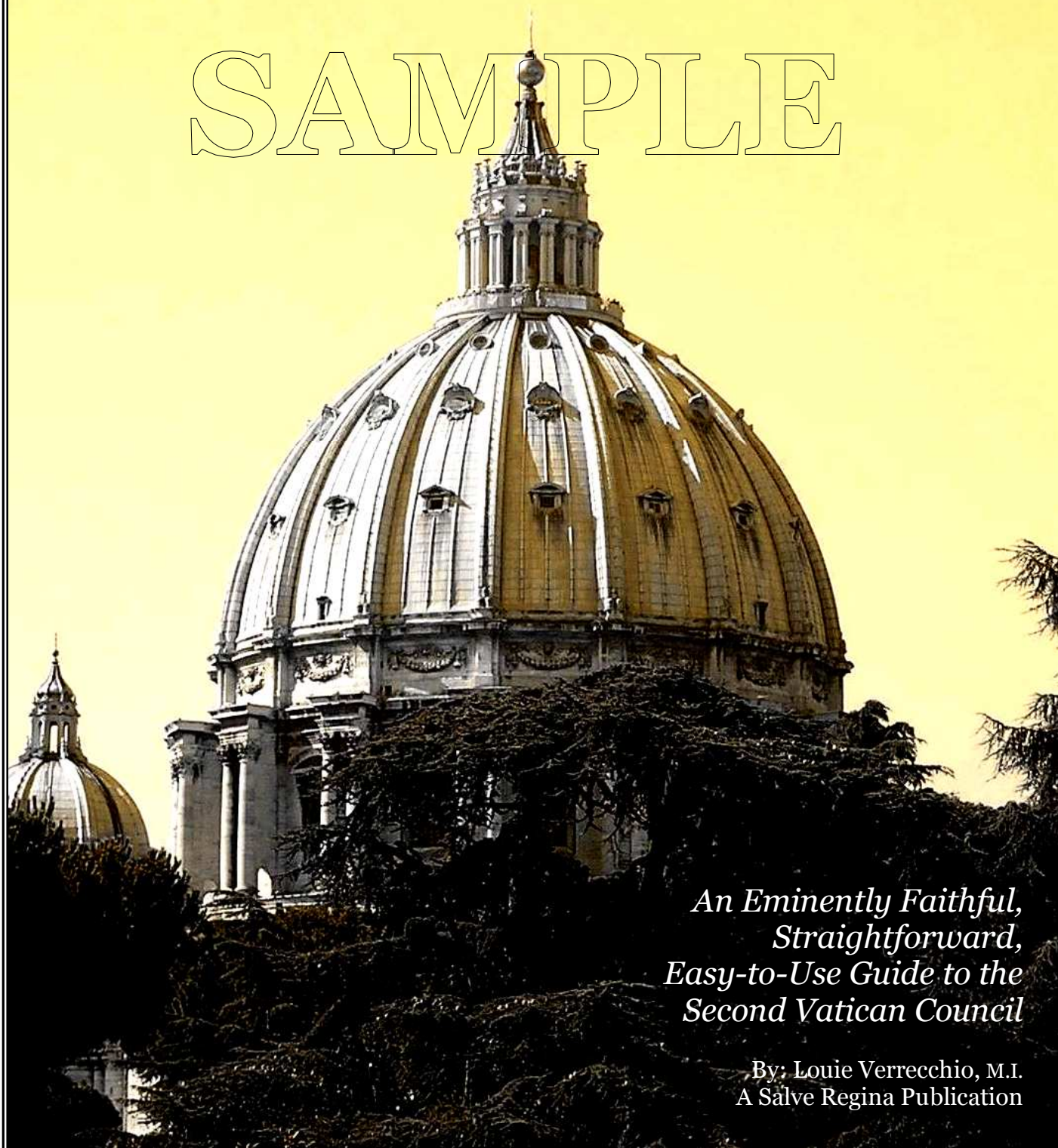


- PART FIVE -  
**Harvesting the Fruit of Vatican II**

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**Constitution on the Church in the Modern World**  
**- *Gaudium et Spes* -**

SAMPLE



*An Eminently Faithful,  
Straightforward,  
Easy-to-Use Guide to the  
Second Vatican Council*

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A Salve Regina Publication

## **Lesson 2 [SAMPLE LESSON taken from PART FIVE]**

### **Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World – Articles 23-45**

#### **Introduction**

In the introductory statement and first chapter to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the Council Fathers laid some solid groundwork for the case they intend to construct in the chapters to follow. It's going to be critical for us to keep some of the key principals found here well in mind as we continue our exploration.

