

Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*)

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http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

We noted in our first discussion that there are four cornerstone *constitutions* that inform all the other documents, with the Constitution on God's Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) having pride of place. *Lumen Gentium* is also fundamental, because it defines who we are as church. It is one of the longer documents, and fairly complex.

Chapter I The Mystery of the Church

What is Old?	What is New?
<p>Catholics knew well the "Seven Sacraments" of the church. ...</p> <p>In the older understanding, the Church is a "perfect society," paralleling the civil society.</p> <p>In the theology manuals since the Council of Trent, the discussion began with a description of the church as an infallible hierarchical society let by the Pope, with all the official ministers ranked below, with little mention of the faithful, except that they had to obey those above them.</p> <p>Only a few Bible citations would be made, as "proof texts," such as Mt. 16:18.</p> <p>Pope Pius XII had introduced the image of "Mystical Body of Christ" a few years previous to the Council, but many Catholics would have considered this a "new" teaching (if they had heard of it at all)..</p>	<p>#1</p> <p>... but it would not have occurred to people to speak of the church itself as a "<i>sacrament</i> of intimate union with God." (the Greek <i>mysterion</i> can be translated into Latin both as <i>mysterium</i> (as it is here) or <i>sacramentum</i>.</p> <p><i>Lumen Gentium</i>, taking a cue from <i>Dei Verbum</i> (#3), begins with the history of salvation.</p> <p>#6</p> <p>This paragraph lists several images from the Bible that describe the church: God's sheepfold, God's estate, a building with Christ as cornerstone, temple of living stones, new Jerusalem, God's spouse.</p> <p>#7 & 8</p> <p>Chapter I comes to a climax by elaborating the church as Body of Christ, an image which continues to be a rich and comprehensive way to understand the church.</p>

Chapter II The People of God

What is Old?	What is New?
<p>Some theologians, including young Joseph Ratzinger, would have preferred to climax Chapter I with the biblical image: <i>People of God</i>; making <i>Body of Christ</i> the focus of Chapter II. But the drafting committee chose to use <i>People of God</i> as the organizing principle of this whole document, which all the bishops voted to accept.</p> <p>Ratzinger settled the issue in his own mind by realizing that the underlying reality that defines the church is Communion, and both of these images support Communion. (Ratzinger, "Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality" (<i>Concilium</i>, vol. 1, no. 1, January, 1965.)</p>	<p>#10, 11, 12, 13, 14</p> <p>Practically everything in Chapter II is a fresh understanding. The whole people shares in Christ's work of salvation as priest, prophet and shepherd. "The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood, though they differ in essence and not simply in degree, are nevertheless interrelated: each in its own particular way shares in the one priesthood of Christ. ... [T]he faithful... by virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist, and they exercise their priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer... and by active charity." The whole People exercises Christ's priesthood by virtue of their baptism (i.e., they are not delegated to do so by the hierarchy).</p> <p>#16</p> <p>Catholic theology has long held the notion of "baptism of desire;" but this paragraph makes it clear that the whole human family is related to the People of God in some way. For example, God never retracts his covenant with the Jewish people; the plan of salvation includes Muslims and others who acknowledge the Creator; and all those who seek God with a sincere heart even if they have not arrived at an explicit knowledge of God.</p>

[Chapter IV will outline the life of the laity in more detail; Chapter V will set forth the universal call to holiness; and there will be an entire separate document on the Apostolate of the Laity.]

Chapter III The Hierarchical Constitution of the Church

Chapter III is a reform of the ordained ministry, using the principle of *ressourcement*: going back to the source, ie, the organization of ministries found in the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles, the early post-apostolic church (eg, the *Didache*) and the early Fathers. There we find three orders: Overseer, Presbyter and Deacon.

