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REVISITING THE RECEPTION OF *GAUDIUM ET SPES*'S VISION OF THE CHURCH-WORLD RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

This year, 2025, marks the 60th anniversary of *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. As one of the landmark documents of the Second Vatican Council, it is renowned for articulating a vision of the Church's

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openness to the world—an aspect widely regarded as a hallmark of the Council. However, the post-conciliar reception of this vision has generally been characterized by two contrasting attitudes. On the one hand, this openness is seen positively as a necessary step for the Church to engage more meaningfully with the contemporary world. On the other hand, it has been viewed as an overly optimistic stance that risks relativizing the Christian faith. In this article, by rereading *Gaudium et Spes*, we propose that these two perspectives need not be understood as opposing positions. Even if the document's worldview may appear excessively optimistic, it does not necessarily lead to relativism. Rather, the Church's more dialogical engagement with the world should be welcomed so long as it remains rooted in Gospel values and the faithful proclamation of the truth. In other words, the dialogical and the kerygmatic approaches are not mutually exclusive; they can—and must—complement each other.

Key Words: *Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes, the Church, the World, the middle position*

Introduction

The vision of *Gaudium et Spes* regarding the Church's openness to the world has been widely acknowledged as one of the defining features of the Second Vatican Council. Its post-conciliar reception, however, has been diverse and at times polarized. While some commentators have unreservedly welcomed this vision, others have offered a sharply critical assessment. Still, others have adopted a more nuanced stance, recognizing the inherent ambiguities and tensions in the document's call for engagement with the world. On the one hand, the Church's openness has been interpreted as a necessary and timely effort to render its presence and mission more relevant in a rapidly changing world. On the other hand, such openness has been viewed by some as excessively optimistic, potentially leading to a relativization of core Christian doctrines.

These two general positions represent a crystallization of broader trends in the reception of *Gaudium et Spes* and its reimagining of the Church-world relationship. Tracey Rowland, for instance, identifies at least five distinct approaches in the reception of this document, reflecting a wide spectrum of theological and ideological responses.²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 42-43.

The first position perceives *Gaudium et Spes*'s efforts to accommodate or correlate the Catholic faith with modern culture as an entirely positive development. This view is championed by figures such as Yves Congar and Nicholas Boyle. Congar, one of the principal architects of Vatican II, considered *Gaudium et Spes* as a decisive moment of *aggiornamento* – a renewal of the Church in dialogue with the contemporary world while remaining anchored in tradition. He emphasized the document's affirmation of human dignity (§ 22), its constructive treatment of culture (§§ 53-62), and its historical consciousness (§§ 4, 44), interpreting these elements as crucial for revitalizing the Church's evangelizing mission. For Congar, this was not a compromise with secularism but rather a retrieval of the Church's early openness to the world, a shift from defensiveness to active engagement.²⁷¹

Nicholas Boyle similarly interprets *Gaudium et Spes* as providing a robust theological framework for the Church's interaction with modernity. He underscores its Christological grounding – particularly in its depiction of Christ as the fulfillment of human aspirations (§§ 12-22), as well as its call for social justice (§§ 63-72), reading the document as a deepening rather than a dilution of doctrine. In his view, Catholic social teaching, as articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*, is a timely response to the ethical and economic dilemmas of modern life. Both Congar and Boyle, therefore, portray the document as a model for how the Church might illuminate and transform the world without abandoning its doctrinal foundations.²⁷²

The second position, often associated with traditionalist circles, adopts a diametrically opposed stance, seeing modernity as fundamentally incompatible with Catholic faith. This position rejects the accommodationist spirit of *Gaudium et Spes*, perceiving it as a dangerous departure from doctrinal purity. One of the most vocal exponents of this view was Archbishop Marcel-François Lefebvre,

²⁷¹ In his post-conciliar work *True and False Reform in the Church* (*Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Église*, 1950; revised 1968, 2011), Congar defends renewal as an intrinsic part of ecclesial life: "A Church that does not change is a Church that is not truly alive. Fidelity to tradition is not a matter of repetition but of renewal in continuity." Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, trans. Paul Philibert, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010.

