

SEARCHING THE SIGNS OF THESE TIMES: INTIMATIONS OF GRACE

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In 2002 our annual meeting took as its theme “Reading the Signs of the Times.” It’s again the topic of my address this morning, sixteen years later. That Vatican II watchword was meant for each generation of the Church in its turn as a call to dialogue with the world. But like all watchwords, repeat it often enough and it has the opposite effect. It becomes a “fall asleep” word, a tired word. So, in each generation the Church needs a new wake up call.

I received my doctorate in theology at St. Michael’s College, Toronto, a center that was very much in tune with the signs of the times in those early post-Vatican II years, and then I taught for a number of years at the Washington Theological Union, a school of theology and ministry, also very conscious of doing theology in dialogue with the signs of the times. Then I came to Boston to teach at Emmanuel College, and for the last many years I have taught largely introductory courses in theology to undergraduates. Teaching undergraduates was a whole new challenge, a whole new world with different questions and no presuppositions. Each year 2002’s reading of the signs of the times recedes further into my students’ past, and Vatican II could have happened in the Stone Age. So, I have asked myself: where is the wakeup call to the Church of their generation? As I listened to their questions, I thought, perhaps it’s coming from these very students who don’t have theological language or background but have the same recurring questions about themselves and their world that Vatican II refers to in *Gaudium et Spes*. That is what provoked me to return to this perhaps overdone theme.

Although there are myriad concerns in both our world and church that are clearly signs of these times, my reflections will highlight three particular signs of our time that I was led to by conversations with my undergraduate students about how the church can be a resource for thinking through the complex social issues of our time, and why in their lives it often isn’t that resource, and perhaps is even a stumbling block—why some have distanced themselves from the church entirely. There are three ecclesial issues that my students consistently raise as critical signs of our times: 1) the issue of women’s ecclesial leadership; 2) the church’s relationship with LGBTQ persons; and 3) the church’s response to climate change. On two of these issues there is significant disjunction between the church’s positions and changing attitudes, both in the wider world and among many of its own faithful. My thesis is that if the church’s magisterium could open itself to listening dialogue with the diverse voices of women, of the LGBTQ community, and of young people like my students, who are deeply invested in these issues, it could be a transformative moment of grace for the church’s self-understanding. These issues are examples of where the church can and should be open to learning from the world as Vatican II, at the time, radically suggested was not only possible but essential. I believe that those of us who teach undergraduates, and many of us do, can have a particularly important role in facilitating this process, by listening, letting students know that their views and experience are respected, and helping them develop theological resources for entering the dialogue.

As I mentioned, sixteen years ago, Jon Nilson’s convention theme was “Reading the Signs of the Times.” In 2002 George W. Bush was president of the United States and Pope John Paul II was nearing the end of his long papacy. The world was reeling

from the traumatic events of 9/11 that ushered us into a new moment in confronting the reality of evil, with the resultant requirement of self-examination about the causes of this evil. The church in the United States was reeling from the revelations of clergy sex abuse and its attendant cover up, soon recognized as a global phenomenon. My undergraduate students were not even five years old in 2002, but they now inhabit a world and church forever changed by these events. Sixteen years later these same issues still confront us, however, new ecclesial and social realities also demand our attention. Particularly in the turbulent last year and a half Paul's reminder in Romans that, where sin abounds grace more fully abounds,¹ is an important impetus to continue to search for inbreakings of grace within this world where sin and evil can sometimes seem the more obvious reality. How is the church to respond to these issues in this complex world? How are we to interpret the signs of these times and discern the direction in which the Spirit is leading the church?² Obviously in this short paper I can't deal with all the critical issues that our world and church are facing. My hope is to suggest that the three signs of the times that I mentioned and the voices that are calling our attention to these issues are intimations of grace where God's presence may be discovered as the Spirit leading the church.

In customary trinitarian fashion, I will proceed in three parts, first, I will give a brief overview of the use of the signs of the times at Vatican II itself, and then call to mind some insights from the plenary papers at the 2002 convention that signal developments beyond the Council. Secondly, I will comment even more briefly on what I understand by "intimations of grace" in the context of a world and church marked by sin and injustice. And thirdly, I will turn specifically to where there could be graced opportunity for ecclesial transformation if there can be authentic dialogue within the church even on the neuralgic issues of leadership of women and LGBTQ issues, dialogue open to listening to all the voices, including those who see the church's positions on these issues as revealing injustice, hypocrisy, and marginalization within the church.