What is Old?	What is New?
<p>The notion of an orderly authority in the Church has been assumed since its beginnings. The concept of the church as <i>hierarchy</i> was promoted by Pseudo-Dionysius, a Syrian monk in late 400's.</p> <p>As a "perfect society," parallel to the Feudal social structure, people are grouped into two classes: clerics and laity (similar to royals and commoners). Being initiated into the clerical <i>estate</i> by Tonsure was a prerequisite for ordained ministry.</p> <p>Being a tonsured cleric gave a man a separate legal standing – he could not be arrested or tried by the civil authorities; he was subject to the legal procedures of the church.</p> <p>Many boys and young men were tonsured simply because they were privileged enough to be sent to school. If a man appeared to be called to ordination, there were four steps called <i>Minor Orders</i> (Porter, Lector, Exorcist and Acolyte).</p> <p>There were three <i>Major Orders</i> (Subdeacon, Deacon and Priest).</p> <p>Technically each order had its origins as a separate ministry in the ancient church and could stand on its own. But from the middle ages, they were simply stepping-stones during one's training for the priesthood.</p> <p>Priesthood was the highest step in the hierarchy of Holy Orders.</p> <p><i>Bishop</i> was not a separate order; it was a jurisdictional authority that might be given to a priest.</p> <p>#29 At the lower degree of the hierarchy stand deacons, on whom hands are imposed "not for the priesthood, but for the ministry." In the Latin Rite, however, the Order of Deacon was the last step to priesthood, and did not stand on its own.</p>	<p>#22 The person of each bishop makes the living Christ present in the local community; and bishops exercise their ministry in their own right. (They are not delegated as "vicars" of the Roman Pontiff.) All the bishops throughout the world live in communion with one another and with the Bishop of Rome in a bond of unity, charity and peace. They exercise their ministry in collegiality, and when acting as one communion, they participate in the infallible teaching ministry of the Church.</p> <p>[In much of this section, and in the whole document on the bishops, the Council Fathers explicitly completed the unfinished work of the First Vatican Council, which had promoted the infallibility of the Bishop of Rome, but left the bishops looking like feudal vassals of the pope.]</p> <p>#28 Presbyters are the counselors to the bishop, and cooperators with the Episcopal college; they serve the people of God in various ways in individual congregations. The Council Fathers assigned an interesting unique ministry to presbyters: "Since today the human race is moving together more and more towards civil, economic and social unity, it is that much more necessary that priests by their united care and resources... wipe out every cause of division so that the whole human race may be brought into the unity of God's family." Priests who were ordained in the years immediately following the Council took these words as a guiding light, seeing themselves as "servant leaders" in the community.</p> <p>#29 Deacons are at the service of the people of God in the ministry of the liturgy, the word and charity; ... administer baptism solemnly, reserve and distribute the Eucharist, bless marriages, take viaticum to the dying, read sacred scripture to the faithful, instruct and exhort the people, preside at the worship and prayer of the faithful, administer sacramentals, preside at funerals and burials, and be dedicated to duties of charity and administration, bearing in mind the words of Polycarp: "Be merciful, zealous, and walking in accordance with the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all."</p> <p>"Since these tasks, which are supremely necessary for the life of the church, can only with difficulty be carried out in many regions, according to the current discipline of the Latin church, the diaconate can for the future be restored as a proper and permanent grade of the hierarchy. It is, however, the responsibility of the competent territorial conferences of bishops ... to decide with the approval of the supreme pontiff himself whether and where it is opportune for such deacons to be appointed for the care of souls. With the consent of the Roman pontiff it will be possible to confer this diaconate on men of more mature age, even upon those living in the married state, and also on suitable young men for whom, however, the law of celibacy must remain in force."</p> <p>[These two paragraphs are the only place where the Council promoted the idea of permanent deacons. The retrieval of the permanent diaconate in the Latin church caused considerable debate. In Europe and North America in 1964 there were plenty of priests to do all the things listed here; but in missionary areas there was a real need to expand the number of available official ministers. These bishops pushed for the permanent diaconate, as well as making <i>Catechist</i> a formal ministry in the Church.]</p>