²⁷² In *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney*, Boyle argues that *Gaudium et Spes* affirms that **Christianity must interpret and shape modern culture** rather than oppose it. Nicholas Boyle, *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney*, Edinburgh: Bloomsbury, T & T Clark, 1998.

who considered the document's engagement with modern culture to be deeply problematic. In his book, *An Open Letter to Confused Catholics*, Lefebvre contends that such efforts to align the Church with contemporary norms result in the erosion of traditional teachings and the emergence of what he calls a "new religion" – one that mirrors secular ideologies more than the Church's enduring truths, thereby undermining its spiritual authority.²⁷³ Lefebvre's critique rests on the conviction that the Church's identity must be preserved through unwavering fidelity to its historical teachings and liturgical practices. For him, the conciliatory tone of *Gaudium et Spes* threatens the very integrity of the Catholic faith. Thus, he advocates for a return to a pre-conciliar theological and ecclesial paradigm.

The third position also offers a negative assessment of *Gaudium et Spes*, albeit from a distinct theological standpoint. This view interprets the document as "the manifesto of a *bourgeois* revolution in modern Catholicism," marking a transition from the aristocratic resistance to modernity represented by Pius IX.²⁷⁴ However, proponents of this critique argue that what is needed is not a bourgeois revolution but a proletarian one – a more radical transformation coherent with the interests of the poor and marginalized. Theologians such as Johann Baptist Metz and Juan Luis Segundo embody this third perspective. From their vantage point, the optimistic tone of *Gaudium et Spes* fails to adequately grapple with the realities of systemic injustice and the lived experiences of the oppressed. Metz's "new political theology" and Segundo's liberationist approach both advocate for a more critical, disruptive, and prophetic engagement with modernity, rooted in solidarity with the poor. They argue that the Church must not merely engage modern culture but challenge its structures of power and privilege, moving beyond dialogue toward a praxis of transformation.²⁷⁵

Segundo specifically criticized *Gaudium et Spes* for its insufficient treatment of systemic injustice. While well-intentioned, he contended that the document lacks the depth of analysis and the urgency required to inspire transformative action in socio-political contexts

²⁷³ Marcel Lefebvre, *An Open Letter to Confused Catholics*, England: Fowler and Wright Books Ltd., 1986.

²⁷⁴ Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith*, 43.

²⁷⁵ Johann Baptist-Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. By. J. Matthew Ashley, New York: Paulist Press, 1998.

marked by oppression. Segundo called for a theology fundamentally grounded in the experiences of the marginalized, insisting that the Church's mission must involve solidarity and active participation in liberative praxis. His vision supports the liberation theology's overarching aim of confronting the root causes of injustice through sustained, context-sensitive engagement.²⁷⁶ While recognizing the significance of *Gaudium et Spes* as a moment of ecclesial openness, Metz and Segundo ultimately argue that the Church must move beyond dialogical engagement to a more profound and radical posture of social transformation. Their theological critiques underscore the need for a Church not only in the world but decisively with and for the oppressed, committed to the ongoing work of justice through concrete, transformative action.

Fourth, a position informed by postmodern critiques of modernity contends that the grand narratives, ideological frameworks, and socio-cultural projects of modernity, once deemed credible dialogue partners for the Church, have largely lost their legitimacy. Nevertheless, the original impulse of *Gaudium et Spes*, namely, the Church's commitment to dialogue with the contemporary world, remains a theologically significant endeavour. This standpoint is most notably articulated in the works of Lieven Boeve, a prominent Belgian theologian. Boeve offers a nuanced and constructive perspective on the Church's engagement with contemporary worldviews, particularly in light of postmodernity's challenge to universalist claims and normative modern ideologies. While acknowledging that modernity's grand projects have become increasingly suspect, Boeve nonetheless affirms that the dialogical ethos of *Gaudium et Spes* continues to offer a valuable theological orientation.

In his seminal work *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*, Boeve explores how the Church might faithfully transmit its tradition while engaging in authentic, critical, and context-sensitive dialogue with the pluralistic and fragmented perspectives characterizing postmodern societies. He argues that the Church must embrace a posture of openness, whereby its tradition is willing to be 'interrupted' – to 'be challenged and enriched by the questions and concerns arising from contemporary contexts. Boeve

²⁷⁶ Juan Louis Segundo, *A Theology for the Artisans of A New Humanity*, Trans. By John Drury, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011.

suggests that such interruptions do not threaten tradition but rather invite it to respond anew, revitalizing its relevance and credibility.²⁷⁷

Boeve further develops this approach in his article "Beyond the Modern-Anti-Modern Dilemma: *Gaudium et Spes* and Theological Method in a Postmodern Context." Here, he maintains that while the critiques of modernity are serious and valid, they do not invalidate the dialogical orientation of *Gaudium et Spes*. Rather, this orientation must be recontextualized to respond meaningfully to the challenges and possibilities of postmodernity. For Boeve, a credible Christian witness today necessitates a critical yet open engagement with contemporary culture, one that draws from a deep well of tradition while remaining responsive to evolving cultural conditions.²⁷⁸ In this way, Boeve advocates for a dynamic theological method that balances fidelity to tradition with the exigencies of the present moment.