Part I: Signs of the Times

First, some reflections on signs of the times at Vatican II. The Council not only said that the church must read the signs of the times, but that we should do so in order to be able to interpret them in the light of the Gospel. Such a reading is not a mere academic exercise. It calls for action. Vatican II's insistence that we must read the signs of the times was positioned squarely in the context of the centrality of the church's mission in the world. *Gaudium et Spes* defined that mission as "to carry on the work of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who came into the world to bear witness to the truth, to save and *not to judge* (my emphasis), to serve and not to be served."³ The document continues: "In every age, the church carries the responsibility of reading

¹ Romans 5:20–21.

² See James A. Coriden, *The Holy Spirit and an Evolving Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018) for a comprehensive overview of the guiding role of the Spirit in the church's response to changing social and ecclesial realities, both past and present.

³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 3; *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996). All references to Vatican II documents are to this edition unless otherwise noted.

the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task.”⁴

Many issues raised at the Council as signs of the times still confront us today. The threat of nuclear war, economic inequality, racism, migration, for example, are all issues that continue to challenge today’s world. These are clearly signs of the times that must be addressed in the light of the Gospel message, but the Council, while recognizing situations that must be challenged in light of the Gospel, also looked for opportunities for dialogue. It saw positive possibilities for humankind in movements and scientific discoveries. For example, the advent of widespread television in the 1960’s heralded enormous potential for social communication and networking, yet, the need for dialogue continues as we have witnessed a darker side emerge as technology has become more and more sophisticated. Certainly, medical and scientific discoveries offer enormous possibilities for good yet continue to demand ethical probing. While all these issues raised at Vatican II remain with us, certain issues rise to the forefront in each generation that demand particular attention. *Gaudium et Spes* says it is the responsibility of the church to enter into dialogue in each generation with these contemporary issues.

John O’Malley, in his analysis of the rhetoric of the Council, has identified as one of the of the most striking contributions of the Council its affirmation that the appropriate posture to take with the contemporary world is dialogue. According to O’Malley, dialogue “was so characteristically attributed to the Council that it turned into jargon and one became almost ashamed to use it.”⁵ In his “Opening Speech to the Council,” Pope John XXIII rebuked those who he said saw in modern times “nothing but prevarication and ruin.”⁶ Clearly, simple condemnation and withdrawal from a dangerous world and challenging issues are not appropriate responses in the theology of Vatican II. This conflict between engagement and withdrawal played out in the conciliar debate over *Gaudium et Spes*, between those Council fathers who found the text naively positive about the contemporary world, neglectful of the reality of sin and evil, and those who followed the more world affirming approach signaled by Pope John XXIII. The more positive approach generally prevailed at the Council, although one can certainly see in *Gaudium et Spes* a concrete awareness of the reality of sin and evil in the world. Nevertheless, the debate between those who follow a more Augustinian approach to the world and those in the more world-affirming Thomist tradition⁷ has

⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.

⁵ John O’Malley, “Vatican II: Historical Perspectives on Its Uniqueness and Interpretation,” in *Vatican II: The Unfinished Agenda* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 28. O’Malley returns to this insight in many of his important works analyzing the uniqueness of Vatican II. On the rhetoric of the Council, see also Catherine Clifford, *Decoding Vatican II: Interpretation and Ongoing Reception* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 53–59.

⁶ Pope John’s Opening Speech to the Council, October 11, 1962, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: Crossroad, 1966), 712.

⁷ For mention of this debate in the context of conciliar ecclesiology, see Joseph Komonchak, “Ecclesiology of Vatican II,” (March 27, 1999), <http://publicaffairs.cua.edu/RDSpeeches/99Ecclesiology.cfm>, accessed on April 30, 2018; Ormond Rush, *Still interpreting Vatican II: Principles of Interpretation* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 52–68.; Avery Dulles, “The Reception of Vatican II at the Extraordinary Synod of 1985,” in *The Reception of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua, and

persisted in the still ongoing long process of conciliar reception and interpretation.⁸ This debate has particular relevance to interpreting the signs of the times today. For the magisterium to just say “never” and close dialogue on critical issues does not seem faithful to a Council whose watchword was dialogue and which encouraged engagement with contemporary issues.