One of the most important teachings found in this opening portion of *Gaudium et Spes* was mentioned several times in Lesson 8, but it bears repeating; mankind will find the answer to his most pressing questions about himself and the meaning of life only when he looks to Christ (cf GS 22).

It is said that Pope John Paul II referenced GS 22 and GS 24 (which we will read in preparation for the current lesson) more often than any other conciliar text. The teachings contained in these two articles reflect the *Christocentricity* of the Council's worldview. If we keep the centrality of Christ as presented in these articles in mind as we consider the remainder of the document, the Council's true message will remain clear; the things of this world have real value only inasmuch as they are ordered toward God.

"The vital link between Christ and the world in all its joys, sufferings and hopes was to be spelled out at length by *Gaudium et Spes*, along with the Church's deep desire to help all human beings to know, love and follow him," Pope Benedict XVI said reflecting on the Constitution's enduring value.

This "vital link" between mankind and the Creator gives rise to yet another indispensable theme that permeates the entirety of the constitution; the dignity of the human person which is founded not upon the externals that our modern culture so often reveres, but upon the image and likeness of God that is uniquely reflected in mankind, and the call to live in communion with God that is exclusive to humanity.

One should notice as we continue in *Gaudium et Spes* that the Council's view of human dignity allows for its development. This takes place as we grow in our willingness to allow God's grace to move our hearts toward choosing that which is truly good. One of the ways that the Lord guides us to more perfectly reflect His likeness is through that quiet voice within known as the conscience...

#### **Follow Your Conscience**

Do you remember the gospel passage in which Jesus said, "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who follows his conscience"?

You don't? Well that's because it doesn't exist! If you listen closely to those who espouse the so-called "primacy of conscience" doctrine, however, you'd never know it.

Pope Benedict XVI referred to this dangerous misconception as the "liberal theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries," one in which the individual alone "considers what is tenable in matters of religion; the subjective 'conscience' being the sole arbiter of what is ethical." (See the Holy Father's Regensburg Address and others.)

According to proponents of this particular view, it is incumbent upon the individual to define the relative morality of any given action according to the dictates of their own calculations (which they have granted the label "conscience"), and once determined, they are then free if not duty bound to follow it. Predictably, the conclusions drawn by the exercise of such individualism are frequently at odds with traditional morality.

So where did this inflated view of conscience originate? Vatican II, of course!

The Council, so it is said, gave us a golden key called "the primacy of conscience" that opens the door not only to the kingdom of heaven, but to guilt-free participation in all sorts of erstwhile sinful activities along the way. From contraception to abortion, homosexuality to promiscuity; if you can convince yourself that no one gets hurt, do it!

Ten minutes of primetime television viewing is enough to aptly demonstrate that the result of this particular approach to morality is a culture that is largely driven by what one might more accurately call a "primacy of concupiscence;" one in which disordered desires seem to rule the day.

The Council Fathers did indeed have much to say about conscience and the indispensable role that it plays in forming individual lives and the world in which we live, but did they really teach a "*primacy of conscience*"?

The first thing we need to know is that the phrase "primacy of conscience" appears nowhere in the Council documents.

As for the word "conscience" itself, on the other hand, it appears more than fifty times, but in each instance it is surrounded by important qualifiers like "properly instructed; rightly formed; Christian; correct; upright and true," characteristics that each of us have an "obligation" to develop within ourselves.

Even more telling, of the ten times that the word "primacy" is mentioned in the conciliar documents, fully nine of them refer to the unique power - not of individual believers - but of the Roman Pontiff!

The other solitary reference to primacy is worthy of very close inspection as it brings much needed clarity to the topic at hand. It occurs when the Council speaks of "the absolute primacy of the objective moral order that affects the entire being of man" (cf *Inter Mirifica* 6).

So what exactly is this "objective moral order" that enjoys "absolute primacy," how do we come to know it, and what is its relationship to conscience?

First and foremost, we should note well that the moral order of which the Council speaks is "objective." This means that it is not subject to the dictates of individual calculation; rather, it refers to that law which is given. Coming as it does from God Himself; it is therefore absolute. Now, this divine law is indeed communicated in man's conscience, but only inasmuch as the conscience is properly formed and instructed, not by feelings and opinions, but by the truth as revealed and presented for belief by the Church as Holy Mother.

The Council speaks of this divine law in *Gaudium et Spes* as follows:

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged (GS 16).