The fifth position, often described as a 'middle position', shares certain affinities with the perspectives previously outlined, but it also diverges in crucial ways. This position adopts a generally positive evaluation of the Council, particularly regarding its theological renewal and emphasis on dialogue. However, it remains cautious – if not critical – of unqualified efforts to accommodate the Christian faith to contemporary cultural norms. From this standpoint, while the Christendom model is rightfully critiqued and set aside, an uncritical assimilation of Christianity into the cultural logic of modernity is viewed as potentially detrimental to the integrity of the Christian faith.

In this article, we will concentrate on this fifth – i.e., middle position- and critically examine how much it offers a sustainable theological trajectory. The central argument advanced here is that *Gaudium et Spes*'s vision of the Church's openness to the world, while undoubtedly shaped by an optimistic theological anthropology, neither reflects a naively optimistic stance nor necessitates a relativization of Christian faith. As demonstrated in the following sections, the Church's dialogical engagement with the world, as articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*, can and should be pursued without

²⁷⁷ Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in Postmodern Context*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003.

²⁷⁸ Lieven Boeve, "Beyond the Modern-Anti-Modern Dilemma: *Gaudium et Spes* and Theological Method in a Postmodern Context," *Horizons* 34/2 (2007), 292-305.

compromising the integrity of the Gospel. On the contrary, faithful dialogue, grounded in the truth of the Gospel, can be a powerful means for the Church to witness its mission in the world.

Methodology

The overall methodology used in this article is a qualitative, descriptive, critical, and systematic approach aimed at exploring the literature on the vision of *Gaudium et Spes* regarding the Church-world relationship and its reception in the post-conciliar period. The article begins with a descriptive overview of five categories representing distinct approaches to the reception of *Gaudium et Spes*'s ecclesiological vision. This initial mapping illuminates the diversity of responses to the document's theological breakthrough. It clarifies the distinctiveness of the so-called "middle position", which lies at the heart of the article's core investigation. The discussion of the research findings utilizes an in-depth and systematic analytical framework to examine the theological meaning of the term *world* as a theological category in *Gaudium et Spes*, and to articulate the document's reconfiguration of the Church's attitude toward the world. In this respect, *Gaudium et Spes* is treated as the primary source. At the same time, insights from secondary literature – particularly theological commentaries and critical analyses – are incorporated to enrich the interpretive depth of the study.

Furthermore, a descriptive, critical and systematic method is employed to analyze the critiques of *Gaudium et Spes* advanced by the proponents of the middle position. Particular attention is given to the theological reflections of Josef Ratzinger and Karl Rahner, whose writings exemplify this stance. Their critical engagements with *Gaudium et Spes* are examined in detail to highlight the central concerns and theological motivations that inform this position. Finally, the article espouses a critical and hermeneutical methodology to assess the extent to which the criticism posed by the middle position, as articulated by Ratzinger and Rahner, is theologically sustainable and compatible with the document's overarching vision. Through a close, text-based reading of *Gaudium et Spes*, the article argues that many of these concerns were anticipated within the document. Far from promoting an uncritical embrace of modernity, *Gaudium et Spes* calls for a dialogical engagement with the world that is discerning and faithful to the Gospel. Therefore, the Church's renewed openness to the modern world should not be construed as naïve optimism, but rather as a

theologically grounded posture that remains rooted in critical discernment. Such dialogue must always be pursued to safeguard the Church's mission of proclaiming the Gospel in truth and integrity.