Chapter IV The Laity

What is Old?	What is New?
<p>As recently as Pope Pius X, the laity were expected merely to pray, pay and obey (the Six Precepts of the Church). But throughout the first half of the twentieth century Pope Leo XIII, Benedict XV and Pius XI inspired the practice of so-called “<i>Catholic Action</i>.” But it was defined as: “the laity assisting the clergy in the <i>clergy’s</i> mission.”</p> <p>This is re-worded in #32: “The laity, just as they have Christ as their brother... so also they have as brothers those who have been appointed [by ordination] to the sacred ministry and who by Christ’s authority – through teaching, sanctifying and governing – so look after the family of God that the new commandment of love is fulfilled by all.”</p> <p>The use of the word “ministry” in #30 and in #32 illustrates one of the differences of opinion that existed side-by-side in the Council debates. In #32, only the ordained are said to have “ministry” properly speaking. But #30 uses the word ministry to describe the work of the laity. This debate continues until today. The final draft of the USCCB statement “Coworkers in the Vineyard” used the term to describe lay <i>ministry</i>. Some bishops questioned this, but Cardinal Dulles spoke in favor of broadening the term <i>ministry</i> to all church workers who are formally prepared, accepted and commissioned. The bishops then voted in favor of using the term <i>ministry</i> to describe any service that requires personal aptitude, proper formation, and formal recognition by the community. [This is <i>distinct</i> from the ordinary Christian responsibilities that all the baptized do as they participate in the priesthood of Christ.]</p> <p>#37 All the faithful should be prompt to accept in a spirit of Christian obedience those decisions that the sacred pastors make as teachers and governors of the church and as representatives of Christ; in doing so they follow the example of Christ, who by his obedience unto death opened to all people the blessed way of the freedom of the children of God.</p>	<p>#30 The major shift in Catholic understanding articulated in this chapter and in the document on the laity is that <i>all</i> members of the church have a call to share in Christ’s saving work in their own right, by virtue of their baptism. “The sacred pastors are well aware how much the laity contribute to the well-being of the whole church. They [the pastors] know that they were not instituted by Christ to undertake by themselves alone the church’s whole mission of salvation to the world; it is their noble task to tend the faithful, and to acknowledge their ministries and their charisms, so that all may cooperate each in her or his own way, unanimously, in the common task.”</p> <p>#33 This section identifies two distinct forms of lay apostolate: “The apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the church’s mission of salvation, and everyone is commissioned to this apostolate by the Lord himself through baptism and confirmation. ... The laity have the specific vocation to make the church present and active in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth.” “... [T]he laity can also be called in various ways to a more immediate cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy, like those men and women who assisted the apostle Paul... They may also be appointed by the hierarchy to carry out certain ecclesiastical offices which have a spiritual aim in view.”</p> <p>#35 Christian marriage and family life has a special value in the laity’s prophetic office. In addition: “Some lay people, when there is a shortage of sacred ministers, supply some of the sacred offices in so far as they can; a greater number are engaged totally in apostolic work.”</p> <p>#36 The faithful must distinguish between their obligations as members of the church as distinct from their duties as members of the human society, and work to harmonize the two, without allowing the world to overwhelm the work of God.</p> <p>#37 The laity have the right to receive help from the pastors, and they should make known to the pastors their needs and desires. “They have the right and indeed sometimes the duty to make known their opinion on matters which concern the good of the church. If possible this should be done through the institutions set up for this purpose; and it should always be done with respect for the truth, with courage and prudence.” “The sacred pastors are to acknowledge and promote the dignity and the responsibility of the laity, make use of their prudent counsel, confidently entrust to them offices in service of the church and leave them freedom and space to act; indeed, encourage them to take up work on their own initiative.”</p>

Chapter V The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church
Chapter VI Religious

These two brief chapters could more logically have been combined into one statement. There is little new in them, except that they do not support the common medieval impression that countless hapless souls are pouring over the edge of the earth into hell every day, which was a common opinion among Catholics in mid-twentieth century.

What is Old?	What is New?
<p>#39 The church is “indefectibly holy as a matter of faith” because Christ loved the church as his bride. There is little awareness, however, that some members are not very holy, but are called to conversion.</p> <p>#41 Bishops, priests and religious are not said to be more holy than laity; however, “<i>in the first place</i>” bishops are called to exercise their ministry with holiness; then priests who “form the spiritual crown of the bishop;” then clerics, then married people, then widows and single people and finally “those also who are crushed by poverty, weakness, or various hardships, or who suffer persecution for the sake of justice... united with Christ in suffering for the world’s salvation.”</p> <p>The reader, having been edified by Chapters II and IV, might have expected that this list of holy people might have <i>begun</i> with the universal human condition of suffering and poverty, which characterizes the whole People of God, identifying with the Son of God who did not cling onto divine stature, but emptied himself, becoming like us.</p> <p>There is no reference to Third Orders of Dominic and Francis, nor of the belief and practice of people like Ignatius Loyola, Francis de Sales, or Vincent de Paul – all of whom famously promoted the universal call to holiness.</p>	<p>#39 The fruits of the Spirit are given to all members of the church. The evangelical counsels [poverty, chastity (here identified with virginity) and obedience] are recommended, but as unique gifts to some, rather than the norm for all.</p> <p>#40 “It is evident to everyone that all the faithful, whatever their condition or rank, are called to the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of charity.”</p> <p>#41 In different kinds of life and its different duties, there is one holiness cultivated by all who are led by the Spirit of God.</p> <p>#42 This section would have made a more appropriate opening paragraph of this chapter. It begins with Bible references (I Jn 4:16; Rom 5:5) stating that holiness is a character of all those who abide in God, into whose hearts the Holy Spirit has poured love. Charity is the essential nature of holiness, sustained by the Eucharist and the Liturgy. “Hence the true disciples of Christ are noted both for love of God and love of neighbor.” The evangelical counsels are recommended as models for all the faithful, but in an abstract and general way.</p> <p>#44 The council acknowledges that vowed profession of evangelical councils unquestionably belongs to the church’s life and holiness, even though it does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the church.</p>

Chapter VI (#43-47)

This chapter is a conventional description of vowed religious life, as a model and edification for the laity. [There will be a separate document on Religious Life.]