One should notice that the voice of conscience as described here speaks to us "when necessary." Examples of such necessity might be in the face of temptation or perhaps in situations where we really are not clear as to what is required of us. This is important; it means that the conscience is not to be treated, as some do, like a sort of "second opinion" when we already possess full knowledge of the demands of God's truth as given to us by the Church.

To instruct one's conscience rightly so that it might speak in the voice of the Lord, according to the Council, is a solemn duty that all of us share.

"All men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth" (*Dignitatis Humanae* 2).

"In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. For the Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth" (*Dignitatis Humanae* 14).

As one can plainly see, there really is no such thing as "primacy of conscience." In fact, the phrase is truly little more than a slogan for dissent that turns conciliar teaching on its head. The only primacy that truly exists according to the Council is the primacy of Christ; He who is the Truth and who speaks to us through the Church.

John Henry Cardinal Newman perhaps summed it up best when he said, "Conscience is a messenger of Him, who both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil and teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ."

So go ahead, follow your conscience; just make sure it is Christ who is speaking.

**NOTE:** Our reading continues in GS 23-45 which follows. Remember to keep GS 22 in mind, and always, enter the document in prayer.



*Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, benedicta tu in mulieribus,  
et benedictus fructus ventris tui Iesus...*

**\* The official English language version of each Council document addressed in *Harvesting the Fruit of Vatican II* is reprinted therein by permission of the Holy See. The documents are broken down into segments for each individual lesson making it easy for participants to navigate its text. For the sake of brevity, the Council documents are not reproduced in the SAMPLE LESSONS.**

## Study Questions

Following many of the questions, a number will appear in brackets that corresponds to the relevant paragraph in the Council document. This is intended to serve only as a guide as relevant insights may be found in the commentary and elsewhere.

1. GS 23 offers, “Since rather recent documents of the Church's teaching authority have dealt at considerable length with Christian doctrine about human society, this council is merely going to call to mind some of the more basic truths, treating their foundations under the light of revelation...” What does this say about the context in which we should read *Gaudium et Spes*? What danger exists if we miss this important statement?

2. Read CCC 356-357. What is the basis for human dignity? What characteristics are unique to mankind among all of creation? (Notice how often *Gaudium et Spes* is referenced in this section of the Catechism.) [24]

3. Read John 17:19-23. GS 24 speaks of the likeness of God – Who is Himself a unity of Persons – as it is reflected in man and how this compels humankind to unity as well. According to Jesus’ prayer, what is required in order for God-like unity to exist among people?

4. Review GS 25 in which the Council tells us that there are certain “social ties which man needs for his development.” (We can understand this “development” as a matter of developing the dignity that is proper to man, i.e. perfecting man’s likeness to God.) What social ties exist in your life and how do they contribute to your development?

5. GS 25 points out some of the real dangers associated with socialization. We are told that social conditions can “spur men to evil.” What kinds of conditions come to mind? Are social conditions the primary cause of evil? Explain.

6. What are the key components of the “common good” and upon what must the social order be founded in order to promote it? [26]

7. In his Encyclical Letter, *Quadragesimo Anno*, (which *Gaudium et Spes* references no less than nine times) Pope Pius XI says, “No one can be at the same time a good Catholic and a true socialist.” Recall that in 1965 as the Council Fathers wrote the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was a menacing world power and an oppressor of Christians, even as its political system claimed to exist for the common good. While the Council condemned neither socialism nor communism by name, look carefully once again at GS 26 and make note of its many references to freedom, both explicit and implied. What do you see?

8. Read Acts 4:32-34 and review GS 30. How did the early Christian community reflect the qualities that the Council is urging of modern society?

9. Read Matthew 16:24-27. After warning of the strong temptations that accompany human progress due to the spiritual battle that runs throughout human history, the Council goes on to tell us “how this unhappy situation can be overcome.” The answer lies in “the power of Christ's cross and resurrection.” How does the passage from Matthew speak to this truth? [37]

10. Read Revelation 21:1-4 and carefully consider the final paragraph of Chapter III. (GS 39 § 4) At the fulfillment of God's Kingdom, what is to happen to the earth, to the works of our hands, to our social realities, etc.; in short, the things of this life?