Findings and Discussion

The discussion of the research findings develops in four structured stages. First, we offer a brief presentation of the different interpretations of the term 'world' as a theological category in *Gaudium et Spes*, highlighting its conceptual richness and evolving significance within the document. Second, we examine the emergence of a new vision of the Church-world relationship articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*, emphasizing its departure from earlier ecclesiological frameworks. Third, we analyze two illustrative examples of the so-called "middle position" in the reception of this new vision, focusing on how these perspectives critically engage with the document while acknowledging its contributions. Finally, we explore the extent to which *Gaudium et Spes* has anticipated concerns regarding the potential relativization of the Christian faith in its call for engagement with the world. In doing so, we argue that the document affirms the complementarity of dialogical and kerygmatic approaches, ensuring that openness to the world does not come at the expense of the Church's evangelical mission.

1. The term 'World' as a Theological Category in *Gaudium et Spes*

In theological discourse, the term 'world' does not carry a singular, fixed meaning. On the contrary, it has been perceived positively and negatively across various contexts. William Cavanaugh's analysis proves particularly valuable in this regard. In *Field Hospital: The Church's Engagement with a Wounded World*, he offers a comprehensive exposition of the multiple theological meanings of the term 'world', especially as they pertain to the Church-world relationship articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁹ William T. Cavanaugh, *Field Hospital: The Church's Engagement with a Wounded World*, Michigan and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016, 49-50. It is important to recognize that asserting the centrality of the Church-world relationship in Vatican II – particularly through *Gaudium et Spes* – does not imply that the Church's engagement with the world began solely with the Council or its aftermath. Although Vatican II marked a significant turning point in how the Church perceived and approached the world, traces of a more positive attitude toward worldly realities were already evident in theological reflections prior to the Council. As Stephan van Erp observes, the growing attention to the world – which

Firstly, the term ‘world’ points to the entirety of creation. This created order is fundamentally sound in principle and its origin. Nevertheless, it fell into the grip of sin and subsequently underwent redemption through Christ.²⁸⁰ From this perspective, ‘world’ denotes a created reality for which God is both Creator and Redeemer. In *Gaudium et Spes*, this is referred to as “the world of men and women,” that is:

“[T]he whole human family in its total environment; the stage of human history notable for its toil, its tragedies and its triumphs; the world which Christians believe has been established and kept in being by its creator’s love, has fallen into the bondage of sin but has been liberated by Christ, who was crucified and has risen to shatter the power of the evil one, so that it could be transformed according to God’s purpose and come to its fulfilment.”²⁸¹

Secondly, the term ‘world’ refers to those outside the Catholic Church, encompassing broader society and other Christian ecclesiastical communities.²⁸² Within this context, *Gaudium et Spes* affirms the significance of mutual exchange and collaboration between the Church and the world. The recognition of shared concerns and aspirations renders such a collaboration both possible and necessary. Indeed, the document further affirms that the world can assist the Church in preparing the way for the Gospel.²⁸³

Thirdly, the term ‘world’ designates temporal realities like economics, politics, and social life.²⁸⁴ This understanding is critical for two principal reasons. First, *Gaudium et Spes* refers to these activities as “worldly affairs” or “earthly realities” and asserts their legitimate autonomy. These spheres, governed by their laws and values, are nonetheless part of God’s creation.²⁸⁵ As such, their independence from ecclesial authority does not imply separation from God. Second, although these realities are autonomous, they are

he himself calls “the Church’s turn to the world” – already begun in Vatican I, namely when Church deployed the Neo-scholastic fundamental theology as its official philosophy. Stephan van Erp, “World and Sacrament: Foundations of the Political Theology of the Church,” *Louvain Studies* 39 (2016), 102-120, at 103.

²⁸⁰ Cavanaugh, *Field Hospital*, 49.

²⁸¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 2. References to this document in this article are taken from Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Trent to Vatican II*, Vol. II, London & Washington: Sheed and Ward & Georgetown University Press, 1990.

²⁸² Cavanaugh, *Field Hospital*, 49.

²⁸³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 40.

²⁸⁴ Cavanaugh, *Field Hospital*, 49-50.

