

A little over one month after I entered this world at the old Miller Hospital across the street from here (now the History Center site), the 39th general congregation was held in Rome as the second session of the Second Vatican Council had just begun. At this point, no documents had been released following the first session one year earlier. Records show that 2,288 bishops were present that day. The Archbishop of Bombay Cardinal Gracias was making a point in relation to a draft, called a schema, of a Council document.

Cardinal Gracias told the council members that care should be taken in the schema not to present the Church as a community closed within itself, but rather as one open to the world. Here the Indian churchman switched from Latin to quote from John Henry Newman in English. He cited Cardinal Newman as saying of the Church: “Grow we must... But of what value is growth without corresponding growth in moral values?” Then Cardinal Gracias said: “The Church exists in itself but not for itself; it exists for service, not for privilege or domination.... The Church seeks to expand not as a means of increasing its power, but rather in order to increase the scope of its service.”¹

Today’s first reading speaks of the Lord’s promise to Isaiah to make him “a light to the nations.” That schema to which I referred switched its Latin name from *De Ecclesia* (On the Church,” to “*Lumen Gentium*,” Light of the Nations.” The switch was deliberate. The first sentence in English may be rendered, ““Christ is the light for nations.”

¹ See Catholic News Service “Vatican II: 50 Years ago Today,” series of articles. 2 October

“Light for the nations” is a theme that links the Old and New Testaments. Jesus, the light of the world (Jn 8:12), fulfills Israel’s vocation to be light for the nations (Is 42:6 and 49:6), as Simeon proclaimed (Lk 2:32). This highlights the unity of God’s plan of salvation, Israel’s privileged place, and the fulfillment of the plan in Christ.²

Just as John the Baptist pointed to another, saying that he himself was not the light, so too the Church exists in order to bear witness to Jesus. We certainly do not exist to bear witness to ourselves! Essentially the Church was reflecting and asking herself a question during this session of Vatican II. Church, what do you say about yourself?” What are you?

In 1985, when I was in the seminary, an important Extraordinary Synod of Bishops was held, effectively 20 years after the close of Vatican II. One line stands out. Reflecting on the month long synod, the bishops issued a document in which they stated:

The Church will be made more credible if speaking less of itself, it preaches more and more of Christ crucified (cf. I Corinthians 22) Thus the Church is as a sacrament, that is as a sign, an instrument of communion with God and also of communion and reconciliation of men among themselves.³

It is not a contradiction to say both that we need to speak more of Christ and less of ourselves, and to say that the Church needs to speak out clearly about who she is. At the core, the Church is Christ, it becomes clear that Jesus Christ must be our primary focus.

² See Douglas Bushman, “Light for the Nations: Themes of ‘Lumen Gentium’, Fifty Years Later”. Found in *Catholic World Report*, 12 November 2014.

³ Final Report II. B, a, 3. *L'Osservatore Romano*, 16 December, 1985, p.7

That Synod was so key because among the suggestions offered by the bishops was the need for a universal Catechism, that the richness of the faith would be outlined in an accessible format and available to all the faithful. What a gift that Catechism was. If you do not own one, you may certainly find it online. It is well worth an investment in your time to read it, or re-read it, as the case may be. Read it slowly, taking your time.

Increasingly, we are called to be a beacon of hope, a light for the nations. The change in title from simply “The Church,” was prophetic, not because the other title was bad or incorrect. Far from it. But the title did not as fully encapsulate why the Church exists. It merely states **that** we exist. And the richness of the Church is so much deeper.

Not only **can** we be this beacon of hope, but I propose to you that we must be, that this is our true call at this time in history. Let us believe in faith that this year of our Lord, 2017 A.D., will indeed be a great year, a year of blessings as we forge ahead in faith and hope.

Today’s prophecy from the Book of Isaiah contains several passages in which the mysterious figure of the Servant is introduced. Christians see in this prophecy a foreshadowing of a Messiah. In the text, the Servant's vocation will be not only the restoration of Israel, but the conversion of the world.⁴ Isaiah 49:1,5 reads, “The LORD called me from birth, from my mother's womb he gave me my name...and I am made glorious in the sight of the Lord.”

We are truly called from the womb to be a light to the nations. Let us embrace this challenge and this call.

⁴ New American Bible, footnote to Isaiah 49:6