Chapter VII The Eschatological Character of the Pilgrim Church

What is Old?	What is New?
<p>This chapter is a recasting of the traditional belief in the Communion of Saints: Church <i>Militant</i>, Church <i>Suffering</i>, and Church <i>Triumphant</i>. The notion of “Pilgrim Church” is a more biblical, somewhat more integral and holistic image than “soldiers of Christ.” But the strong emphasis is on the <i>destiny</i> of the pilgrimage – the Eschatological fulfillment with Mary and all the saints in the heavenly Jerusalem. The <i>earthly</i> pilgrimage is merely mentioned, with very little said about how we might navigate it.</p> <p>The Council eventually <i>did</i>, however, deal with the Church’s earthly pilgrimage – in <i>The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)</i>.</p>	<p>#48 “Already the end of the ages has reached us (I Cor 10, 11) and the renewal of this world has been irrevocably constituted and is being anticipated in this world in a real sense: for already on earth the church is adorned with true (though imperfect) holiness. ... [T]he pilgrim church in its sacraments and institutions, which belong to this age, carries the figure of this world which is passing, dwelling among creatures who groan and till now are in the pains of child-birth awaiting the revelation of the children of God (Rom 8:19-22).”</p> <p>#51 Devotions to the saints are affirmed, with the caution that they do not take the place of the Worship of God.</p>

Chapter VIII The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church

There was considerable debate over how the Council should present the Virgin Mary. Mariology was a booming industry at the time of the Council (Lourdes, Fatima, etc.), and a working document had been prepared to present an independent teaching on Mary. It built on the ancient cult of Mary, Mother of God, which, in the nineteenth century was highlighted by the declaration of the Immaculate Conception, and more recently in 1954 the dogma of the Assumption. The schema then went on to propose some newer ideas, such as Mary, Co-redemptrix.

Many Council Fathers were uncomfortable with this. The whole purpose of this council was *aggiornamento* – to update the Church in its encounter with the modern world. This trend of ever-increasing focus on Mary seemed to overshadow the desire to stress the central role of Christ in the modern church and modern world. They decided to employ *ressourcement* rather than further development. They stated explicitly that the council intends to illustrate carefully both the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the proper response of the faithful, “without however intending to put forward a complete doctrine concerning Mary or of settling questions which have not yet been brought fully to light through the work of theologians” (#54). The bishops decided to make this statement about Mary as the climactic chapter on the larger teaching on the church.

What is Old?	What is New?
<p>#61 “She conceived Christ, gave birth to him and nourished him, presented him to the Father in the temple, and suffered with her son as he was dying on the cross; in doing all this she cooperated in a very special way in the work of the savior – through her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity – towards the restoration of the supernatural life of souls. For this reason she has become our mother in the order of grace.”</p> <p>#62 “This motherhood of Mary in the economy of grace goes on without interruption ... For assumed into heaven she has not put aside this saving role, rather she continues by her many prayers of intercession to obtain for us gifts of eternal salvation... who are still on our pilgrimage.”</p> <p>#64 “The church, contemplating her hidden holiness and imitating her love, and faithfully carrying out the will of the Father, by faithfully accepting the word of God also becomes a mother: for by preaching and baptism it brings forth to new and immortal life children conceived of the holy Spirit and born of God.”</p> <p>#66 The cult of Mary, although she is above all the angels and saints, “differs essentially from the cult of adoration which is given to the Incarnate Word and equally to the Father and the holy Spirit...”</p>	<p>#53 “In view of the merits of her Son, redeemed in a more sublime manner and united to her Son by a tight and indissoluble bond, she is enriched by this supreme office and dignity of being the mother of God the Son, and therefore she is the specially loved daughter of the Father and the shrine of the Holy Spirit; and by this gift of pre-eminent grace she surpasses by far all other creatures in heaven and on earth. At the same time, however, she is united in Adam’s race with all human beings who are to be saved. Therefore she is also acknowledged as the super-eminent and uniquely special member of the church as well as its model in faith and love and its most outstanding exemplar; and the catholic church treats her as its most loving mother.”</p> <p>Sections #55-58 summarize the image and role of Mary in the Scriptures, from the book of Genesis to the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation. These are familiar teachings, but the document is more conscious of Mary’s place in the overall mystery of Salvation History.</p>

The entire Constitution *Lumen Gentium* concludes with this final paragraph:

#69

“It brings great joy to this holy synod that people are not lacking among our separated sisters and brothers who duly honor the mother of our Lord and Savior, especially among Eastern Christians who honor the ever virgin mother of God with fervor and devotion. Let all Christians pour forth insistent prayers to the mother of God and mother of the human race that she who stood by the primitive church with her prayers, now also, exalted in heaven above all the blessed and the angels, in communion with all the saints may intercede with her son so that all the families of peoples, both those that are honored by the Christian name and those who do not yet know their savior, may be happily gathered together in peace and harmony into one people of God to the glory of the most holy and undivided Trinity.”

What is the impact of this document on the Catholic experience today?