²⁸⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, 36.

not self-sufficient ends. They are constantly contributing to both society and the Church. Therefore, *Gaudium et Spes* clearly emphasizes that "the Church has a particular need of those who live in the world, whether they are believers or not."²⁸⁶

Fourthly, unlike the first three, the term 'world' has a negative connotation. It can refer to realities in opposition to Christ.²⁸⁷ Here, 'world' is characterized by "the spirit of vanity and badness which distorts human activity," transforming what is ordered for God's service into an instrument of sin.²⁸⁸ In this context, *Gaudium et Spes* adopts a tone of warning, echoing St. Paul's admonition: "Be not conformed to this world" (Rom 12:2). Nevertheless, a pertinent question arises: Does this negative treatment imply an inherently pessimistic attitude toward the world? According to the document *Theology Today*, this negative view does not necessarily lead to an opposing stance toward the world. Even though the world is depicted as "the setting of the rejection of God by human beings," the document affirms that "God's love towards them is always infinitely greater."²⁸⁹ Echoing John 3:16 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" – this theological stance insists that the world, even in opposition, remains an object of divine concern and salvation.

This conviction bears two significant theological implications. On the one hand, it asserts the sovereignty of God's redemptive power: salvation remains greater than the evil that seeks to obstruct it. Edward Schillebeeckx rightly observes that the restoration of the world, aimed at making it "a dwelling-place worthy of man, and ever worthy of sons of God," cannot be thwarted, even in the face of persistent sin.²⁹⁰ On the other hand, this conviction insists that there is no moment in time or space in the world that lies beyond God's invitation to salvation. As Schillebeeckx underscores, this conviction stands at the heart of Christianity, affirming "faith in the absolute

²⁸⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, 44.

²⁸⁷ Cavanaugh, *Field Hospital*, 49.

²⁸⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, 37.

²⁸⁹ *Theology Today*, 6. References to this document in this thesis are taken from International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011.

²⁹⁰ Edward Schillebeeckx, "Church and World," in Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx – World and Church*, Vol. IV, London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2014, 86.

and gratuitous nearness of God, in Christ, in all the circumstances of life in this world.”²⁹¹ Thus, even the secular world—with its own laws, structures, and aims—has been embraced by God in Christ.²⁹²

In our view, this theological position articulates the universality of salvation and affirms the principle that salvation history and secular history are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the former is meant to sanctify and transform the latter. With these four interpretations of the term ‘world’ as a theological category, we now turn to the vision of the Church-world relationship as expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*.

2. *Gaudium et Spes* and the Church’s New Attitude to the World

The foregoing analysis of the term ‘world’ suggests that, while the Church and the world remain distinct, they cannot be regarded as entirely separate realities. This is particularly evident in the first theological category of the understanding of the term ‘world’, which also affirms that the Church is, in a real sense, part of the world. Even when the term points to realities outside or even opposite to the Church, the world remains neither alien nor irrelevant to the Church’s mission. If the world is indeed the arena of God’s salvific action, it must be approached, not avoided.

This understanding reflects the paradigmatic shift introduced by the Second Vatican Council, especially through *Gaudium et Spes*.²⁹³ James McEvoy characterizes this development as an “engaged stance” – a deliberate alternative to the older ecclesial posture marked by a negative view or even rejection of the world. The pre-conciliar approach disproportionately focuses only on the prevarication and ruin of the modern world. The positive meaning of the world and its significance as the locus of God’s active presence and His salvific work are simply overlooked. The world was frequently cast as morally fallen and opposed to the Church, which was viewed as a pure and self-contained society under threat.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Schillebeeckx, “Church and World,” 76.

²⁹² Schillebeeckx, “Church and World,” 76.

²⁹³ Cf. James Hanvey, “The Challenge and Hope of *Gaudium et Spes*,” in *The Church in the Modern World*, ed. Erin Brigham, London: Lexington Books, 2015, 3-42, at 3.

²⁹⁴ James McEvoy, “Church and World at the Second Vatican Council: The Significance of *Gaudium et Spes*,” *Pacifica* 19 (2006), 37-57, at 43-46. A comprehensive discussion on the development of the Church’s understanding of its relationship with the world, as reflected in the drafting process leading to the final version of *Gaudium et Spes*, can be found in this article on pages 42-49.

