



# Freedom and the Dilemma of “Autonomy – Theonomy”: On a Possible Reading of *Gaudium et Spes*

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to consider a particular issue present in the constitution *Gaudium et spes* of the Second Vatican Council. The anthropological discourse employed in this constitution reveals a significant interest in the issue of autonomy. The present study explores the contemporary issue of the tension between autonomy and theonomy, a tension which has characterized both the teaching of the Church and modern thought and culture. The analysis outlines how the Council transcends historical conflicts in this domain, thereby establishing a forum for dialogue without relinquishing its position regarding the primacy of God in the context of human freedom. Following the presentation of the problem and the modern context, the main section of the article provides an analysis of selected passages from *Gaudium et spes* that are considered to be pertinent in providing an answer to the aforementioned question. This is followed by an interpretation of the results of that analysis. It has been demonstrated that the Council deviates from the confrontational presentation of theonomy against autonomy. The approach employed here is to direct attention towards the concept of concrete freedom, which is characterized by its ambivalence and limitations. This, in turn, engenders an openness to the recognition of its foundation in God. The study concludes with a summary, which also draws attention to the topicality of the issue.

**Keywords:** *Gaudium et spes*, theological anthropology, Second Vatican Council, autonomy, freedom

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, is presented as the mature fruit of the Second Vatican Council. The importance of including a basic anthropological lecture at the beginning of the document has been emphasized many times. In addition to the detailed analyses contained therein (Kasper 2019b; Bosschaert 2017, 2019; Bujak 2011; Xavier 2010), the question of the legitimacy of including such a lecture at the beginning of a document on the Church's relationship with today's world could not be overlooked. The initial answer seems as simple as it is significant. The document describes the Church's relationship with the world as a relationship with man in his own environment, which encompasses the family, culture, economy, and politics. Therefore, it first describes the human condition as it is understood and proclaimed based on the Revelation. The issue of human freedom plays an important role in this presentation. This is what we will focus on. The subject of freedom always attracts attention. It is also the hallmark of the modern times. We consider it in the context of the conciliar document because,

it seems, its reception 60 years later is still linked to the reception of the answer that the Council gave to the question of freedom. In other words, the attitude towards freedom in the sphere of the life of faith is important for understanding and accepting the conciliar constitution.

## 1. The Modern Context of the Council's Question About Freedom

The time gap between our times and the Council allows us to take a step back and ask questions about the contexts in which this teaching on man and the Church in the modern world was proclaimed. One of these contexts was the long-standing debate on the relationship between theology and modernity, i.e., the developing ideas that seemed to be increasingly in conflict with the image of man and the world presented by Christianity (Schelkshorn 2012, 62–63). The result of this difficult history was a critical isolationist ecclesiastical-theological view of the world as an area outside the Church, straying as a result of the rejection of the existence of God or His absolute primacy, nourished by the idea of autonomy, which is characteristic of atheistic humanism. By positioning the Church as a universal sacrament of salvation living in the world, the Council rejected this defensive ecclesiastical isolationism. It sought to diffuse the accumulated tensions, i.e., to use the diagnoses already developed or to suggest its own, in order to address questions important to contemporary man and to point out the value of the answers offered by the Christian faith.

The question of human freedom was among the most important issues highlighting the tension between modern ideas and the teachings of the Catholic Church (Wąsek and Zieliński 2025). The identity of modern times can be understood in the light of the emergence of the idea of autonomy. At first, it was linked to trust in the reliability of universal reason, which could replace the authority of religious truth. This shift can be described in much more radical terms: the absolute authority of God was replaced by the absolute authority of reason. This substitution was based on the idea that reason discovers God's laws and therefore does not need religion and its revelatory foundation. In this way, the conflict between modernity and the religious worldview emerged.

The conflict was not alleviated by the progressive erosion of the original modern conception of universal reason. The awakened need for autonomy slowly came to terms with the crisis of the idea of strong reason. Moreover, the need for autonomy grew even more intense as the bonds of subordination to objectified reason loosened. The conflict with religion remained. It was no longer fueled by the opposition of reason to God, but by the opposition of human freedom to God's freedom. It can be expressed by the opposition of "autonomy vs. theonomy." The idea of autonomy, shaped in various ways, was profiled by opposition to theonomy, i.e., to the recognition of

the measure of man in God and His law. Among the mature trends diagnosing such an antinomy, we should mention the 19th-century critique of religion, in which the very foundation of Christianity is subjected to strong criticism from various positions. It is about freedom from religion as a condition for human emancipation.