## Reflections

1. In GS 27, the Council tells us that “everyone must consider his every neighbor without exception as another self.” Consider those people in your life, in your community, and even in the world that you find the most difficult to view as another self. Who are they? How might you go about, as an act of the will, placing yourself “in their shoes” and viewing them more as another self?
2. We considered in this lesson the Council’s warning concerning socialization; how it can present dangers as well as blessings. Are there any social ties, circumstances or groups with which you associate, or social activities in which you engage, etc., which create the near occasion of sin or impel you to reflect God’s likeness less perfectly than you might otherwise? Is there a course of action you can take to become a force for good within these situations? Is it possible that you may need to disconnect from these circumstances entirely?
3. The Council Fathers exhort believers “to purify and renew themselves so that the sign of Christ can shine more brightly on the face of the earth.” What specifically “purifies” and “renews” you? What parts of your life most stand in need of purification and renewal today? How will address this need?

## Consulting the Catechism

CCC 1930 Respect for the human person entails respect for the rights that flow from his dignity as a creature. These rights are prior to society and must be recognized by it. They are the basis of the moral legitimacy of every authority: by flouting them, or refusing to recognize them in its positive legislation, a society undermines its own moral legitimacy. If it does not respect them, authority can rely only on force or violence to obtain obedience from its subjects. It is the Church's role to remind men of good will of these rights and to distinguish them from unwarranted or false claims.



## Action Plan

Review your answers to the Reflection Questions and consider a goal for each one that will help you to make the transition from Reflection to Action. Commit to carrying out one action for each of your three reflections; this week, in the months ahead, and long term.

An action I can carry out this week:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

An action I can carry out this month or next:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Long term goals:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## Mass Intention

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## Suggested Responses

1. The Council Fathers make it clear in GS 23 that the Constitution is not intended to serve as a thorough catechesis on Catholic social teaching; rather it is meant to be read in context with certain “recent documents of the Church’s teaching authority.” If we follow the footnotes, we find that the documents to which the Council is referring are the Encyclical Letters of John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, (1961) and *Pacem in Terris*, (1963) and the Encyclical Letter of Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964.) It is important for us to recognize these caveats when they appear. The Council is essentially telling us, “If you want a complete presentation of Catholic social doctrine, you must look beyond what is presented here.” This sort of explanatory note is found in other parts of the conciliar texts as well, e.g. in *Apostolicam Actuositatem* the Council Fathers make it clear that they are not attempting to give a full treatment of the laity’s relationship with the hierarchy, and they footnote those other documents that provide greater context. Another example can be found in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* when the Council refers to Pius X’s treatment of sacred music rather than attempting to redefine its proper expression in the sacred liturgy from scratch. If one were to miss references such as these, it can easily lead to the mistaken notion that the document in hand is all that the Church has to say on the subject, and this of course can lead to faulty interpretations. In this we find a microcosm of the Council itself; all of the conciliar teaching must be viewed within the context of everything that preceded it and not as a wholly new beginning containing all that the Church has to offer.

2. The Catechism tells us that man is unique among all creation in that he is the only visible creature that is able to know and to love the Creator. Notice the word “visible.” This refers, of course, to the angels; purely spiritual beings that also have the capacity for knowing and loving God. CCC 356 repeats a phrase from *Gaudium et Spes* which says that man is “the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake.” The rest of creation is intended to serve the needs of man, and it is man alone who is called into a relationship of loving self-donation with God. It is this relationship with the Creator, the CCC (after the teaching of the Constitution) tells us that this is the “fundamental reason” for human dignity. Man is also unique in his capacity for self-knowledge and self-possession; requirements of authentic love (self-donation) since one cannot give that which he does not possess, nor can he give fully and sincerely give that which he does not know. Acting on this ability to love is the key to self-discovery; as GS 24 tells us that man “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.” Man is uniquely capable of entering into a covenant relationship not only with God, but with other persons as well as in the case of marriage.

3. In what is often referred to as the “Priestly Prayer” recorded in John 17, Jesus prayed for unity among His followers and in so doing, the Council tells us, “He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity” (GS 24). The first thing we see in Jesus’ prayer as a requirement of such unity is God’s grace, which Jesus refers to as “the glory which [the Father] has given” to the Son. Jesus in turn dispenses this glory, God’s grace, to us, “that they may be one even as we are one.” We should also notice that unity among men comes from unity with Christ. (“I in them and thou in me...”) This is decidedly Eucharistic language that should call to mind Holy Communion in the Blessed Sacrament. (The Bread of Life discourse recorded in John 6 should naturally come to mind as well.) Notice too that Jesus is praying for all to become “perfectly one;” a unity so profound as to testify to the Father. (“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”) Needless to say, such unity can never

be achieved apart from our dependence upon Christ who alone unites God and man and makes true unity among His members possible. This is why attempts to emphasize communion among the members of the worshipping community, even as Holy Communion with Christ in the Eucharist is not the primary focus, always ring hollow. Lastly, the simple fact that Jesus is praying for unity suggests that prayer is itself a necessary requirement of unity among peoples; i.e., we too must pray for unity.