As Simon Hewitt-Horsman observes, this previous ecclesial model rendered the Church an "otherworldly perfect society," detached from meaningful engagement with the world.²⁹⁵ Even when interaction occurred, the Church was conceived as the sole measure of truth and authority, drawing everything to itself in a hierarchical and often hegemonic posture. This approach found concrete expression in the so-called "Christendom model", which positioned the Church as superior to and sovereign over the world.²⁹⁶

In contrast, the "engaged model" introduced by the Council, and exemplified by John XXIII's opening speech, recognized the positive elements present in the world. McEvoy emphasizes that this approach reflects a deep conviction in "the action of divine providence in the present order of things."²⁹⁷ While not blind to sin, this view affirms that the world, with all its flaws, is the arena of God's redemptive work. As Johan Verstraeten rightly puts it, this attitude rests on believing that "God is at work in the actual history of humankind."²⁹⁸

In short, the Council's vision represents a dialogical turn, making dialogue a metaphor of the Church-world relationship. McEvoy affirms that *Gaudium et Spes* sees dialogue not merely as a strategy, but as a theological necessity.²⁹⁹ The world is no longer seen as an enemy to be condemned but as a partner in pursuing justice, peace, and human flourishing. Most importantly, this dialogue is rooted not merely in sociological pragmatism, but in a Christological and

²⁹⁵ Simon Hewitt-Horsman, "Church as Sacrament: A Model for Political Ecclesiology," *The Dominican Council* (2004), 357-368, at 359.

²⁹⁶ James M. McEvoy, "Proclamation as Dialogue: Transition in the Church-World Relationship," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009), 875-903, at 881.

²⁹⁷ McEvoy, "Church and World," 40. McEvoy observes that the Pope's emphasis on adopting a positive outlook toward the modern world does not overlook the reality of its negative sides. McEvoy writes, "Certainly, the limitations of modernity are addressed unhesitatingly but modernity's strengths are also valued." McEvoy, therefore, critiques interpretations that regard *Gaudium et Spes* as exhibiting an overly optimistic stance toward modernity. McEvoy, "Church and World," 37-38.

²⁹⁸ Johann Verstraeten, "Towards Interpreting Signs of the Times, Conversations with the World and Inclusion of the Poor: Three Challenges for Catholic Social Teaching," *International Journal of Public Theology* 5 (2014), 314-330, at 317.

²⁹⁹ McEvoy, "Dialogue as Proclamation," 876.

theological vision: it is grounded in God's own dialogue with humanity, made manifest in the Incarnation of Christ.³⁰⁰

However, this renewed approach is not without its critics. A key concern is that the Church's openness to the world may lead to theological relativism – a blurring of the Church's distinctiveness and mission.³⁰¹ Critics argue that this engaged stance risks leading to compromise, potentially diluting the Church's prophetic and kerygmatic identity. This concern is especially prevalent among proponents of the so-called “middle position” in the reception of *Gaudium et Spes* – a topic to which we now turn.

3. The Middle Position's Criticism of *Gaudium et Spes*

What Rowland designates as the “middle position” – previously mentioned – has also been described by some as the “neo-conservative position”.³⁰² As Joseph Komonchak notes, this position seeks to occupy a middle position between ecclesial liberals and traditionalists by adopting a stance of praising the Council while being critical of its popular interpretations.³⁰³ Consequently, it tends to lean toward a more traditionalist orientation.³⁰⁴ According to proponents of this view, the Church, in *Gaudium et Spes*, adopts an overly positive and optimistic stance toward the modern world – one allegedly rooted in the euphoria surrounding modernity's idea of human progress.

This critique is exemplified in Joseph Ratzinger's assessment of *Gaudium et Spes*. His principal concern is the Church's relationship with technological advancement, which he views as inappropriately conflating Christian hope with modern notions of progress. Ratzinger identifies this conflation as reflecting “an almost naïve progressivist optimism,” failing to grapple with human development's ambiguities and contradictions.³⁰⁵ Moreover, he

³⁰⁰ McEvoy, “Church and World,” 46-47.

³⁰¹ McEvoy, “Proclamation as Dialogue,” 877.

³⁰² See Lieven Boeve, “*Gaudium et Spes* and the Crisis of Modernity: The End of Dialogue with the World?,” in *Vatican II and Its Legacy*, ed. M. Lamberigts and L. Kenis, Leuven: Leuven University Press & Peeters, 2002, 83-94, at 85-89.

³⁰³ J. A. Komonchak, “Interpreting the Second Vatican Council,” *Landas* 1 (1987), 81-90, at 82-83.

³⁰⁴ Komonchak, “Interpreting the Second Vatican Council,” 82-83.

