

The Church's Mission and Temporal Realities

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1. Introductory remarks

By the "mission of the Church," we mean the goal towards which its activity is directed. This includes not only the ultimate realities that will come about with the glorious second coming of Christ and the final resurrection, but also temporal realities, proper to the present time of the Church journeying towards its definitive homeland. The Church's Magisterium speaks of "making the Christian spirit a vital energizing force in temporal realities,"¹ while also using the equivalent expression "earthly realities,"² or simply "the world."

The Church's mission is the responsibility of all the faithful, without excluding anyone. As the Second Vatican Council taught: "The Lord Jesus, 'whom the Father has sent into the world' (*Jn 10:36*), has made his whole Mystical Body a sharer in the anointing of the Spirit with which he himself is anointed. In him all the faithful are made a holy and royal priesthood. . . . Therefore, there is no member who does not have a part in the mission of the whole Body."³ However, in the carrying out of this mission a diversity of functions exists within the organic unity of the whole people of God. Thus it would be a mistake to consider the fulfillment of the Church's mission, directed both to the eternal salvation of mankind and to temporal realities, as the activity of only a certain category of persons in the Church, whether they be sacred ministers, laity, or religious.

2. Guidelines in Sacred Scripture

With regard to the Church's mission, the New Testament has nothing explicit to say about temporal or earthly realities, or the social order. However, it often speaks about the world, which it calls the cosmos, understood first of all as the dwelling place of mankind, the setting for history.⁴

1. Cf. Vatican II, Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (from here on AA), 4.

2. Cf. Vatican II, Pastoral Const. *Gaudium et Spes* (from here on GS), 36.

3. Vatican II, Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.

4. Cf. Antonio Bonora, "Cosmo," in Pietro Rossano - Gianfranco Ravasi - Antonio Girlanda (ed), *Nuovo Dizionario di Teologia Biblica*, Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 1988, pp. 333-334; H. Sasse, "Kovsmos," in *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento*, 5, 916-941.

St. Paul insists that all created realities are good,⁵ but that the world is at present subject to the negative power of sin and opposes itself to God.⁶ Nevertheless, this negative judgment on the world, although frequent, is not absolute, since the world is the object of the redemption worked by Christ: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19). Christians are in the world and are not called to leave it⁷ but to spread light in it.⁸

The realities of this world include "the social order," with its essential element of public authority. St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, gives specific advice regarding the respect and obedience Christians owe to authorities.⁹ At first glance this might seem like a program of socio-political ultraconservatism, of full conformity to the system. But on closer consideration, St. Paul's advice points Christians towards a mission that is truly transformational. Although recognizing temporal motivations, he repeatedly states that submission to authority responds to the order established by God: it should be lived in the presence of God, because it is a question of conscience. To obey the civil authority and pay taxes is to obey and pay a servant of God. The social order is transformed, not by the direct action of the Christian community on social structures, but by introducing a new spirit through the consistent Christian action of the faithful. In other passages of the Pauline letters, elements of the social order are seen as being transformed in the same way: the relationship between spouses;¹⁰ the condition of slaves;¹¹ the value of riches;¹² social peace;¹³ the value of work.¹⁴ The first letter of St. Peter offers a parallel teaching.¹⁵

Although his main concern is the question of mankind's salvation, St. Paul also gives an overview of the present situation of the material world, highlighting its participation in the destiny of redeemed mankind.¹⁶ When the glorious resurrection of the body takes place, material creation will also be freed from decay and corruption and come to share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.¹⁷ The horizon here is that of the end times, rather than

5. Cf. 1 Tim 4:4.

6. For "sin came into the world through one man [Adam]" (Rom 5:12). Sin spread and led to the fact that "the whole world may be held accountable to God" (Rom 3:19). Jesus Christ "gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age" (Gal 1:3). Cf. Col 2:20, Gal 6:14.

7. "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolators, since then you would need to go out of the world" (1 Cor 5:9-10).

8. "...that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Phil 2:15). It is the echo of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Mt 5:16).

9. Cf. Rom 13:1-7.

10. Cf. Eph 5:21-33; Col 3:18-19.

11. Cf. 1 Cor 7:21-23; 12:13; Gal 3:28; Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-24; q Tim 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10.

12. Cf. 1 Tim 6:17-19.

13. Cf. Rom 12:17-21.

14. Cf. 2 Thess 3:7-12.

15. On submission to civil authority, cf. 1 Pet 2:13-15; on relations between spouses, cf. 1 Pet 3:1-7; on the submission of slaves to their masters, cf. 1 Pet 2:18-21.

16. Cf. Rom 8:16-18, 23.

17. "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was

a mission St. Paul is pointing to for present-day Christians in respect to the material world.

