

Gaudium et Spes  
Chapter 5 Section 2 – Setting up an International Community  
Reflection by Helen Hawkins  
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Gaudium et Spes was written and promulgated in 1965 by Pope Paul VI.

For me to understand the spirit of this document, I decided to read it in light of who I was and what I felt and thought in 1965. I was eighteen years old, idealistic and about to marry my husband. To claim that I was a person who gave a great deal of thought about the events of the day, would hardly be the truth but I was very much involved in my Protestant Church, I loved Jesus and I was reasonably knowledgeable about the Bible - especially the Gospels.

If, for some reason, the constitution “Gaudium et Spes” had come to my attention, I would have read the lines found on in chapter 5: page 76: “It is our clear duty, therefore, to strain every muscle in working for the time when all war can be completely outlawed by international consent. The goal undoubtedly requires the establishment of some universal public authority ..... “;

I would have immediately thought of the United Nations as being the perfect vehicle for this concept. I remember as a child going door to door on Halloween with my little UNICEF box asking for money to feed the poor of the world. I had studied enough history to know that after WWI President Woodrow Wilson wanted to have the United States join the League of Nations and was disappointed that the country had become isolationist. In my naivety I thought that had been a terrible mistake.

Although I was never part of the flower-child movement, I had great hopes in 1965 for real peace in the world. After my husband came home from Vietnam to a country that was more than willing to spit on him and call him a “baby killer”, there was a certain shift in my thinking about “the peace movement”. I learned how easily phrases and slogans can mean exactly opposite of the words that are employed.

I do think that originally the United Nations was an ideal for peace. Over the years, like any temporal institution that grows in prestige and power, the lust for power soon becomes an obsession for those who seek to use the institution for their own gain.

The most disturbing aspect of the United Nations is its support and on-going implementation of laws and rules enforcing abortion as a human right. The failure of the United Nations to recognize the intrinsic value of the smallest and most vulnerable person of all mankind, has thrown into question the possibility of any temporal institution

being capable of fostering peace. Mother Teresa of Calcutta said at the 1994 National Prayer Breakfast Call to Defend Life,

“The greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because it is a war against the child, a direct killing of the innocent child, murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another?”

So, where does this lead me as I read Chapter V of “Gaudium et Spes”? I cannot just dismiss the joy and hopes of the writers of this document in their search and desire for a lasting peace because in 1965 I felt that same joy and hope for peace.

Unless we can unite our own families in love and our local churches and communities in peace, we do not have the necessary skills to change the world. If our religious leaders can not be faithful to their vows of chastity and be protective of our children and if our political leaders can not be faithful to their wives and to their children, they certainly are not going to be faithful to those they are supposed to serve. Unless mankind can love and care for the most vulnerable of our species, the unborn child, we do not have the necessary love to care for anyone else.

These are the reasons why I believe that the power of the “Church in the World” can not be found in temporal institutions. Nor can it be found in the reasoning of the temporal mind. I have come to realize that the “Church in the World” as an effective force for peace, will come from our lay members and our religious leaders who live their lives in Christ without slogans, without force, without power, but with love and dedication to those around them – and then extending this love in and beyond their communities.

No matter how powerful or equipped a temporal institution may become, true peace will only come from within. It can never be imposed from the outside.