Echoes of those disputes did not die out in the Church in the mid-20th century, when the Council was held. The reason for the fascination with this issue seems simple. The Promethean or Nietzschean idea of liberating man from the power of God (or gods) is in itself an extremely attractive proposition. As such, it demands thorough exploration. It was therefore eagerly taken up by many thinkers and became increasingly prevalent in the lives of many people in Europe. In 20th-century Europe, after the Second World War, modern reflection on the autonomy of the subject split into two camps. In the circle of “Western” culture, it continued to develop, while the “East” at that time experienced existential immunity to such a debate, caused by the systemic aggression of state Marxism. In conditions of systemic enslavement, the autonomy of a subject free from religion appeared to be a cynical intellectual construct fabricated by ideologues. On the other hand, the Catholic Church, strongly affected by a dispute with modern ideas in its institutional and intellectual path, and only just emerging from the defensive stance it had maintained, especially during the period of anti-modernism, did not have ready-made solutions that would allow it to address the issue of human freedom in a substantive manner. It was difficult not to immediately fall into the trap of polemics marked by the poles of “autonomy” versus “theonomy,” into an “all or nothing” dilemma with regard to the theological vision of man. These dilemmas are highlighted, among others, by Henri de Lubac’s (1995) research on “atheistic humanism.”

We propose to look at the Second Vatican Council from this perspective, even though the theme of freedom is not equally emphasized in all the documents of this Council (Hilpert 2013, 427f). The constitution *Gaudium et spes* made just such a conciliatory attempt: to describe man as a “being of freedom,” an attempt that avoided an extremely confrontational interpretation. This description does not begin with a rejection of the “worldly” vision, which refers to intuitions related to autonomy, but first evokes and appreciates this vision. It then points to its limitations and ambivalences, finally pointing to the core of Christian thought about man and his freedom—centered on the line of thought “creation in the image of God—discovery of the truth about man in the light of the Incarnation—eschatological perspective.”

These are familiar themes from the constitution *Gaudium et spes*. They are related to the concept of human dignity, which is central to this document: human dignity is not only not diminished by faith in God but finds its unquestionable foundation in the recognition of God. In this study, we analyze these themes exclusively from the perspective of one question: how was it possible to overcome the opposition between “autonomy” and “theonomy” in the description of human freedom? This breakthrough was of fundamental importance for abandoning the Church’s

unilaterally confrontational course in its encounter with modernity and strengthening its position of dialogue. We are, of course, talking about a breakthrough in terms of intellectual proposals. Alongside this, work remained to be done on removing resentments—work which, it seems, has still largely not been done on both sides of this long-standing dispute.

The above question remains important even 60 years after the Council. It is impossible to outline the broad context of the current situation in a short article devoted to the history of the issue. Let this brief opinion suffice as a hypothesis supporting the value of revisiting the issue of freedom presented in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church, isolated from the context of other important documents.

## 2. The Council's Presentation and Assessment of Autonomy

The terms “autonomy” and “autonomous” appear 14 times in *Gaudium et spes* (in the Latin version). This is a significant number, indicating the authors' interest not so much in the term itself as in the issue behind it.

Examining the successive occurrences of this term in the document, one can see a certain characteristic structure of the conciliar statement. It first appears in the description of the reasons for choosing atheism as a worldview and attitude towards life. It fills the entire point 20 of the document (the official English version available on [vatican.va](http://vatican.va) uses the term “independence” here). The term is then used in a general discussion of “human activity in the world” to declare its “rightful autonomy.” However, it is important to note the specific nature of English translation, which does not use the expression “rightful autonomy” in this context. The title of the paragraph 36 in the original Latin version is *De iusta rerum terrenarum autonomia*. And at the same point the Latin expression *legitima scientiae autonomia* is translated into English as “the rightful independence of science.”

### 2.1. A Differentiated Criticism of the Atheistic Concept of Autonomy in *Gaudium et Spes* (nos. 20–22)

In the first passage mentioned, we find the most important presentation of the idea of autonomy, which cannot be accepted from the point of view of the Christian faith. It states that belief in God negates human autonomy. This is a model case in which the thesis that autonomy is incompatible with theonomy applies. It was this idea of autonomy that was at the root of the deep conflict between the teachings of the Church and the philosophical trends of modernity. The second part of this statement is merely an extension of the first. It seems that it can be justified, e.g., by the presence of aggressive atheistic propaganda derived from Marxism in countries where

communist regimes seized power. In this way, however, a connection is established between theoretical, Feuerbachian or Nietzschean atheism based on the postulate of human autonomy, and ideological atheism, harnessed in the service of building a “new world” according to the political visions of state communism.