3. First doctrinal statements on the Church's mission regarding temporal realities

It was only in the twentieth century that the Church's mission in the face of earthly realities became the object of specific theological reflection. In this area of doctrine, life has far outstripped theology. A faith incarnated in life led to the profound social and cultural transformations produced by the Christianization of the ancient world, whether of Imperial Rome and other neighboring lands in the Church's first centuries, or of the Germanic, Slavic and other peoples in the following centuries. But neither the Fathers of the Church nor medieval and modern theologians showed much interest in this theological topic.¹⁸

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, Pope Leo XIII's concern over the de-Christianization of many sectors of civil society spurred him to publish a series of encyclicals on specific aspects of the social and political order, among them, the well-known *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891). Although this encyclical does not contain a systematic teaching on the Church's mission regarding temporal realities, it does emphasize in several places the Church's beneficent influence in this area, even though her immediate aim is the salvation of souls.¹⁹ The same is true regarding the social teachings of successive Pontiffs. Until the Second Vatican Council, one fails to find in the Magisterium a general and systematic exposition of the Church's mission in relation to temporal realities.

The reflection of theologians on this question started to bear more mature fruit towards the middle of the twentieth century.²⁰ It began to be recognized that temporal realities enter into the divine plan of salvation, and that in order to understand them correctly one had to confront the question of who man is. The need was seen to distinguish between the spiritual and temporal planes, but there were many different ways of focussing this distinction. One point of agree-

subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; for the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (*Rom* 8:19-23). There has been much discussion, from Patristic times to the present, about how "creation" in this paragraph should be understood. The fact of having been "subjected to futility, not of its own will," which distinguishes it from the non-believers (cf. *Rom* 1:21), suggests it should be understood as the non-human world (cf. Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, [*Sacra Pagina Series*," 6], The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 1996, pp. 254-262; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Lettera al Romani. Commentario critico-teologico*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1999, pp. 601-608; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, [*Word Biblical Commentary*, 38A], Word Books, Dallas, Texas 1988, pp. 465-475).

18. Cf. Antonio Miralles, "La missione della Chiesa nella storia della teologia cattolica," *Annales theologici*, 18 (2004), 285-354; especially 285-312, for the period preceding the Second Vatican Council.

19. Cf. *Enchiridion delle Encicliche*, 3: Leo XIII (1878-1903), Dehoniane, Bologna 1997, nos. 445, 887, 903-904.

20. Among the works of greater relevance one might mention Michael Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik*, III/1: *Die Kirche und das göttliche Leben*, Munich 1940, pp. 154-156; Gustave Thils, *Théologie des réalités terrestres*, 2 vol., Paris 1946, 1949; Yves Congar, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïc*, Paris 1954 2

ment was the duty of the Magisterium to illumine the right ordering of earthly realities in so far as they are part of the divine plan. There also arose a common conviction that the laity were the protagonists in any effective search for that order. The idea of the *consecratio mundi* began to spread. Pius XII employed this expression when stressing that the *consecratio mundi* is essentially the responsibility of the laity.²¹ However, the precise meaning of this expression remained open to clarification; there was also a lack of agreement on the continuity or discontinuity between the present world and the future Kingdom, with different solutions regarding the value of human activity in time.

This was not only a question of theological reflection, which, even though important, would not be effective unless it was translated into specific deeds by the faithful. Decisive in this respect was the fact that many Catholics—individually or in collaboration with others—undertook in a spirit of faith actions directed towards perfecting temporal realities. With eyes of faith, we can see here the impulse of the Holy Spirit, who animates the life of the Church. Given the journal in which this article is being published, I would like to consider briefly the spiritual message and activity of St. Josemaría Escrivá, and its repercussion on this area of the Church's mission.

The goal of the Church's mission in regard to temporal realities and the path to attain it are summed up in one of the points of his well-known book *The Way*, published in 1939: "I'll tell you a secret, an open secret: these world crises are crises of saints. God wants a handful of men 'of his own' in every human activity. Then . . . *pax Christi in regno Christi*—the peace of Christ in the kingdom of Christ."²² In God's plan, every human activity should be recapitulated and united in Christ,²³ and St. Josemaría insisted that this would come about through faithful who are themselves united to Christ, docile to his action. This is understood in the context of professional work, as we see in another point from the same book: "In order that he [Christ] may reign in the world, it is necessary to have people of prestige who, with their eyes fixed on heaven, dedicate themselves to all human activities, and through those activities exercise quietly—and effectively—an apostolate of a professional character."²⁴

As a result of St. Josemaría's teaching, men and women of every walk of life and social class took up the mission of sanctifying their daily activities. Thus the theology of the Church's mission in relation to temporal realities became a theol-

(1st ed. 1953), pp. 488-498, 85-146; Alfons Auer, *Weltoffener Christ: Grundsätzliches und Geschichtliches zur Laienfrömmigkeit*, Düsseldorf 1962 (1st ed. 1960), pp. 140-159; "Kirche und Welt," in Ferdinand Holböck - Thomas Sartory (ed.), *Mysterium Kirche: in der Sicht der theologischen Disziplinen*, II, Salzburg 1962, pp. 479-567.

