

The Church cannot Afford to be Indifferent to Contemporary Tendencies, a Call from *Gaudium Et Spes* Number 4

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Introduction

As a living reality, the Church is affected by both informal and external forces. In this way, she has to respond to the call of the day if she is to remain relevant. Pastoral theology ought to have a particular vision of the current world and humanity. A vision that must be founded upon the relationship between God and all that He created as revealed in the person, life, and ministry of Jesus Christ. Guided by these views, this article seeks to discuss the proposition that, “In her pastoral endeavors, the Church cannot afford to be indifferent to contemporary tendencies” in the light of *Gaudium et Spes* Number 4.

The Church through the Second Vatican Council situated her reflections of faith directly in relationship with the joys and hopes, the real griefs and anxieties of the world. *Gaudium et Spes* then gives more priority to those who are poor or afflicted in any way. The message of the Gospel and the call to faith must address humanity together with their problems. The message should be grounded on issues of poverty, social injustices, and incurable diseases that are giving the faithful untold suffering.

Accordingly, for the Church to remain relevant and continue proclaiming the Good News effectively, she must recognize her responsibility to understand the dynamics of the world and to address real problems, hopes, and longings affecting humanity in its daily activities (Sachs 5). This means that the Church in her pastoral endeavors has the responsibility of responding to the needs of her members. The answers come from dialoging with the contemporary tendencies and responding to them. Some areas like politics will demand prudence on the part of the Church when addressing them.

A theology that pays renewed attention to life dynamics in the world brews a wonderful theological creativity. “Rather than operating in a detached abstract realm of theological speculation, pastoral theology seeks to pay attention to people’s various life situations and contexts” (Veling 8). Though the Church should not be reduced to a social organization, pastoral care can be provided in hospitals or creation of institutions to deal with AIDS victims and or other pandemics. Pastoral care can work very well with medical care, counseling, and education of people. It is the duty of the Church to provide pastoral care to these victims because the Church always seeks to align herself with the joys and hopes, griefs and anguishes of the people in every moment of their history. Pastoral theology should, “always be attentive to the context of human culture and human experience in its unique singularity and concrete particularity” (Veling 8 – 9). This helps it to be more relevant since it will be dealing with real life situations. The Church as the people of God cannot afford to be indifferent to contemporary tendencies since these tendencies impact on the lives of the people who happen to be members of this reality called the Church.

The understanding of the Church is slowly shifting to the idea of her being the people of God. By being a community of people, the Church has a duty towards its subjects. The word which became flesh in Christ has to become flesh in the members of the Church (John 1: 1). The Church understands herself not just as people without a vision but as people with a pastoral vocation. “The truth of baptism and confirmation confronts people regularly, and they begin to see that being incorporated into the Church carries with it responsibilities” (Harris 23). The message or responsibilities have to be relevant to the space and time in which one is inserted.

The Church has an obligation to continue the healing ministry of Jesus through provision of medical care both physical and psychological. It should also continue to play its prophetic role of exposing the ills of society and also going a step further to rehabilitate the victims of

human selfishness and greed. The Church is made up of people called by the Word of God to make a difference to the world in which they live (Harris 24), and the Church cannot make a difference if she chooses to remain indifferent. In this way, she cannot afford to remain indifferent to contemporary tendencies but as a living reality respond to the needs, hopes, and longings of her members.

Pastoral theology struggles to keep the relationship between the Church and the world open and in a balance. This makes pastoral theology ready to embrace the new dynamics and try to implement them in a way that brings about life to the Church (Veling 7). Reading the signs of the times becomes very important because reality is always there waiting for responses. It is the duty of the Church to avail her people with a vision and hope in her response to the contemporary tendencies. The spirit of *Gaudium et Spes* is to open avenues that makes the Church relevant by being in touch with the realities of life that affect her members at every stage in space and time. The Church remains the source of hope and courage to her members in whatever social, political or economic situation they find themselves in.