If central to interpreting the signs of the times is dialogue, dialogue involves not just speaking but listening. It assumes that both parties have something worthwhile to say. As I said, Vatican II advocated that the church could, and even should, listen to the world, and learn from it.⁹ Yet, it is not clear that this commitment to dialogue with the world has been consistently carried out in the years since the Council!

In preparing this address I reread the plenary addresses of the 2002 convention to get an overview of what the speakers saw as central to interpreting the signs of the times forty-seven years after the Council. The very rich analyses they offered allow me only to mention the briefest snapshot of their concerns, but an insight that emerged as central was the conviction articulated by Barbara Andolsen in her plenary address. Andolsen stated forcefully that “the signs of the times must be read by persons with multiple perspectives in order to produce a reading that is capable of recognizing and proclaiming where the Spirit is at work in the world today. The signs of the times [she said] must also be read placing those whom the world marginalizes or ignores at the center of our vision.”¹⁰ Peter Phan, in his presidential address that year highlighted the transformative effect on the church that comes from dialogue with other religious traditions.¹¹ The signs of the times, he said, can no longer be interpreted in an exclusively Christian context. In one way or another, all the speakers in 2002 acknowledged that authentic interpretation of the signs of the times can only come from multiple and diverse voices that place the marginalized at the center. This theological insight emerged explicitly in the years following the Council. Although the seeds were

Joseph A. Komonchak (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987); Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2012).

⁸ For a more general discussion of approaches to interpreting the Council, see Rush in *Still Interpreting*, where he suggests that to interpret the Council in a balanced way for today we must attend to three hermeneutical, or interpretive, dimensions: first, the event itself, or the world behind the text, what was going on at the time ecclesially, socio-politically, and behind the scenes at the Council; second, the texts themselves; and third, the years of reception by the Catholic community in a changing world which has given rise to new questions and issues. Rush is opposed to any theory that would suggest that an analysis of the texts alone is adequate to understanding the meaning of the Council as some would suggest. Pope Benedict, for example, frequently cites the texts of the Council as the bearer of its authentic meaning and opposes them to appeals to the Spirit of the Council, or to the related “event” of the Council which he finds dangerous and misleading. The texts of Vatican II, however, are notoriously difficult because of their nature as compromise documents that often contain contradictory positions. See also Joseph Komonchak, “Vatican II as an ‘Event’” in *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* ed. David G. Schultenover (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007) and Norman Tanner, *The Church and the World* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 3–90.

⁹ See *Gaudium et Spes*, 44 for an extended discussion of the necessity of listening to the world.

¹⁰ Barbara Andolsen, “‘The Vision Still Has Its Time’: A Social-Ethical Cryptanalysis of the Signs of the Times,” *CTSA Proceedings* 57 (2002): 22.

¹¹ Peter Phan, “Theology on the Other Side of the Borders: Responding to the Signs of the Times,” *CTSA Proceedings* 57 (2002): 87–120.

there in the Council, since many voices not present in previous councils were included, it was only in the years following the Council, particularly in the many liberation theologies, feminist theologies, and interreligious dialogue, that this conviction really developed.

Both the perspectives drawn from the Council itself and those from the 2002 papers stress that reading and interpreting the signs of the times is in service of the church's mission. The church cannot carry out its mission apart from dialogue with the world. Since Vatican II the church has focused its attention outward, on its mission in the world. Through its social teaching, particularly developed since Vatican II, the church speaks to this world so badly in need of the transforming power of God's own presence. Edward Schillebeeckx coined the phrase "No salvation outside the world."¹² For Schillebeeckx the most important and lasting contribution of the Council was the commitment to critical engagement with the world.¹³ His early work, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, hints at this conviction when he identifies the church as the sacrament of Christ's presence in the world.¹⁴ But a sign must be intelligible and the reality of Christ's presence and his mission of justice to the poor and marginalized are obscured by injustices within the church.