21. Cf. Pius XII, Address to the Second World Congress for the Apostolate of the Laity, October 5, 1957, in *Discorsi e Radiomessaggio di Sua Santità Pio XII*, XIX, Tipografia poliglotta Vaticana, p. 459.

22. *The Way*, New York: Doubleday, 2006, no. 301.

23. [God the Father] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (*Eph* 1:9-10).

24. *The Way*, no. 347.

ogy incarnated in the life of ordinary Christians, as he explained to members of Opus Dei: “United with Christ through prayer and mortification in our daily work, in the thousand human circumstances of our simple life as ordinary Christians, we will work the miracle of placing all things at the feet of our Lord lifted up on the Cross, on which he has allowed himself to be nailed because he so loves the world and us human beings . . . work is for us not only our natural means of meeting financial needs and maintaining ourselves in a reasonable and simple community of life with other people, but also—and above all—the specific means of personal sanctification that God our Father has indicated to us, and the great apostolic and sanctifying instrument that God has put in our hands to make the order that he wants shine forth in all of creation.”²⁵ On the eve of the Second Vatican Council, thousands of men and women all over the world were thus carrying out the Church’s mission to restore the order of temporal realities.²⁶

4. Teaching of the Second Vatican Council

In the second chapter of the decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the Council provides a systematic, although brief, teaching on the Church’s mission, also in regard to temporal realities. This systematic exposition provides the framework needed to assimilate the other teachings of the Council on this topic.

a) *The two spheres of the Church’s mission*

The chapter begins with a clear statement of the Church’s mission, grounded on the mission of Christ. “The work of Christ’s redemption concerns essentially the salvation of men; it takes in also, however, the renewal of the whole temporal order. The mission of the Church, consequently, is not only to bring men the message and grace of Christ but also to permeate and improve the whole range of the temporal” (AA 5). The mission of the Church continues that of Christ, as he himself said in his prayer to the Father: “As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (*Jn* 17:18); and later he told his disciples on the day of his resurrection: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (*Jn* 20:21). Thus Christ’s work of redemption determines the content of the Church’s mission. This work encompasses two areas of activity: on the one hand, the salvation of mankind; on the other, the restoration of the whole temporal order. Corresponding to the first is the work of bringing Christ’s message and grace to mankind. The second involves imbuing and perfecting the order of temporal realities with the spirit of the Gospel.

25. Letter, March 11, 1940, no. 13, cited by Andres Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei, I: The Early Years*, Princeton: Scepter, 2001, pp. 289-290.

26. We don’t see any need to give precise statistical data in this article, that is the task of those who write about the history of Opus Dei. Nevertheless, to get an idea of the number of its members in the years when Vatican II was taking place (around 30,000) and the extension of its apostolic work, see Amadeo de Fuenmayor - Valentin Gómez Iglesias - José Luis Illanes, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, Princeton: Scepter, 1994, p. 285.

The restoration of the whole temporal order towards which the work of Christ's redemption also points, will be fully realized at the end of the world. Here we speak of restoration in the terminology of Ephesians 1:10, in accord with the Vulgate translation (*instaurare omnia in Christo, quae in caelis et quae in terra sunt*). In the Neovulgate, the verb *recapitulare* is used, to better express the multiple shades of meaning of the Greek verb: to reassume, to sum up, to begin anew, to renew, to group under a single head (recent English versions use "unite"). Already now, while the Church is journeying on earth, this restoration has begun, and the Church's duty is to imbue and perfect temporal realities with the Gospel spirit.

The two channels of the Church's mission do not run in parallel, as though independent of one another. Rather the Conciliar document stresses the unity between the spiritual and temporal orders while distinguishing between them: "These orders are distinct; they are nevertheless so closely linked that God's plan is, in Christ, to take the whole world up again and make of it a new creation, in an initial way here on earth, in full realization at the end of time" (AA 5). The link between the two orders comes from God's plan to restore the whole world in Christ.

b) *Unity of mission and diversity of action*

"The Church was founded to spread the kingdom of Christ over all the earth for the glory of God the Father, to make all men partakers in redemption and salvation, and through them to establish the right relationship of the entire world to Christ" (AA 2). "The apostolate of the Church therefore, and of each of its members, aims primarily at announcing to the world by word and action the message of Christ and communicating to it the grace of Christ" (AA 6). This urgent task is the responsibility of all the faithful, but the ministry of those who have received the sacrament of Holy Orders takes on a special role here: "The principal means of bringing this about is the ministry of the word and of the sacraments. Committed in a special way to the clergy, it leaves room however for a highly important part for the laity" (AA 6). The special role of the sacred ministers does not make the role of the laity marginal: "It is in this sphere most of all that the lay apostolate and the pastoral ministry complete each other" (AA 6).