4. Answers will vary from person to person when asked about the social affiliations that contribute to their personal development, but one thing the Council makes certain in GS 25; such ties are needed. This flows naturally from the teaching found in GS 24 and elsewhere; man was not created to exist as a solitary being and he cannot therefore truly “find himself” in solitude. While properly speaking the Church is far more than simply a social institution, it does in fact have “a visible social structure” (LG 8) and as such one answer common to most people will involve the indispensably valuable social ties that exist within the Church. Some of us enjoy social ties within a study group, an evangelization movement like Militia of the Immaculata, within an organization like Knights of Columbus, or perhaps just in more loosely defined gatherings that simply share faith and friendship. Our social ties exist in secular organizations of various kinds as well; those centered on politics, professional affiliations, recreational activities, etc. These too contribute to man’s well being and development, and the possibilities are nearly endless.

5. The Council Fathers say that certain social conditions can actually “divert men from doing good” and can “spur him toward evil.” Conditions like poverty, widespread violence, oppression, lack of opportunity in education and employment, etc. come to mind as the underlying circumstances that can in some way spur men to evil. This should engender in each of us deep sense of responsibility for influencing the broader culture in a way that urges its social structures toward the true good. Notice well that the Council is not saying that social conditions alone urge men to evil. Man’s fallen nature and sinfulness are the pre-existing inducements to evil, social conditions simply contribute to diverting man’s attention from seeking and doing good. It’s important to acknowledge this lest we find in social conditions an exemption from personal responsibility and the call to personal holiness that every man must heed. Our social structures can only be kept in the light of truth thereby directing its members toward good by “strenuous efforts and the assistance of grace.” This is vitally important to acknowledge; the Council is telling us that man on his own cannot form a society that is truly good apart from God. Note this well; it is one of the caveats that those who believe *Gaudium et Spes* is overly anthropocentric have missed.

6. The phrase “common good” is often invoked in the political arena to justify certain policies and programs, and while opinions will certainly vary concerning how best to accomplish the common good, the Council offers some important guidelines for identifying what can rightly be considered an authentic expression of its achievement. At the very heart of GS 26 the Council tells us that the social order “must invariably work to the benefit of the human person.” In other words, it must uphold and affirm human dignity and all that goes with it. The Council lists some basic things that should be made available to man in a social order that is directed toward the common good; these include food, clothing, shelter, employment, education, etc. These things, however, are not to be viewed as ends unto themselves; rather they are to be viewed as expressions of society’s awareness of “the exalted dignity proper to the human person.” This

dignity is founded upon man's likeness to God and his call to communion with Him. It should therefore come as no surprise then that the social order, in service to man's dignity, "must be founded on truth, built on justice and animated by love." As Catholics we know that truth is not simply a concept, rather it is a Person; Jesus Christ. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council Fathers are making exactly this point; all things find their highest expression and ultimate fulfillment in Christ.

7. If we read GS 26 carefully we will notice that the concept of freedom is woven throughout this brief treatment of the common good. For example, the Council tells us that the social order itself requires freedom saying, "In freedom it should grow every day toward a more humane balance." All men, the Council says, must be afforded a "rightful freedom, even in matters religious." (The Council expounds on this theme in more detail in a separate document, *Dignitatis Humanae*.) The Council also alludes to freedom indirectly, but no less clearly, in several other ways. Notice that it speaks not simply of a society that meets man's *needs* alone (food, clothing, shelter,) but also his "*aspirations*." (This is why the preferential option for the poor, as we discussed in the previous lesson, involves not just in giving "things," but also in creating opportunity.) Notice too that the various goods listed in GS 26 are not to be *given* by society (or the state) per se, they are to be "made available" to man within society. This is an important distinction. To miss it is to see a sort of socialism being encouraged here that the Council did not intend. As the Council met, Communism was imposing its will on many of the world's citizens under the pretense of meeting all of his needs, and while the Council Fathers chose not to address Communism by name, their approach to the social order confronts its errors head on. They say that the social order is to be "subordinate to the personal realm." To make their point they referenced the words of Christ, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." In other words, man is not at the service of the social order (or the state as in Communism) rather the social order is to be built at the service of man in accord with his dignity.