The 1971 Synod document, *Justice in the World*, in its introduction, explicitly places itself in the context of *Gaudium et Spes*, the signs of the times, and its focus on the Church's mission in the world. It, like *Gaudium et Spes*, unites itself with and addresses the whole human family by "scrutinizing the 'signs of the times' and seeking to detect the meaning of emerging history. . . sharing the aspirations and questionings of all those who want to build a more human world. . ." ¹⁵ It goes on to declare in the well known citation that "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."¹⁶ Yet in a less often cited statement the Synod also said that "while the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the

¹² "The Religious and Human Ecumene," in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutierrez*, eds., Marc. H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1989), 180. For a more extended discussion of the implications of this phrase, see Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 1–40.

¹³ The theme of essential engagement with the world runs through *Church: The Human Story of God* and permeates his post-Vatican II writing.

¹⁴ Schillebeeckx, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963). For a discussion of the ambiguity of this sign, see Susan A. Ross, "Church and Sacraments," in *The Praxis of the Reign of God*, ed. Mary Catherine Hilker and Robert J. Schreier (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 136–39. For a brief discussion of Karl Rahner's understanding of the church as sacrament of salvation see, "The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future" in *Concern for the Church, Theological Investigations XX*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 104–105.

¹⁵ Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World* (Washington, D.C., NCCB, 1971), Introduction, 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Introduction, 34.

modes of acting and of the possessions and life style found within the church herself.”¹⁷ An important point here is that the Synod says that the church must *be perceived* to be acting justly. Its actions must be comprehensible to the world, a sign must be able to be comprehended. For my students, and others, the ability of the church to speak about justice is clearly obscured by what they experience as injustice within.

To sum up this first section, *Gaudium et Spes* called the church to enter into dialogue with the world, but *Justice in the World* called attention to the reality that the church’s ability to carry out this mission is impeded by sin and injustice within. The plenary sessions of the 2002 CTSA convention added that for dialogue with the signs of the times to be fruitful it must include diverse voices, especially the marginalized. I will draw from these insights in what follows.

Part II: Intimations of Grace

Where can we find intimations of grace in this world and church marked by sin and injustice? A brief word about “intimations of grace.” The great theologian of grace, Karl Rahner, envisioned “a world of grace.”¹⁸ For Rahner grace is primarily God’s own self-communicating presence, uncreated grace. He envisioned human beings caught up in God’s presence from the very first moment of their existence. This unthematic presence, always God’s gratuitous gift, is experienced, although not usually experienced as grace. But there are self-reflective moments when this presence bursts into awareness *as grace*.¹⁹

There are those who critique Rahner for an overly optimistic focus on the prevalence of grace and maintain that we need to take more seriously the evil that also surrounds us and is within us. Schillebeeckx, for example, highlights “negative contrast experiences” where we are forcibly confronted with the reality that this world is not as it should be and are led to protest and resist this evil.²⁰ But, it is in the midst of the inescapable reality of suffering and evil that we must search for in-breakings of grace, of God’s presence.

Although grace is often understood as individual experience, social issues or movements can be also experienced as God’s presence, grace, or the Spirit moving the church. There can be “structures of grace” as well as “structures of sin.”

There are significant theological analyses of the structural, or social, sin that pervades our world.²¹ This category is less often applied to the church, but the social

¹⁷ Ibid., 44.

¹⁸ See Leo O’Donovan, *A World of Grace* (New York: Crossroad, 1980). O’Donovan saw this as an appropriate title for a book introducing the themes and foundations of Rahner’s theology.

¹⁹ For a discussion of these “boundary” moments see “Nature and Grace,” *Theological Investigations IV* (New York: Seabury, 1966), 183–84; also “Reflections on the Experience of Grace,” *Theological Investigations III* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1967), 86–90. For a fuller discussion of Rahner’s understanding of grace, see Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 119–42.

²⁰ For Schillebeeckx’s understanding of “contrast experiences” see *God the Future of Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 148–61; also *Church the Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 28–30.