³⁰⁵ Cited in Joseph A. Komonchak, “Augustine, Aquinas or the Gospel of sine glossa? Divisions over *Gaudium et Spes*,” in *Unfinished Journey: The Church 40 Years after Vatican II*, ed. Austen Ivereigh, New York and London: Continuum, 2003, 102-118, at 105-106.

perceives the Church's dialogue with the world as being motivated by a triumphalist aspiration to resolve all contemporary issues in pursuit of a utopian future. He writes:

"The text and, even more, the deliberations from which it evolved *breathe* an astonishing optimism. Nothing seems impossible if humanity and the Church work together. The attitude of critical reserve toward the forces that have left their imprint on the modern world is to be replaced by a resolute coming to terms with their movement. The affirmation of the present [...] is carried to its logical conclusion; solidarity with today seems to be the pledge of a new tomorrow."³⁰⁶

Ratzinger is not alone in this assessment. Karl Rahner expresses a similar concern, particularly regarding what he describes as the Church's neglect of Christian pessimism. He argues that, rather than adopting an uncritical optimism, the Church must emphasize human sinfulness and the tragic dimensions of history, acknowledging that the ideal of progress often leads to new forms of suffering. Citing *Gaudium et Spes* as an example of excessive optimism. Rahner admits:

"Although I took part in the elaboration of *Gaudium et Spes* at the Council, I would not deny that its undertone is too euphoric in its evaluation of humanity and the human condition. What it says may be true, but it produces the overall impression that it is enough to observe its norms, and everything will more or less turn out well. It does not insist enough on the fact that all human endeavours, with all their sagacity and good will, often end up in blind *alleys* [...]"³⁰⁷

In addition to the concern about optimism, the middle or neo-conservative position also criticizes the document for potentially relativizing the Christian faith.³⁰⁸ Ratzinger, for example, acknowledges the value of the Church's openness and dialogical attitude as a departure from triumphalism.³⁰⁹ Nevertheless, he warns

³⁰⁶ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy, San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987, 380-381.

³⁰⁷ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigation*, Vol. XXII – *Humane Society and The Church of Tomorrow*, trans. Joseph Donceel, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991, 157-158.

³⁰⁸ Ratzinger nonetheless observes that this crisis was also rooted in a broader spiritual crisis of humanity, particularly in the Western world. Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 370-371.

³⁰⁹ "The kind of self-accusation at which the Council arrived with respect to the Church's own history was not sufficiently aware of this fact and so expressed itself in ways that can only be called neurotic. It was both necessary and good for the Council to put an end to the false forms of the Church's glorification of self on earth

that such a shift risks jeopardizing the identity of the Church. He considers the Council's move from a Christendom model to a dialogical model as a radical interpretation of the biblical call for conversion and love of neighbor – an interpretation that, in his view, has “led not only to uncertainty about the Church's own identity, which is always being questioned but especially to a deep rift in her relationship to her history, which seemed to be everywhere sullied.”³¹⁰

What emerges from this exposition of Ratzinger's and Rahner's critiques is that, despite the Council's breakthrough, the vision of *Gaudium et Spes* concerning the Church-world relationship is somehow viewed as problematic. This raises a critical question: To what extent can these criticisms convincingly argue that *Gaudium et Spes* presents an overly optimistic view of the modern world or endangers the identity of the Church and the integrity of the Christian faith? The final section of this article engages precisely with this question, offering a rereading of *Gaudium et Spes* to explore how the Council fathers themselves anticipated such worries raised by the proponents of the middle position.

4. Being Open and Yet Remaining Critical – Proclaiming the Gospel through Dialogue

Contrary to the claims of the middle position, we argue that the vision of *Gaudium et Spes* is neither naively optimistic nor susceptible to relativism. Rather, its dialogical stance reflects a renewed ecclesiology that engages the world without compromising the integrity of the Gospel. The following three interrelated points support this claim.

First, in response to the charge of excessive optimism, it is important to highlight that *Gaudium et Spes* does not present a one-sided affirmation of the modern world. While the document adopts a positive and dialogical tone, it also acknowledges the tensions and contradictions of modernity. It appreciates the world's capacity to serve as a locus for evangelization (§§ 44, 57), and yet it simultaneously discusses the dangers and ambiguities inherent in contemporary society (§§ 4-10, 56, 63). In this light, *Gaudium et Spes* is

and, by suppressing her compulsive tendency to defend her past history, to eliminate her false justification of self.” Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 373.

³¹⁰ Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 371-372. Italian original.

best understood not as an uncritical embrace of modernity but as a measured engagement that combines openness with vigilance.