The Council does not share this understanding of human autonomy, just as it firmly rejects atheism. However, the Council’s statement does not end with criticism. The Council invites dialogue with those who reject God, including those who adhere to the understanding of human autonomy outlined above. It wants to seriously consider the arguments of atheists as well as to present its own explanations. It is interested in the concrete human being, that is, the practical anchoring of the abstract idea of atheistic autonomy in the history of an individual’s life. On this occasion, in the following sentences, it provides an initial framework explanation of why rejecting the concept of complete human autonomy and recognizing dependence on God does not threaten man. It reads as follows:

The Church holds that the recognition of God is in no way hostile to man’s dignity, since this dignity is rooted and perfected in God. For man was made an intelligent and free member of society by God Who created him, but even more important, he is called as a son to commune with God and share in His happiness. She further teaches that a hope related to the end of time does not diminish the importance of intervening duties but rather undergirds the acquittal of them with fresh incentives. By contrast, when a divine instruction and the hope of life eternal are wanting, man’s dignity is most grievously lacerated, as current events often attest; riddles of life and death, of guilt and of grief go unsolved with the frequent result that men succumb to despair.

Meanwhile, every man remains an unsolved puzzle to himself, however obscurely he may perceive it. For on certain occasions, no one can entirely escape the kind of self-questioning mentioned earlier, especially when life’s major events take place. To this questioning, only God fully and most certainly provides an answer as He summons man to higher knowledge and humbler probing. (GS 21)

As can be seen, the Council is not focused on criticizing the idea of autonomy, but on emphasizing human dignity. This dignity will not suffer from the recognition of God, but, on the contrary, will find its foundation in Him: in the fact of being created in His image and in the calling to eternal communion with Him. The Council supplements this justification, anchored in the beginning (creation) and the eschatological goal, in the next point with a famous reference to the mystery of Christ: “The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light.” (GS 22) Let us note that the Council’s argument for human dignity, encompassing the theological triad of “creation—the Incarnation of Christ—eschatological fulfilment,” was formulated as a response to the expectations of “systematized atheism,” which emphasizes the value of human autonomy.

Human dignity is founded in God, not in autonomy, treated as a primary reality, not derivable from anything other than itself. With this statement, the Council seems to be revisiting the aforementioned conflict of the modern era. In such a situation, the other side could easily return to its classic thesis that the rejection of God is a fundamental condition for finding and consolidating one's own autonomy. However, the impression of a simple return to the old dispute is misleading, because it results from an analysis of the most polemical moment, namely the criticism of atheism. And yet, even this criticism by the Council is marked by the balanced wording of paragraphs 21 and 22 of *Gaudium et spes*. Even more importantly, this polemical lecture, contained in the section on atheism, is a summary of a much broader statement found at the beginning of the constitution. There, the positive tone of the diagnosis of human experience that flows from the expression of freedom and its aspirations is striking. Admittedly, this diagnosis of aspirations is accompanied by an acknowledgment of the ambivalence of the results achieved (GS 4–10) and, thus, their criticism. However, this is not a criticism that questions autonomous aspirations from the outset, but rather an observation of their validity as a manifestation of human dignity. This “Introductory statement,” called “The situation of men in the modern world,” thus takes on an important function. It does not reject the aspirations resulting from autonomous efforts to develop culture, science, and technology, but rather emphasizes their positive significance for the good of humanity. Only in the second step does it point to the ambiguity of these achievements. In this way, it becomes possible to present its message about man (GS 12–22). The desire for freedom, revealing the depth of humanity, once its drama and ambivalence are discovered, leads to the mystery of God, and certainly should not repel us from Him.