²¹ See, for example, Daniel Finn, “What is a Sinful Social Structure?” *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): 136–64.

sin that pervades our world is also found embedded within the structures of the church. In a 2014 *Theological Studies* article, Bryan Massingale provided a survey of Catholic ethical and theological scholarship in which he critiqued the continuing inadequate engagement of Catholic moral theology with the issue of racism, in spite of a growing body of theological ethics dealing with race.²² In her many articles on African American Catholic experience Shawn Copeland exposes the endemic racism still present in the church, and in *Enfleshing Freedom*, also calls the church to recognize the sin of homophobia within the church and the damage this does to gay and lesbian Catholics' ability to recognize themselves in the image of Christ.²³ Elizabeth Johnson, in an article entitled "Galileo's Daughters: What Error Looks Like Today," identifies sexism as a structure of sin that operates within the church. "Prejudice against women," she says, "is a structural sin that pervades the history of 'the whole church', not just many of its members"²⁴ Structures of sin, like racism and sexism and homophobia, then, deeply pervade not only our world but our church.

We can never ignore the pervasive reality of sin and evil; however, it is essential to search within this flawed world and church also for structures of grace, grace at work in the world, the theme of this Convention. Our world seems in particular need of signs of grace at this moment in history. There are movements and voices today that we might call structures of grace where we can discern God's presence calling the church to a new way of being in the world. As an example, Kevin Ahern describes diverse lay movements that serve the common good, such as Young Christian Workers, Plowshares, and the Jesuit Refugee Service as such structures of grace. There are many more such movements.²⁵ I will say more about this in the third section.

In these first two sections I have attempted a cursory look at signs of the times and understandings of grace in a sinful world and church in order to provide background for discussing how signs of *our* times call the church to recognize situations of injustice within, or structures of sin that prevent the church from carrying out its mission. The challenge is to look for, and participate in, structures or movements of grace that challenge these sinful structures. The third, and final section will discuss some specific ways this challenge is being taken up.

Part III: Concrete Examples

At Emmanuel I have the opportunity to teach our introductory course in Catholic theology regularly, as well as an upper level course on Vatican II. Emmanuel is a small, urban, undergraduate, Catholic, liberal arts institution. While our student population is not as diverse as we would like, we have some racial, ethnic and religious diversity. Many of our students are the first generation in their family to go to college. Many

²² See Bryan M. Massingale, "Has the Silence Been Broken? Catholic Theological Ethics and Racial Justice," *Theological Studies* 75 (2014): 33–155; Massingale, *Racial justice and the Catholic Church* (New York: Orbis, 2010).

²³ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2010), 55–84. See also Paul Crowley S.J., "Homosexuality and the Counsel of the Cross," *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 500–29.

²⁴ See Elizabeth Johnson, "Galileo's Daughters: What Error Looks like Today," <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/galileos-daughters>, accessed April 30, 2018.

²⁵ Kevin Ahern, *Structures of Grace: Catholic Organizations Serving the Global Common Good* (New York: Orbis, 2015).

don't initially self-identify as Catholic, but in the course of class discussions it becomes clear that they come from a Catholic background. If my students were under five at the time of the of the 2002 CTSA Convention, they were certainly many years from being born at the time of the Council. Most of my students, even those who attended Catholic schools, have never heard of Vatican II. In fact, their parents were also likely not born or were very young at the time. The generation that experienced the "changes" of Vatican II is that of their grandparents. My students often tell me they experience the church they know as static, unchanging, and judgmental. Many have a decidedly negative attitude to what they understand as "religion" in general. For them, it's a bunch of restrictive rules, opposed to science, and Catholicism is exhibit A. They experience the Catholic church as opposed to signs of the times that they find personally and socially compelling. The church's approach to women's leadership and LGBTQ issues seem clearly unjust to them. They are not theologically well informed, but they have a strong sense of justice and equality. They are not reluctant to share their views on where they perceive ecclesial injustices that damage the church's credibility in the world and to them. On the other hand, when they are introduced to Vatican II and Catholic Social Teaching they resonate strongly and positively. We have a high level of involvement in a variety of social outreach programs such as alternative spring break and service learning classes.

