remains unchanged.

The day after the draft was introduced on 30th September, 1963, a vote was taken on whether the draft was acceptable as a whole as a basis for debate. The result was as follows:

Voters: 2301

For: 2231

Against: 43

Null: 27

Before this vote was taken, three points were made by various speakers:

- (1) German-language Fathers, led by Cardinal Frings, asked that a chapter be added on Our Lady, and so eliminating the need for the Council to produce a separate document on her;
- (2) It was suggested that Chapter III should be subdivided into two chapters: one on the People of God, to be inserted between Chapters I and II, the other on the laity; and
- (3) It was suggested that a chapter be added on the Church in heaven, the Church in a state of perfection.

Over many sessions the different chapters were systematically discussed. Much was made of the concept of the collegiality of the bishops and the need to restore deacons as a permanent office. During the 55th General Congregation (24th October, 1963), it was announced that the question of including a chapter on Mary would be put to a vote. Two speakers summed up opposing arguments. Cardinal Santos of Manila argued against the addition, saying that Mary is above the Church, and deserved separate treatment. Cardinal Koenig of Vienna argued for inclusion, mainly on the ecumenical grounds that this would make it clear that Mary belongs to the community of the redeemed. In the 57th General Congregation (29 October 1963) the majority needed to carry the vote was 1097. The vote was as follows:

Voters: 2193

For: 1114

Against: 1074

Null: 5

Following the vote, a sub-commission was set up by the doctrinal commission to write a chapter on Mary, to be included in subsequent drafts. Next day votes were taken on collegiality and the diaconate.

In the period between the second and third sessions, both the third and the fourth drafts of the constitution on the Church were produced. The final shape of the document was beginning to emerge.

Third Draft

This draft included the chapter on Mary. It also included a chapter entitled: *The consummation of holiness in the glory of the saints*. Chapter Three of the second draft had

been divided into two chapters, one on the People of God, and the other on the laity. By the insertion of the chapter on the People of God after that on the mystery of the Church, a new perspective was introduced. Placing the hierarchy first, as in the previous draft, tends to obscure the fact that the People, the community, is primary. Placing the chapter on the People before that on the hierarchy emphasizes that as faithful, as baptized believers, both clergy and people belong to the same community and are fundamentally equal. It suggests too that the People as a whole are responsible for the life and growth of the Church. Placing the hierarchy after the People, on the other hand, suggests the hierarchy exists only for the service of the community. From the point of view of encouraging the participation of all, both priests and people, in the life of the Church, the revised placing of this chapter can hardly be over-estimated.

At this stage the draft had the following structure:

- I. The mystery of the Church
- II. The People of God
- III. The hierarchical constitution of the Church, especially the episcopate
- IV. The laity
- V. The vocation of all to holiness in the Church; Religious
- VI. The consummation of holiness in the glory of the saints
- VII. The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the mystery of Christ and the Church.

Fourth Draft

During the second and third sessions, observations on the third draft were submitted by the Fathers to the co-ordinating Commission. On this basis changes were made both in the text and in the arrangement of chapters. Chapter VI was altered to read: *The eschatological character of our vocation, and our union with the heavenly Church*. Allowance was also made for subdividing Chapter V, should the Council wish to devote a separate chapter to religious.

This revised text came up for discussion in the third session, and especially the topics of the Church of heaven, and of Mary. Several Fathers expressed strong opposition to the use of the title '*Mediatrice*' for Mary, since in the New Testament Jesus Christ is the one and only mediator. A vote was taken on whether a special chapter should be devoted to religious, and resulted as follows:

Voters: 2210

For: 1505

Against: 698

Null: 7

The large number against the proposal suggests an unwillingness of those who voted in this way to imply that religious have some sort of monopoly of holiness in the Church.

Following the voting on the different chapters, the doctrinal commission was able to prepare the final version of the text, which was given the final vote of approval on 21st November, 1964. It is sub-divided as follows:

- I. The Mystery of the Church
- II The People of God
- III The Church is hierarchical
- IV The laity
- V The universal call to holiness
- VI Religious
- VII The Pilgrim Church

VIII Our Lady

Each of these chapters will repay careful study and reflection.

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