As regards the diverse modality of action of the faithful in relation to temporal realities, the Conciliar text stresses that the Church fulfills its mission of leading the whole world to Christ by means of men and women who have been made sharers in the redemption. The first protagonists of this duty are the faithful, rather than the Church as an institution. When one speaks of the Church as an institution, the role of the pastors moves into first place, while, with respect to the building up of the temporal order, the pastors take second place. As the Conciliar decree clearly explains: "It is the work of the entire Church to fashion men able to establish the proper scale of values in the temporal order and direct

it towards God through Christ. Pastors have the duty to set forth clearly the principles concerning the purpose of creation and the use to be made of the world, and to provide moral and spiritual helps for the renewal of the temporal order in Christ" (AA 7). With respect to the laity, the text continues: "Laymen ought to take on themselves as their distinctive task this renewal of the temporal order, guided by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church; prompted by Christian love, they should act in this domain in a direct way and in their own specific manner" (AA 7).

In this regard, the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* offers an eloquent call: "This council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties faithfully in the spirit of the Gospel. They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation...The Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation" (GS 43). This exhortation is addressed to all Catholics, but it clearly holds special relevance for the lay faithful.

The perfecting of the temporal order is the work of all mankind, not only of the faithful of the Church. Moreover, it cannot be carried out by a Christian in isolation. Since man is social by nature, the participation of all men and women is needed. "As citizens they must cooperate with other citizens with their own particular skill and on their own responsibility. Everywhere and in all things they must seek the justice of God's kingdom" (AA 7). Although the faithful are not working in the name of the Church here, their action has an ecclesial value in so far as it is carried out by members of Christ, sharers in his royal priesthood, guided by the Holy Spirit, and therefore benefiting the entire Church through the communion of saints.

c) *The content of the Church's mission in regard to temporal realities*

The Conciliar decree sums up the content of the Church's mission in regard to temporal realities with these words: "to permeate and improve the whole range of the temporal [with the Gospel spirit]" (AA 5). But it also uses other equivalent formulations: "to establish the proper scale of values in the temporal order and direct it towards God through Christ" (AA 7); "making the Christian spirit a vital energizing force in the temporal sphere" (AA 4).

The decree goes on to list the realities that make up the temporal order: "the good things of life and the prosperity of the family, culture, economic matters, the arts and professions, the laws of the political community, international relations, and other matters of this kind, as well as their development and progress" (AA 7). Therefore these are the realities that have to be imbued with the Gospel spirit, with a Christian spirit.

Earthly realities become an object of the Church's mission not as a final end, but as an intermediate one. Nevertheless, they have a value and consistency of their own. The decree insists that these realities "not only aid in the attainment of man's ultimate goal but also possess their own intrinsic value. This value has been established in them by God, whether they are considered in themselves or as parts of the whole temporal order. 'God saw that all he had made was very good' (*Gen* 1:31). This natural goodness of theirs takes on a special dignity as a result of their relation to the human person, for whose service they were created. It has pleased God to unite all things, both natural and supernatural, in Christ Jesus 'so that in all things he may have the first place' (*Col* 1:18). This destination, however, not only does not deprive the temporal order of its independence, its proper goals, laws, supports, and significance for human welfare, but rather perfects the temporal order in its own intrinsic strength and worth and puts it on a level with man's whole vocation upon earth" (AA 7). Respect for the values intrinsic to temporal realities requires of the laity an adequate formation. As the Council teaches in *Gaudium et Spes*: "Secular duties and activities belong properly although not exclusively to laymen. Therefore acting as citizens in the world, whether individually or socially, they will keep the laws proper to each discipline, and labor to equip themselves with a genuine expertise in their various fields" (GS 43).

But what does it mean to permeate the whole temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel? For a full answer, we can turn to *Gaudium et Spes*, specifically to Chapter 4 of the first part, on the task of the Church in the contemporary world. Confronting the Church's mission, the pastoral constitution affirms: "Pursuing the saving purpose which is proper to her, the Church does not only communicate divine life to men but in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth, most of all by its healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person, by the way in which it strengthens the seams of human society and imbues the everyday activity of men with a deeper meaning and importance" (GS 40). The following three paragraphs (41, 42, and 43) show how the Church perfects these three aspects of the temporal order: the dignity of the human person, the ordering of society, and mankind's daily activity.²⁷ The Church does not limit itself to communicating divine life; its efforts are also directed to the perfecting of temporal realities—not as a parallel action but in such a way that the communication of divine life in itself contributes in great measure to such perfecting.