Although women's ordination and gay marriage don't in themselves express the complexity of issues that surround the church's attitude to women and the LGBTQ community, they are potent symbols for my students of what they see as ecclesial injustice that renders the church's voice not credible, or hypocritical, on other justice issues where they do share the church's views. They are happy to share where they see the Spirit leading the church, though they would not use that language, and they wish for a more inclusive, welcoming church where all voices are respected. Their voices seem to me to be an occasion of grace from a younger generation increasingly distancing themselves from church participation, the so-called "nones," or "sorta Catholics" or "almost done Catholics," as a recent study on disaffiliation in young Catholics calls them.²⁶ Vatican II, when it spoke of the "supernatural sense of faith which characterizes the People as a whole,"²⁷ reminded us that the Spirit speaks not only through the magisterium, but also through the voices of the faithful. That statement presumes that the "people," and maybe even young people, have some insight into the way the Spirit is guiding the church. It presumes that their experience and knowledge have value.²⁸

When my students identify the internal issues they see as signs of the times critical for the church to address in today's world, they focus on the three areas I have mentioned: leadership of women, LGBTQ issues, and ecological justice. Two of them

²⁶ Robert J. McCarty and John M. Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*, (Winona, MN: St Mary's Press, 2107), 9–10.

²⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

²⁸For a brief, helpful overview of the meaning of the *sensus fidei*, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, *By What Authority?: Foundations for Understanding Authority in the Church*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2018), 179–99. For a wide-ranging collection of essays from diverse perspectives on the topic, see *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei*, ed. Bradford E. Hinze and Peter C. Phan (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2016).

raise serious concerns for my students and seem to them contradictory to the church's public positions on other justice issues involving human dignity. They are, however, encouraged by the Pope's engagement with ecological issues, particularly in *Laudato Si'*. As part of my course on Vatican II, which surprisingly to me they always find engaging, we always end with a Council, for which we have schemas, debate, voting, etc. These three issues are always on the agenda of their Council. They are happy to discover from studying the Council that the church has indeed changed in the past, which is new news for them, and that there were even some women at the Council!²⁹ From that they gather hope that it can change going forward. Often times their responses to this and to learning about the church's social teaching on issues like the common good and human dignity, are, "why have we never learned this before?"

For the church to be able to speak credibly to the world about issues of injustice it is important to listen to the signs of the times in the voices of these young people, who are calling attention to the diverse voices of women, and the LGBTQ community who experience marginalization and injustice within the church. As has been much in the news lately, with the movement for gun control laws led by the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, it is often very young people who have been the harbingers of great social change. The civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam war protests were in many ways youth movements. Vatican II itself did not take place in vacuum. It took place in the midst of a period of many movements for social change in the 1960's, many of them led by young people.

The issue of ecological injustice is one example where an openness to a dialogical method, as Vatican II called for, has already been fruitful. In the introduction to *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis says he wishes to enter into dialogue with all people. He particularly cites the voices of young people as demanding this dialogue. "Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded."³⁰ Pope Francis draws on accepted science and the work of theologians in calling for justice for our "common home," as he calls it. He begins his encyclical by saying, "I will begin by briefly reviewing several aspects of the present ecological crisis, with the aim of drawing on the results of the best scientific research available today, letting them touch us deeply and provide a concrete foundation for the ethical and spiritual itinerary that follows."³¹

There is accepted science and theological anthropology that calls just as compellingly for the church to be open to dialogue about women's leadership and LGBTQ issues. But the magisterium continues to rely on an essentialist natural law theory that assigns roles and positions according to biology. On the basis of this the church argues that its approach to both women's leadership and gay marriage are not in fact the injustices that they appear. This essentialist approach became central in the

²⁹ M. Carmel McEnroy, in *Guests in Their Own House: The Women of Vatican II* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), tells the story of the twenty-three women who were present and influential at the third and fourth sessions of the Council. Even theologians are often unaware of the presence and contributions of these women at the Council.

³⁰ *Laudato Si'*, Encyclical Letter of 2015, no.13.
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, accessed April 30, 2018.

³¹ *Ibid.*, no.15.

writings of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis continues it. While women and men are equal in dignity before God, they have distinct complementary roles based on gender. Women's functions are consistently focused on motherhood and roles in the private sector of home and family.³² Likewise, in its approach to gay marriage the church relies on essentialist biological roles as normative for sexuality and marriage. *Justice in the World* declared that the church must not only preach justice but demonstrate justice within itself. In today's culture many do not perceive or experience these positions as just. These are surely cases where the dialogical approach with contemporary culture and scientific scholarship, heralded by Vatican II, should be employed as it was in *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis. There are similar resources to address the church's approach to roles of women and understanding of homosexuality.