At the heart of a pastoral vocation is an attempt to make a difference. Pastoral implies caring for the other and the universe with practical engagement with the same. It is a call to care for the self, the other, and the universe. This makes it impossible for the Church to be indifferent to contemporary tendencies because her life affects what surrounds her and her life is at the same time affected by what surrounds her (Harris 24). This can be understood more clearly through a realization that the Church is a people with a mission. Their mission is “to go into the world and to be in the world as Jesus was, as the revelation of God. The mission of the people who are the Church is to reveal God as present to the world, as God who cares for the world and is in an ongoing relation with the world” (Harris 24 – 25). To actualize this, there is great need to be in touch with the joys and sorrows of the world. To be connected to the reality of the issues affecting the Church and her people.

Borrowing from the thought of Heidegger, Veling affirms that, “practical theology suggests that we cannot separate knowing from being, thinking from acting, and theological reflection from pastoral and practical involvement. Theology is always shaped by, and embodied in the practices of historical, cultural, and linguistic communities” (6). One has to relate with the realities of the time and space to remain relevant in the field of pastoral care. It is important to remain relevant by responding to the joys and sorrows of the people of God because a good pastor will engage the people of God in trying to help them maneuver in the presence of contemporary tendencies. The Church should devise a language which her members understand in responding to their concerns. It should also embark on practical engagement and involvement through works of charity thereby instilling faith and hope in the faithful.

The fact that makes the Church not to be indifferent to contemporary realities is her duty to, “establish mutually critical correlations between an interpretation of the Christian tradition and an interpretation of the contemporary situation” (Tracy 170). Don Browning argues that the work of the Church should remain interpretive or hermeneutical in order to read and interpret the signs of God in the midst of the signs of the times (80). This was exactly what was intended by the Council Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes* Number 4. They called for the will to read the signs of the times and respond to them being guided by Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the Magisterium which is the teaching authority of the Church.

The Church necessarily ought to attend to the conditions of human life in every stage of life her members find themselves in. *Gaudium et Spes* reminds the Church that if she is not paying attention to “the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time” (# 1), she will have little or no connection to the realization of the Kingdom of God here on earth. For her to remain relevant, “at all times, the Church carries the responsibility of reading of the signs of the times and of

interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (*Gaudium et Spes* # 4). At all times, the Church has to be attentive to the needs of herself and of those her life impact, giving concrete responses. This makes her not to afford to be indifferent to contemporary tendencies.

The message of Jesus in the Gospel according to Luke reminds the Church that her duty has to be a visionary responding to the contemporary realities. “When you see a cloud looming up in the west you say at once that rain is coming, and so it does. And when the wind is from the south you say it will be hot, and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the face of the earth and the sky. How is it you do not know how to interpret the present time?” (12: 54 – 56). Veling argues in the same line affirming that the Church cannot afford to be indifferent to contemporary realities when he says, “to read the signs of the times is one of the most difficult tasks, yet it is a theological imperative” (17). It is one of the elements pastoral theology cannot do without thus it has to embrace the contemporary tendencies with a concrete response.

Pastoral theology is primarily interested in hermeneutics and the art of interpretation. It calls the Church to listening and paying great attention to the biblical testimony and the way biblical testimony has been understood across generations. The word of God is a word always addressed to humanity and for humanity, which is why it calls for a response. Reading the signs of the times means paying attention to the concern of God for the world. It also means listening and responding to contemporary questions and issues, instead of shying away from these questions and issues, the Church has the duty to respond (Veling 25).

The living word of God addresses humanity in the signs of life which happens to it. The Second Vatican Council can be credited for opening the eyes and ears of the Church to dialogue and engagement with the world. This matches the definition of theology as faith seeking understanding. This understanding cannot be alienated from the

context in which humanity finds itself in. Understanding is something that affects the way in which humanity lives. It is guided by revelation (Veling 44).

Conclusion

Pastoral theology calls for selfless people who are concerned with the welfare of the entire universe. In simple terms, the work of pastoral theology is a vocational work in which the purpose of the pilgrim Church is the will of God for the universe. The whole idea is to respond to the call of the moment guided by the divine will. The Church has to be active and thoughtful. This makes her not to risk being silent or indifferent to realities around her since she has a responsibility to proclaim the truth and live the truth.

List of Sources

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