— Healing and elevating of human dignity

The healing and elevating of human dignity that the Church fosters is oriented above all to the individual. The Church opens up "to man at the same

27. These three aspects also correspond to the topics of the first three chapters of the pastoral constitution. The titles of the chapters are: 1. The dignity of the human person; 2. The human community; 3. Human activity in the world.

time the meaning of his own existence, that is, the innermost truth about himself For man will always yearn to know, at least in an obscure way, what is the meaning of his life, of his activity, of his death” (GS 41). Questions about the meaning of one’s life, actions and death touch on the individual in a special way. The answer that comes from God has a universal value and the Church offers it to everyone, but each person perceives it as a response to his or her most intimate desires.

The Council stresses the Church’s commitment to “the great value of these things: the human person with his freedom and bodily life”²⁸ And it defends the Church’s right to “to pass moral judgment in those matters which regard public order when the fundamental rights of a person or the salvation of souls require it” (GS 76). Similarly it invites the laity “also by their combined efforts [to] remedy the customs and conditions of the world, if they are an inducement to sin, so that they all may be conformed to the norms of justice and may favor the practice of virtue rather than hinder it. By so doing they will imbue culture and human activity with genuine moral values.”²⁹

— Strengthening the ordering of human society

Gaudium et Spes stresses that human society is called to form a strong unity, like that of a family. “God, who has fatherly concern for everyone, has willed that all men should constitute one family and treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (GS 24). “For having been created in the image of God, who ‘from one man has created the whole human race and made them live all over the face of the earth’ (*Acts* 17:26), all men are called to one and the same goal, namely God himself” (GS 24). The unity of all mankind could seem a utopian proposal if one considers the whole of human history, made up of continual conflicts and wars and offenses against human dignity. Nevertheless, God’s plan in the end will be fully realized. God does not fail. He himself, through the incarnation of his Son, has established the irrevocable foundation for this plan and provided the unfailing dynamism needed for its fulfillment.

Christ had formed the community of those who believe in him, that is to say, the Church, as the family of God.³⁰ Therefore one can understand why paragraph 42, in seeking to explain how the Church strengthens the ordering of human society, begins with this affirmation: “The union of the human family is greatly fortified and fulfilled by the unity, founded on Christ, of the family of God’s children” (GS 42). Therefore the Church fulfills this aspect of its mission by building itself up as God’s family.

28. Second Vatican Council, Decree *Christus Dominus*, 12.

29. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 36.

30. “She is already present in this world, and is composed of men, that is, of members of the earthly city who have a call to form the family of God’s children during the present history of the human race, and to keep increasing it until the Lord returns. . . . She serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God’s family” (GS 40).

The Church does not infuse the spirit of family unity into human society as though from without. “The Church recognizes that worthy elements are found in today’s social movements, especially an evolution toward unity. . . . The promotion of unity belongs to the innermost nature of the Church, for she is, ‘thanks to her relationship with Christ, a sacramental sign and an instrument of intimate union with God, and of the unity of the whole human race’³¹” (GS 42).

The proper end of the Church is of a religious nature. “But out of this religious mission itself come a function, a light and an energy which can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine law” (GS 42). “Thus [the Church] shows the world that an authentic union, social and external, results from a union of minds and hearts, namely from that faith and charity by which her own unity is unbreakably rooted in the Holy Spirit. For the force which the Church can inject into the modern society of man consists in that faith and charity put into vital practice, not in any external dominion exercised by merely human means” (GS 42).

The Council also stresses the role that the Church’s universality plays in fostering the unity of mankind: “Moreover, since in virtue of her mission and nature she is bound to no particular form of human culture, nor to any political, economic or social system, the Church by her very universality can be a very close bond between diverse human communities and nations, provided these trust her and truly acknowledge her right to true freedom in fulfilling her mission” (GS 42). “For this reason, the Church admonishes her own sons, but also humanity as a whole, to overcome all strife between nations and races in this family spirit of God’s children, and in the same way, to give internal strength to human associations which are just” (GS 42).

— Introducing a deeper meaning and significance into human activity

How the Church fosters a deeper meaning and significance in the daily activity of men and women is the topic of Chapter 3 of *Gaudium et Spes*. “For man, created to God’s image, received a mandate to subject to himself the earth and all it contains, and to govern the world with justice and holiness; a mandate to relate himself and the totality of things to him who was to be acknowledged as the Lord and Creator of all. Thus, by the subjection of all things to man, the name of God would be wonderful in all the earth” (GS 34). The following sentences goes on to specify: “This mandate concerns the whole of everyday activity as well. For while providing the substance of life for themselves and their families, men and women are performing their activities in a way which appropriately benefits society. They can justly consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator’s work, consulting the advantages of their brother men, and are contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan” (GS 34). Here we see clearly the deep significance of the everyday activity of men and women.

31. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

“Human activity, to be sure, takes its significance from its relationship to man. Just as it proceeds from man, so it is ordered towards man. For when a man works he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well. He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself. Rightly understood this kind of growth is of greater value than any external riches which can be garnered. A man is more precious for what he is than for what he has. Similarly, all that men do to obtain greater justice, wider brotherhood, a more humane disposition of social relationships has greater worth than technical advances. For these advances can supply the material for human progress, but of themselves alone they can never actually bring it about” (GS 35).

But the shadows produced by sin are also very real, and therefore men have to resist the “spirit of vanity and malice which transforms into an instrument of sin those human energies intended for the service of God and man” (GS 37). As a result, “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” (GS 37). Christ cautions them “that this charity is not something to be reserved for important matters, but must be pursued chiefly in the ordinary circumstances of life. Undergoing death itself for all of us sinners, he taught us by example that we too must shoulder that cross which the world and the flesh inflict upon those who search after peace and justice” (GS 38).

Thus the Church’s mission, insofar as it concerns the introduction of a greater significance into the activity of men and women, cannot be restricted to the act of teaching but also requires the communication of divine life, principally through the sacraments, in order to second the action of Christ, who “works in the hearts of men through the power of his Spirit.” Through docility to Christ’s action, the laity can fulfill their part in this aspect of the Church’s mission. “It is generally the function of the well-formed Christian conscience [of the laity] to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city. For guidance and spiritual strength let them turn to the clergy” (GS 43), receiving doctrinal orientation and the impulse of divine life communicated through the sacraments.

Thus the laity can carry out their activity in the temporal order with an authentic sense of mission: “By their competence in secular training and by their activity, elevated from within by the grace of Christ, let them vigorously contribute their effort, so that created goods may be perfected by human labor, technical skill, and civic culture for the benefit of all men according to the design of the Creator and the light of his Word. May the goods of this world be more equitably distributed among all men, and may they in their own way be conducive to universal progress in human and Christian freedom” (LG 36).

The laity in their fulfillment of the Church’s mission not only contribute effectively to the right ordering of temporal realities but also elevate them to a

higher level, as part of their spiritual worship of God: "For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become 'spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (*1 Pet 2:5*). Together with the offering of the Lord's Body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God. One thus reaches the most genuine meaning of the consecratio mundi, the meaning which results from union with the sacrifice of Christ" (LG 34).

5. After the Council

a) *Incarnating Vatican II's teachings*

St. Josemaría Escrivá, who from the end of the twenties had worked tirelessly to spur ordinary Catholics to take up their responsibility in the Church's mission to leaven temporal realities, accepted with great joy all the Council's teachings. He saw there a confirmation of a fundamental part of the spirit of Opus Dei: the sanctification of ordinary work.³² "Sanctity, for the vast majority of men, implies sanctifying their work, sanctifying themselves in it, and sanctifying others through it. Thus they can encounter God in the course of their daily lives."³³ He speaks here not only of sanctifying oneself in one's work and sanctifying others through it, but also of sanctifying the work itself. Thus we see an effective contribution to the task of informing and perfecting temporal realities with a Christian spirit. He fostered among men and women of all walks of life and social classes, all over the world, the effective translation into life of what the Council had taught with such richness of doctrine.³⁴

Through the efforts of the faithful of Opus Dei and many other Christians, individually or grouped in various ecclesial realities, the Council's teaching is little by little bearing fruit in a true restoration of the temporal order. This effort

32. This is how he expressed it in an interview published in *L'Osservatore della Domenica* in June of 1968: "Indeed, one of my greatest joys was to see the Second Vatican Council so clearly proclaim the divine vocation of the laity. Without any boasting, I would say that, as far as our spirit is concerned, the Council has not meant an invitation to change but, on the contrary, has confirmed what, with the grace of God, we have been living and teaching for so many years. The principal characteristic of Opus Dei is not a set of techniques or methods of apostolate, not any specific structures, but a spirit which moves one to sanctify one's ordinary work." (The interview is found in *Conversations with Josemaría Escrivá*, no. 72).

33. An interview with Tad Szulc, correspondent for *The New York Times*, October 7, 1966 (*Conversations with Josemaría Escrivá*, no.55).