For example, Catholic ethicists are suggesting new approaches to natural law that take into consideration contemporary scientific research on homosexuality and are offering more personalist interpretations that would offer the opportunity for true dialogue.³³ Likewise there are resources in feminist theology³⁴ and contemporary theological anthropology³⁵ that offer alternatives to the essentialist anthropology that that underlies the magisterium's approach to both women's roles and to homosexuality.³⁶

³² Mary Ann Hinsdale offers a brief analysis of the gender essentialism that permeates official church teaching, especially the writings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI in "A Feminist Reflection on Postconciliar Catholic Ecclesiology," in *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 118–29. Pope Francis echoes this perspective in numerous places, see, for example, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 103–104, where he explicitly ties this to the church's stand on women's ordination. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, accessed April 29, 2018. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 16 also demonstrates this stereotypical view of women's roles, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html, accessed April 29, 2018.

³³ See Stephen J. Pope, "Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality: A Methodological Study" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25 (Spring 1997): 89–126.

³⁴ For overviews of the development of Catholic Feminist Theology, see Mary Ann Hinsdale, *Women Shaping Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006); "Vatican II and Feminism: Recovered Memories and Refreshed Hopes," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 32/2 (2016):251–72. I would also like to mention Sr. Kathleen Dolphin whose work on the Madeleva Lectures continued to make feminist scholarship by some of the most significant Catholic feminist theologians available and accessible.

³⁵ Susan Ross, in *Anthropology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), provides an overview with particular attention to contemporary questions; María Pilar Aquino, in *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (New York: Orbis, 1993), proposes an egalitarian anthropological perspective that places all oppressed, especially women, at the center; M. Shawn Copeland, in *Enfleshing Freedom* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2010), reframes theological anthropology from the perspective of race and embodiment; Michelle Saracino, in *Christian Anthropology: An Introduction to the Human Person* (New York: Paulist, 2015), offers a text accessible to undergraduates and puts their questions at the center.

³⁶ For particular attention to the call for a new theological anthropology that critiques essentialist assumptions about the complex reality of homosexuality see Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 55–84; Paul G. Crowley S.J., "Homosexuality and the Counsel of the Cross," 500–29; Crowley, *Unwanted Wisdom: Suffering, the Cross and Hope* (New York: Continuum,

I am not going to rehearse this research here but merely recognize that there are scholarly resources available for authentic dialogue on these issues, many provided by people in this room. My point is that the voices of all in dialogue need to be able to really listen to the other.³⁷ But how does such a dialogue take place? One of the weaknesses of Vatican II was that it re-visioned the nature of the church as more dialogical without providing the structures for that realization. After Vatican II we were left with a new vision of the church, but essentially the same institutional structures remained.³⁸ In spite of the exhortation to dialogue and the recognition that the Spirit speaks through all the people, *ecclesia docens/ecclesia discens* has remained the operative ecclesiology. Synods, parish Councils, and other such structures have remained largely controlled by the hierarchy and clergy.³⁹ If the conciliar mandate to read and respond to the signs of the time in each generation is to happen, ecclesial structures must be reformed to facilitate this process.

In the study on disaffiliated young Catholics, the young people who responded raised as central concerns that they didn't feel listened to, that their concerns and questionings weren't taken seriously, that they would be judged, that church was about meaningless rules.⁴⁰ I hear this in my classroom. Students will often tell me that this is the first time they have been encouraged to raise the questions they have. Our undergraduate classes are often the first time our students have felt listened to and encouraged to question. When they had previously raised questions about what they experience as injustice or hypocrisy on the part of the church, they felt the response was often to simply explain why they were wrong, or to dismiss their experience.⁴¹ A recent online article in *America* titled "Why Does the Church Hate Gay People? Boston Bishop Seeks to Listen to Young People" recounts a session that Bishop Mark O'Connell had with a confirmation class. It reflected the perception that many young people have about the church's attitude to gay people, that it is unkind and a scold. Bishop O'Connell admitted that it is 'rare' for bishops to listen to the concerns of young

2005); Pope, "The Magisterium's Arguments against 'Same-Sex Marriage': An Ethical Analysis and Critique," *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 530–65.