8. In Acts 4 we are told that the early Christian community enjoyed incredible unity; the members were of "one heart and soul," and each one attended to the needs of the other such that "there was not a needy person among them." The Council urges us to unity by attending to our own obligations of "justice and love" by "contributing to the common good according to our own abilities," supporting those "public and private institutions" that truly meet the needs of others. (The obvious implication here is that we should refrain from supporting institutions that undermine the common good.) The centerpiece of the Christian community described in Acts 4 is the gospel - "With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus," and as a result, "great grace was upon them all." According to the Council, developing a society that meets the broader needs of the community of man requires that each individual person "cultivate themselves in the moral and social virtues," i.e. individual holiness is critical. This, we are told, is not accomplished by sheer human effort alone, but rather "with the needed help of divine grace." This speaks rather clearly to the problem of what I like to call "I'm a good person syndrome," a form of secular humanism in which we alone determine what constitutes the norms of upright living. While its adherents may engage in charitable works and can often be considered "nice people," by exalting man apart from God, (apart from the gospel) the door is thrown open to all manner of immorality that is misnamed as good. Why? Because development in the moral life as GS 30 makes clear can only take place by the grace of God; He who alone is able to give us the knowledge of good and evil. (The example of Eden should come to mind once again.)

9. The Council tells us that the remedy to the “unhappy situation” of the “monumental struggle against the powers of darkness that pervades the whole history of man” can be found in the cross. “All human activity, constantly imperiled by man's pride and deranged self-love, must be purified and perfected by the power of Christ's cross and resurrection.” St. Paul tells us that the power of the cross is “the very power of God” (cf 1 Cor 1:18). Jesus elaborates on this in Mt. 16 when He essentially tells His disciples that it is in the power of self-donating love that man “finds his life.” We encountered this theme in GS 24 which told us that man “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.” To “pick up one's cross and follow Jesus” is to learn from His example of love; His perfect obedience to the Father in truth, no matter what the “worldly” voices may say. (“Come down from your cross and save yourself!” – Mark 15:30) It is only in loving self-sacrifice that man avoids the temptations that accompany human progress. We see this in many ways in our own day as all manner of evil is justified in order to avoid suffering (e.g. abortion, euthanasia); we see it in the greediness of some worldly rich who live in spiritual poverty (tyrannical dictators who live in opulence while the citizenry suffers) and in those who measure their own worth by the goods they accumulate (even though the Council tells us that “man is more precious for what he is than for what he has”). In Christ and by the example of His cross, suffering and death are no longer meaningless; they no longer have the final word. Joined to Him our struggles have new meaning; they can become, by grace, the key to unity among men and the gateway to life.

10. The Council Fathers are teaching us a truly remarkable thing in GS 39; “indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured, when Christ hands over to the Father: a kingdom eternal and universal, a kingdom of truth and life...” Think about what they are saying; not only will we endure, but even the works of our hands will not pass away! “All the good fruits of our nature and enterprise” will be resurrected along with our bodies in the new earth when the fullness of God's kingdom becomes a present reality at the end of time. The things of this life will be purified, fully redeemed in Christ; they will be made new, but they will not simply be gone. This is an incredible teaching! It lends meaning to all of our good efforts as coworkers in the Lord's vineyard on this earth. It means that we are not simply passing the time, nor are our efforts only directed toward growing in personal holiness in service to others – as wonderful as that is. No, our work on earth can rightly be considered building the things of the eternal Kingdom which is present in the here-and-now albeit imperfectly. While we really don't know exactly how all things will be transformed, we do know that they will. This is quite different from believing that the world in which we live and all that we do bears no eternal value. We get a sense in Revelation 21 that the “new earth” is the material universe renewed as a dwelling place for God and His people following the physical resurrection of the body at the end of time. This also points to the notion that our social institutions and the ties that they facilitate among humankind also have eternal value as the interrelationship of mankind will endure in the Kingdom where unity will at last be perfected.



## Summary

In this lesson we learned:

1. “Primacy of conscience” is a misrepresentation of the Council’s actual teachings. One has the duty to form one’s conscience rightly in keeping with God’s law.
2. Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself, i.e. self-donating love.
3. Unity among mankind cannot be achieved apart from unity with God in whose image and likeness we are created.
4. Properly understood, Catholic doctrine concerning social justice does not embrace socialism; rather it teaches that respect for man’s freedom is a necessary requirement of social enterprises that uphold human dignity.
5. All the good fruits of our nature and enterprise will be fully redeemed in Christ at the end of time; they have eternal value. We are building, in some way, the eternal Kingdom.