## 2.2. “The Rightful Autonomy of Earthly Affairs” (GS 36)

The second important passage devoted to autonomy refers to the analysis of “human activity in the world.” (GS 33–39, especially 36) It evokes the same concern related to the alleged opposition between “autonomy” and “theonomy”: “Now many of our contemporaries seem to fear that a closer bond between human activity and religion will work against the independence of men, of societies, or of the sciences.” (GS 36) Instead of abstract reflection on the acceptance or rejection of God, there are various questions here about the value of human activity in the world (Losinger 1989, 127–62). Several perspectives are combined here (“of men, of societies, or of the sciences”). This does not make it easier to answer whether the autonomy of scientific methodologies in the study of “created things and human communities” in relation to the religious order, respect for the independence of the public order, or the basic spiritual attitude of the individual comes to the fore here. The Council emphasizes various activities, but clearly stresses the importance of scientific knowledge of reality and technical control over it. It argues that the fear of limiting the autonomy of

activity (“of men, of societies, or of the sciences”) is unjustified, because it concerns created realities that have their own “created” order. And this order requires scientific study. The only limit is the recognition of dependence on the Creator. This final declaration is understandable to a religious audience. However, for a scientist, it raises the question: how can science, which uses autonomous research methodology, recognize the dependence of creation on the Creator? After all, maintaining such a postulate goes beyond the limits of scientific knowledge and the assumptions made at the outset. It seems that science can only remain silent on this issue.

This teaching on autonomy in scientific inquiry can be understood not only as a methodological problem, but as a continuation of the reflection on human autonomy. In this sense, it also concerns social and cultural activity. The Council suggests that human activity directed outward also shapes the interior of the human person (GS 35). The Council continues to focus on the human person—in this case, as the author of social and scientific activity. In this light, the postulate of recognizing the dependence of creation on the Creator can be understood differently. It can be assumed that it concerns the person practising science, and not science treated as an impersonal cognitive procedure. It is the human person who, e.g., conducts scientific research using methods appropriate to the autonomous sciences, who does not forget that he or she is still dealing with reality created by God and directed towards Him. Therefore, in the realm of autonomous sciences, this declaration remains “inactive,” while a believing scientist can and should continue to recognize, in his personal relationship with the reality he is studying, that it is created by God. Moreover, this principle should be invoked in such an extreme case as the scientific reference to scientific knowledge as an argument against the existence of God. After all, this reveals a methodological error, a forgetting of the accepted research perspective, which does not deal with the existence of God. Finally, this warning of the Council against forgetting the Creator can and should be invoked when making ethical decisions, and therefore especially in the field of the technical use of cognitive achievements.

Let us summarize both statements on autonomy (GS 20, 36) in their mutual relationship. The common point of the Council’s teaching is the conviction that theonomy does not threaten “rightful” autonomy. But the latter must be properly understood, that is, its limits must be acknowledged. It does not mean independence from God, because man (in his subjective experience) and all created reality depend on God: He is their Creator and their goal. This has numerous consequences related to the recognition of the laws governing created reality, and therefore to submission to the truth of reality, which has both a physical and a moral dimension (it is a field of theoretical and practical reason).

In such a situation, the question arises as to whether autonomy, which is “relative” and which accepts self-limitation by recognizing dependence on God, is still worthy of the name “autonomy.” Is the above-mentioned solution, which calls autonomy “relative,” not in fact a source of renewed conflict?

### 3. Freedom Beyond the Dilemma of “Autonomy” Versus “Theonomy”

As long as we use the term “autonomy” inherited from the post-enlightenment discourse, we will not resolve the dilemma, and it will be difficult to characterize the theological solution offered by the Council. It seems that the terms “autonomy” and “theonomy” are mutually exclusive. It does not allow us to find a satisfactory solution to the question of man before God, seen from the perspective of modern sensitivity to the autonomy of the subject. Let us discuss an approach to answering this question that was presented by Walter Kasper.

He suggests that we need to refer to the term “freedom,” which directs the discussion towards the real experience of man. This is the experience where one accepts the numerous conditions of existence that determine one in an insurmountable way. The abstract concept of autonomy is transformed into the concept of freedom, which corresponds to the lived experience. Using this concept, and describing it further in certain passages, we will indicate a proposal for understanding, in its light, the message of freedom contained in *Gaudium et spes*. To this end, we will take two formally distinct steps: from (1) the classical solution, prior to modern criticism, to (2) a proposal referring to the anthropological turn. Both of these layers can be found in the conciliar document.

In the first step, it is easy to see the traditional interpretative figure employed by *Gaudium et spes* to show the truth about man. It is the already mentioned triad of Creation—Incarnation—Eschaton. These three stages manifest that God is the transcendent foundation of the inalienable dignity of man. At the same time, they express a conviction about the nature of freedom. Accordingly, thanks to the mystery of creation, we believe that God is not a rival to human freedom, but its foundation. As the Creator, He cannot be a rival to His creation. Thanks to the Incarnation, we believe that created freedom reaches perfection through full union with God. Union with God in the mystery of Christ does not bring about a limitation of humanity, but its fullness. This also applies to freedom. Thanks to our conviction about the eschatological goal of man, we recognize that freedom has a purpose and is therefore closely linked to the world of values, which have their own objective order, imposed by God who is the goal of everything.