³⁷Also highlighting the need for listening for true dialogue, a series of four conferences was held at Fordham, Fairfield, Union Theological Seminary, and Yale. They focused on sexual diversity and the Roman Catholic Church. The purpose of these conferences was to move from monologue to dialogue and to truly listen to all voices in the conversation. The series identified problems in truly having conversations when parties have deep differences in how they view theological realities. See *More Than a Monologue: Sexual Diversity and the Catholic Church*, vol. 1, *Voices of Our Times*, ed. Christine Firer Hinze and J. Patrick Hornbeck II, vol. 2, *Inquiry, Thought, and Expression*, ed. J. Patrick Hornbeck II and Michael A. Norko (New York: Fordham University, 2014).

³⁸ See Mary E. Hines, "Church: Community for Liberation" in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 173–78, for a more extended discussion of the need for structural reform to realize the Vatican II vision of a dialogical church.

³⁹ For a discussion of the possibilities and limitations of synods thus far, see Bradford Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church*, (New York: Continuum, 2006) 157–78.

⁴⁰ McCarty and Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone*, 18.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 63. This study recounts similar experience on the part of the young Catholics studied and similar concern about women's issues and LGBTQ issues among the issues that alienate them from the church.

people about these issues and encouraged a more listening attitude on the part of bishops.⁴² Both this article and the study of disaffiliated young Catholics suggest that a dialogical church will have to be open to hearing some very uncomfortable perceptions of the church from these young Catholics, and others.

There are beginning to be some hopeful signs of a more listening church. Pope Francis seems to want Synods to function as opportunities for dialogue, although there is pushback, particularly evident in some responses to *Amoris Laetitia*. There will be a Synod on “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment” this coming fall. A pre-Synodal Meeting of 300 young people in Rome produced a document that shares the diverse views of the invited young people. It acknowledges the internal conflicts around the issues concerning women’s goals and LGBTQ issues and calls for the church to approach these and other neuralgic issues “with real discussion and open-mindedness to different ideas and experiences.”⁴³ The document authored by the young delegates calls for structures on every level to facilitate this process. But the synodal structure needs to be transformed if it is to serve as a dialogical model at all levels of the church, parish, diocese. In his address on the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis said a “synodal church is “a Church that listens.” He noted that Pope Paul VI expected that the organization of the Synod could “be improved upon with the passing of time.”⁴⁴ The church could be truly transformed if it moved beyond the stratified categories of *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens* to a dialogical church where all are teachers and all are learners. In a remarkable statement Pope Francis acknowledges that, “The *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens*, since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways the Lord is revealing to the Church.”⁴⁵

Not only the scholarship, experiences, and voices of women and of the LGBTQ community, but also the often-marginalized voices of young people are occasions of grace calling the church to examine the issues of exclusion experienced by women, gay Catholics, and alienated young people. Can the church recognize these voices *as inbreakings of grace*, as the Spirit leading the church to a new moment through these signs of our times?

⁴² Michael J. O’Loughlin, “‘Why Does the Church Hate Gay People?’ Boston Bishop Seeks to Listen to Gay People”

<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/01/23/why-does-church-hate-gay-people-boston-bishop-seeks-listen-young-people>, accessed April 30, 2018.

⁴³ See Synod of Bishops, XV Ordinary General Assembly, “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment” Pre-Synodal Meeting, March 19–24, 2018.

<http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/news/final-document-from-the-pre-synodal-meeting.html>, accessed April 30, 2018.

⁴⁴ “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops” (October 17, 2015).

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html, accessed April 30, 2018,

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* The note to this quote references other occasions the Pope has reiterated this. The seminars of bishops and theologians held in the US to follow up on *Amoris Laetitia* also involved mutual teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Pope Francis has placed the church's mission to the poor and oppressed at the center of his ministry as Bishop of Rome. The world needs to hear this message, but if this is obscured by injustices within, calcified structures or theological approaches, the Church is not able to read the signs of the times and carry out its mission, the mission of Jesus, which Vatican II identified as "to serve and not to be served, not to judge," the mission Pope Francis articulates so compellingly. As theologians we have the awesome task of helping our students develop the resources to participate thoughtfully and critically in the dialogue necessary to discern where the Spirit is leading today's church. As we have learned this year, and has been the case in the past, young people are often the most powerful agents for change, and true and lasting change usually comes from below.