Second, regarding the fear that openness leads to the relativization of the Christian faith, *Gaudium et Spes* explicitly affirms that the Church must evaluate contemporary developments in the light of the Gospel (§ 44).³¹¹ Here, Verstraeten's insight is instructive. He identifies a hermeneutical tension between two interpretive poles: one stressing God's presence in history, the other underscoring the Church's distinctive identity as the bearer of divine love.³¹² Verstraeten contends that the document itself resolves this tension by asserting that "examining the signs of the times" must be followed by "interpreting them in the light of the Gospel."³¹³ This dialectical method – holding together historical consciousness and theological discernment – ensures that the Church remains faithful to its mission while engaging dynamically with the world.³¹⁴

Third, the Church's openness to the world, far from undermining its evangelical mission, is integral to its very identity as a witness to the Gospel. The concept of the "signs of the times" illustrates this dual responsibility. These signs refer to historical phenomena that manifest the hopes and anxieties of a given age, and they invite discernment rather than passive observation.³¹⁵ McEvoy emphasizes that dialogue with the world allows the Church to learn from human history and remain attuned to contemporary voices – an essential condition for communicating the Gospel meaningfully and transformatively.³¹⁶ As he remarks, "Without attention to 'the

³¹¹ As Verstraeten observes, the legacy of *Gaudium et Spes* has triggered a conflict of interpretation between the position emphasizing God's presence in the history of humankind on the one hand and those who conceive of the Church as "a distinct sociolinguistic reality that brings God's love to the world" on the other. Verstraeten, "Towards Interpreting," 315.

³¹² Verstraeten, "Towards Interpreting," 315.

³¹³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.

³¹⁴ Verstraeten, "Towards Interpreting," 319.

³¹⁵ *Theology Today*, 54.

³¹⁶ McEvoy, "Church and World," 46-50. See also *Gaudium et Spes*, 44; See Sean O. Sheridan, "Gaudium et Spes: The Development and Implementation of the Church's Role in Evangelization in the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World," *The Jurist* 71 (2011): 98, 100 and 103. See also McEvoy, "Proclamation as Dialogue," 879.

various voices of our day', the Church will not be able to express adequately the full message of the Gospel."³¹⁷

Therefore, reading the signs of the times must be understood as part of the Church's missionary task to "continue the work of Christ, who came into the world to give witness to the truth" (§ 3).³¹⁸ This discernment deepens the Church's capacity to respond effectively to human concerns and to articulate the Gospels in ways that resonate with lived experience. Through a dialogical approach, to which reading the signs of the times is a key aspect, the Church will be able to respond "to the desires and struggles of this age, while listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit in the world."³¹⁹

In light of *Gaudium et Spes*, embracing a dialogical approach never leads to renouncing the Church's primary task of proclaiming the Good News of salvation. On the contrary, the dialogical approach enhances the Church's proclamation of the Gospel, as "in reading the signs of the times, the Church sees itself as continuing the mission of Christ."³²⁰ Reading the signs of the times serves the purpose of spreading the Good News of salvation and carrying out God's plan of transforming the world. Accordingly, the world should be primarily seen as "the place in which the Church, following in the footsteps of Christ, announces the Gospel, bears witness to the justice and mercy of God, and participates in the drama of human life."³²¹ Far from retreating from the world, the Church is called to active engagement: to announce the Gospel, witness God's justice and mercy, and fully enter into the complexities of human history.

Conclusion

This article has critically examined the reception of *Gaudium et Spes*, particularly through the lens of the so-called "middle position," which views the Council's reimagining of the Church-world relationship as overly optimistic and potentially relativizing. Against this, we have argued that *Gaudium et Spes* neither succumbs to naïve optimism nor compromises the Gospel. Its dialogical posture reflects a theologically grounded discernment that holds together openness to the world and fidelity to the Church's mission. Nevertheless, this analysis has primarily focused on the general and Western reception

³¹⁷ McEvoy, "Church and World," 49-50.

³¹⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, 3.

³¹⁹ McEvoy, "Proclamation as Dialogue," 887.

³²⁰ McEvoy, "Church and World," 51.

³²¹ *Theology Today*, 54.

of *Gaudium et Spes*. Further research is necessary to explore how this vision has been received and interpreted in diverse cultural and ecclesial landscapes, especially in Asia and its specific contexts. Such an inquiry would deepen our understanding of the document's transformative potential in a global Church.