This type of argument is well-known and has been recognized as convincing for centuries. It belongs to the classical apparatus explaining the nature of man and his freedom. In this light, freedom appears to be founded by God the Creator. Its highest expression is the voluntary search for revealed truth and the choice of good. Ultimately, it is a choice of God. In this view, human freedom is always theonomic. If, within this framework, one can speak of the autonomy of the subject, it is always seen from the perspective of the goal set by the Creator. However, such determination cannot be treated as “heteronomous” for man. Man can and should be able to interpret it as consistent with his nature and thus consistent with his deepest desires for good.

However, the early modern anthropological turn rejects this message. Man experiences himself first and foremost as a free and freedom-seeking subject, rather than as a particle of the cosmos governed by laws established by the Creator. This primacy of subjective experience turns the argument based on the recognition of objective “creative facts” on its head. Immanuel Kant’s critique of pure reason closes the door to metaphysical (*a priori*) objective knowledge about God, who creates human freedom and determines its content. Hence, we speak of the early modern anthropological turn. Therefore, it is first necessary to analyze freedom from the subject’s perspective. Following Kasper, it is an analysis of concrete freedom, not autonomy. The latter is an abstract postulate.

The second step in Kasper’s thinking on freedom presented here refers precisely to the situation after the modern anthropological turn. Kasper is a prominent thinker who tirelessly advocates for the appreciation of the value of European (early) modern philosophical thought in theology and for its critical reception. He notes that the experience of freedom is inextricably linked to its contingency (Kasper 2019a, 42–44). Human beings must constantly face the determinants of their lives. At the peak is the finiteness of life, in other words, the boundary of death. Therefore, the first condition for manifesting freedom is the acceptance of its indelible limitations. In this way, while accepting the pursuit of freedom itself, the modern understanding of freedom, which presents it as its own basis and goal, is criticized as overly optimistic. The manifold limitations on the subject’s freedom to shape its own existence show that it is necessary to refer to the basis of freedom outside the human subject itself. Only in this way can its meaning (sense) be revealed. Of course, such a thesis about the external definition of freedom—more precisely, about its transcendent, divine foundation—will bring back the modern fear of its complete determination, and thus ultimately its abolition.

Kasper therefore proposes to emphasize “concrete freedom” as the acceptance of the laws of reality and the freedom of other people. In this way, he links it to responsibility. Only responsible freedom is experienced as autonomous in concrete life. That is, it is not “at the mercy of particular interests, moods, passions.” If we recognize this, we also recognize that there is a certain order or meaning that is not our own creation but is given to us. At the same time, the experience of freedom opens up transcendence: man discovers his striving for “more” in every instance. In this light, we must accept that God exists as complete and creative freedom.

Kasper’s reflection, summarized here, is a proposal for how it is possible to reflect on man, starting from the subjective experience of freedom, which can be considered consistent with the modern perception of autonomy, and which at the same time allows us to refer to the need to recognize God as the foundation and goal of freedom. The tension between autonomy and theonomy does not disappear completely in this reflection. However, it is not antagonistic in nature. The opposite of autonomy would be heteronomy (Höver 1993, 1296). As the presentation shows, theonomy should

not be associated with heteronomy. Theonomy can be discovered as a transcendent condition for the possibility of human freedom, which is always concrete freedom.

In his summary, Kasper himself warns that Christian reflection on freedom attentive to the trends of modern thought, needs a “new theonomy,” that is, the recognition of the primacy of God as Creator, goal, and guarantor of created freedom. Kasper’s intuition helps us understand how *Gaudium et spes*, while seeking a positive assessment of the modern turn towards the subject and his freedom, at the same time tries to show the necessity of recognizing God—and thus theonomy—through a reflection on “concrete freedom.”