34. The biographies of St. Josemaría are a good source for seeing his efforts to foster the expansion of the apostolate of Opus Dei, so that it would reach thousands of people of all walks of life. Cf., for example, the previously cited work by Andres Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. III: *The Divine Ways on Earth*, New York: Scepter Publishers 2005, pp. 313-359, 646-660, 694-731, 747-753. In the years right after the Second Vatican Council, the number of members of Opus Dei continued to grow and its apostolic work expanded. One need only consider the number of people who took part in the work connected with the Special General Congress during the years 1969-1970: 50,710 (26,974 men and 23,736 women) from 77 countries (cf. Fuenmayor-Gomez-Iglesias-Illanes, *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, p. 381).

has been accompanied by theological reflection and by documents from the Church's magisterium that highlight the Council's teaching and also provide new light on certain points. For the Church experiences "a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts, through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth."³⁵ Doctrine and life go hand in hand. We will now turn to some statements from the Papal magisterium that shed new light on the Council's teaching.

b) *The Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi*

The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975) of Pope Paul VI, issued ten years after the conclusion of Vatican II, sums up the mission of the Church as one of evangelization.³⁶ This mission looks not only to individual men and women but also to humanity as a whole, which needs to be transformed through the transformation of individuals.³⁷ It is a deeply penetrating action that involves "affecting and transforming, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation" (EN 19). A transformation of this type will have obvious repercussions on the order of temporal realities.

The salvation that evangelization offers to all men and women is not restricted to the framework of temporal existence. Rather it is a transcendent, eschatological reality that finds its fulfillment in communion with God.³⁸ The Pope goes on to explain how the advancement of humanity, seen as liberation and development, is included in this picture, while warning against a reductive view of liberation.³⁹ While making clear that the Church's mission is not limited to the religious sphere but also has reference to the temporal problems of

35. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic const. *Dei Verbum*, 8.

36. "We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church....Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity" (Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* [hereafter cited as EN], December 8, 1975, no. 14).

37. Cf. EN 34.

38. "Salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God's grace and mercy. And not an immanent salvation, meeting material or even spiritual needs, restricted to the framework of temporal existence and completely identified with temporal desires, hopes, affairs and struggles, but a salvation which exceeds all these limits in order to reach fulfillment in a communion with the one and only divine Absolute: a transcendent and eschatological salvation, which indeed has its beginning in this life but which is fulfilled in eternity" (EN 27).

39. "There is no reason to hide the fact that many Christians who are generous and sensitive to the dramatic questions which the problem of liberation brings with it, on wanting to commit the Church to the effort of liberation, have frequently felt the temptation to reduce its mission to the dimensions of a purely temporal project, to reduce its objectives to an anthropocentric perspective, the salvation of which it is a messenger and sacrament, to a material welfare; its activity—forgetting all spiritual and religious concern—to initiatives of the political or social order" (EN 32).

mankind, the Pope reaffirms that the announcement of salvation in Jesus Christ is the first priority.⁴⁰ “The Church links human liberation and salvation in Jesus Christ, but she never identifies them” (EN 35). Liberation understood solely as temporal, political liberation, is not the Gospel concept of liberation: “The Church has the firm conviction that all temporal liberation, all political liberation—even if it endeavors to find its justification in such or such a page of the Old or New Testament, even if it claims for its ideological postulates and its norms of action theological data and conclusions, even if it pretends to be today’s theology—carries within itself the germ of its own negation and fails to reach the ideal that it proposes for itself whenever its profound motives are not those of justice in charity, whenever its zeal lacks a truly spiritual dimension and whenever its final goal is not salvation and happiness in God” (EN 35). Liberation theologies of a temporal mold are thus disqualified at their root.

c) *The apostolic exhortation Christifideles Laici*

The decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* on the apostolate of the laity was the Council document that expressed in the most organic way the teaching on the Church’s mission. It was expected that John Paul II’s post-synodal exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (December 30, 1988) would go more deeply into this teaching, especially in regard to temporal realities. And this is indeed what happened.

According to *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church includes the world in its mission because it finds itself immersed in the world. The Council’s language leads us to understand that this is not simply a sociological reality. *Christifideles Laici* focuses on this point and clarifies the secular dimension of the Church, which in a particular way defines the theological and ecclesial condition of the laity. “Certainly all the members of the Church are sharers in this secular dimension but *in different ways*. In particular the sharing of the *lay faithful* has its own manner of realization and function, which, according to the Council, is ‘properly and particularly’ theirs. Such a manner is designated with the expression ‘secular character’⁴¹. . . . *The “world” thus becomes the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation*, because the world itself is destined to glorify God the Father in Christ. . . . The lay faithful, in fact, ‘are called by God so that they, led by the spirit of the Gospel, might contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially in this way of life, resplendent in faith, hope and charity they manifest Christ to others.’⁴² Therefore, for the lay faithful, to be present and active in the world is not only an anthropological and sociological reality, but in a specific way, a theological and ecclesiological reality as well.”⁴³

40. Cf. EN 34.

41. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

42. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

43. John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (hereafter cited as CFL), December 30, 1988, no. 15; the italics are in the original.