Let us then return to the text of *Gaudium et spes*. It is easy to find in it a reference to a “concrete freedom” that reveals the need for God. An important lecture on freedom can be found in the first chapter, which presents the theological teaching on human dignity. After appreciating the manifestations of the pursuit of freedom observed throughout history, the Council states:

For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man remain “under the control of his own decisions,” so that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him. Hence man’s dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure. Man achieves such dignity when, emancipating himself from all captivity to passion, he pursues his goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself through effective and skilful action, apt helps to that end. Since man’s freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the aid of God’s grace can he bring such a relationship with God into full flower. Before the judgement seat of God each man must render an account of his own life, whether he has done good or evil. (GS 17)

We can see how the description of freedom transcends the opposition between “autonomy” and “theonomy.” At first, it seems to be emphasized unconditionally. Man is dependent on God, which is expressed by reference to the act of creation, and thus to the dependence of all created things on the Creator. Therefore, there is no room for “autonomy,” understood as the rejection of this dependence. The “theonomy” resulting from the fact of creation cannot be rejected, even if in practice it can be opposed. At the same time, in the same place, the aforementioned dilemma is transcended by the fact that freedom is presented as founded by the Creator. God, who is the author of freedom, cannot be its opponent. The idea of conflict over freedom is reversed: the dependence on the Creator resulting from the fact of creation entails the protection of created freedom. Man has the right to use freedom. This right requires protection. If he is to achieve the goal intended by the Creator, it is only possible if he chooses it freely.

This line of argument may still seem to be a pre-modern, classical interpretation. However, it contains all the above-mentioned elements of reflection on “concrete freedom” and its experience. From this experiential moment, which emphasizes the ambivalence of freedom, sensitivity to the mystery of God as the transcendent basis of human aspirations is derived. The concrete freedom invoked by the Council faces various determinants, above all, moral choices. In this way, its connection with responsibility is revealed. Responsibility is its measure. This reflection is complemented by a characteristic passage:

But human freedom is often crippled when a man encounters extreme poverty just as it withers when he indulges in too many of life's comforts and imprisons himself in a kind of splendid isolation. Freedom acquires new strength, by contrast, when a man consents to the unavoidable requirements of social life, takes on the manifold demands of human partnership, and commits himself to the service of the human community. (GS 31)

This text puts an end to the idea of unconditional autonomy as an ideal. It rejects the very desire for it, showing that in this case, freedom and autonomy become almost opposite concepts. Thus, it professes that freedom needs to be guided by values that are discovered, not self-generated. It is precisely the world of values, which comes to the fore when one recognizes the specific position of the subject in the world, that forces us to abandon the idea of unconditional autonomy, which serves itself and rejects theonomy as the main threat.

## Conclusions

We have seen that the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, in its anthropological exposition, refers to the modern struggle for the recognition of human freedom as a fundamental feature of human nature. In the face of the long-standing controversy between the demands for recognition of autonomy and the necessity of accepting theonomy, it takes a position that is not surprising, namely, defending theonomy—the primacy of God in human life. At the same time, it conducts this reflection in such a way as to point to the value of freedom as a gift from God and as an internal power that is not threatened by the freedom of the Creator. Above all, by virtue of its numerous references to existential strivings and desires, it presents itself as a reflection originating in everyday experience, only subsequently subjecting it to an interpretation that opens onto the “absolute horizon”—the mystery of transcendence as an internal postulate emerging from these experiences.

Is this interpretation still convincing today? Undoubtedly, it remains a witness to an era that elevated to the level of church teaching a thought seeking an

expression appropriate for the early modern anthropological turn. The elements of transcendental-theological analysis intersecting with reflection, which, after the anti-modernist crisis, had already assimilated the connection between the natural and supernatural orders, remain an indelible witness to the era. All this is significant today, as it strengthens theological reflection practiced in the context of contemporary theoretical questions and practical challenges, as non-confrontational but critical of the surrounding phenomena of the “world.”

The ambivalence of human freedom in times of technological revolution and the profound social changes associated with it is taking on a new depth today. Even if the catalogue of examples given in *Gaudium et spes* needs to be supplemented, their structure remains unchanged: thanks to autonomous exploration, humanity has developed tremendously. At the same time, the threats created directly or indirectly by humanity’s autonomous pursuits and actions have increased dramatically too. However, diagnosing the situation by referring to one God in a pastoral sense seems much more difficult today. Despite technological advances in communication, the impression of growing barriers between people is increasing. The universalizing language of the Second Vatican Council, which refers to common human experiences and uses transcendental analysis, may encounter much greater difficulties today in being accepted, i.e., in accepting the message of faith expressed in such language. There remains a chance that the question of freedom is one of the most universal dilemmas, and that the pursuit of freedom and the awareness of insurmountable limitations in its realization is a common experience. To this extent, the message of the constitution *Gaudium et spes* retains its ability to inspire the acceptance of the Gospel as a message of freedom.

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