In various places in the document, John Paul II points to a consequence of fundamental importance: the unity of life needed for the laity to fulfill their mission within temporal realities. First of all, it is seen in the context of the search for holiness in one's professional and social life: "The vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their involvement in temporal affairs and in their participation in earthly activities. . . . 'The unity of life of the lay faithful is of the greatest importance: indeed they must be sanctified in everyday professional and social life. Therefore, to respond to their vocation, the lay faithful must see their daily activities as an occasion to join themselves to God, fulfill his will, serve other people and lead them to communion with God in Christ'"⁴⁴ (CFL 17).

Further on in the document, the need for unity of life in carrying out the new evangelization is stressed, in order to prevent any split between the Gospel and life: "Their [the laity's] responsibility, in particular, is to testify how the Christian faith constitutes the only fully valid response—consciously perceived and stated by all in varying degrees—to the problems and hopes that life poses to every person and society. This will be possible if the lay faithful will know how to overcome in themselves the separation of the Gospel from life, to again take up in their daily activities in family, work and society, an integrated approach to life that is fully brought about by the inspiration and strength of the Gospel" (CFL 34),

The need for unity of life is also considered in the context of formation: "the lay faithful must be formed according to the union which exists from their being members of the Church and citizens of human society. There cannot be two parallel lives in their existence: on the one hand, the so-called 'spiritual' life, with its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called 'secular' life, that is, life in a family, at work, in social relationships, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture. The branch, engrafted to the vine which is Christ, bears its fruit in every sphere of existence and activity. In fact, every area of the lay faithful's lives, as different as they are, enters into the plan of God, who desires that these very areas be the 'places in time' where the love of Christ is revealed and realized for both the glory of the Father and service of others" (CFL 59).

Christifideles Laici is in continuity with GS 40 in affirming that the Church's mission to further the salvation of all men and women has repercussions on the temporal order: "Having received the responsibility of manifesting to the world the mystery of God that shines forth in Jesus Christ, the Church likewise reveals the meaning of man to man, the meaning of each person's existence, opening to each the whole truth about one's life and final destiny" (CFL 36). The document goes on to highlight important aspects of this revelation of the "meaning of man to man," making clear the central role of the laity: "the inviolable dignity of every human person" (§ 37); "the inviolability of human life"

44. *Propositio* 5.

(§ 38); “the right of freedom of conscience and religious freedom” (§ 39); “the married couple and the family” as “the first and basic expression of the social dimension of the person” (§ 40); “charity towards one’s neighbor” (§ 41); “participation of all in public life” (§ 42); “the socio-economic question, which depends on the organization of work” (§ 43); “the creation and the transmission of culture” (§ 44).

Placing man at the center of the restoration of the temporal order does not mean ignoring the material world. As John Paul II states: “Today in an ever-increasingly acute way, the so-called ‘ecological’ question poses itself in relation to socio-economic life and work. Certainly humanity has received from God himself the task of ‘dominating’ the created world and ‘cultivating the garden’ of the world. But this is a task that humanity must carry out with respect for the divine image received, and, therefore, with intelligence and with love, assuming responsibility for the gifts that God has bestowed and continues to bestow. Humanity has in its possession a gift that must be passed on to future generations; if possible, passed on in better condition, [for] these future generations are [also] the recipients of the Lord’s gifts” (CFL 43).

Although other documents of the recent Magisterium could be cited, the above two are the ones that add the greatest depth to the Council’s teachings in this area.

6. Final considerations

If the Church’s mission in regard to temporal realities was not very developed in terms of doctrine before the Council, the present situation is quite different. Indeed, the Council’s teachings and those of recent Popes offer us a rich organic treatment that can be directly translated into life.

These teachings presume a perspective in which the Church does not look at the world from without but is immersed in it—although it also transcends the world. The Church “goes forward together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot which the world does” (GS 40), and therefore it views the world with eyes of full solidarity.

To carry out the Church’s mission in the face of earthly realities, the Magisterium repeatedly calls the laity to an all-out effort exercised with personal freedom and responsibility. This does not mean that the role of pastors is marginal. Their task of clarifying the Church’s teaching in this field is indispensable for the laity to receive the light of the Gospel that illumines their own activity in the temporal order. Even more essential is the spiritual strength the laity receive from the communication of divine life through the sacraments. Without an authentic following of Christ and, through him, union with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the laity, instead of imbuing and perfecting the world of temporal realities with a Christian spirit, would become worldly, permeated with the

worldly spirit St. John warns us against: “the concupiscence of the flesh, the concupiscence of the eyes and the pride of life” (1 Jn 2:16). Hence the special need here for unity of life.

The Church’s mission in the face of earthly realities, grounded on each one’s personal actions, touches on three main areas: the personal dignity of all men and women, their daily activities, and the social repercussions of their actions. It also touches on the material world, and specifically on the ecological question. The development of each of these aspects offers abundant possibilities for specific programs carried out by the laity, both individually and in association with others, Christians and non-Christians.