

From Donna B. Doucette, Executive Director: The following notes are from the presentation “Pope Francis and the Unfolding of Vatican II in Today’s Church” by Dr. Massimo Faggioli at the June 2016 Assembly of the AUSCP.

Dr. Faggioli recently joined the faculty at Villanova University as a professor in theology and religious studies, moving there from a post as associate professor of theology and director of the Institute for Catholicism and Citizenship at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul MN. Residing in the U.S. since 2008, Dr. Faggioli earned his Ph.D. from the University of Turin (Italy) in 2002 where he also worked at the John XXIII Foundation for Religious Studies in Bologna. He writes regularly for both Italian and American newspapers and journals on the Church, religion, and politics. His two most recent books are A Council for the Global Church: Receiving Vatican II in History (2015) and The Legacy of Vatican II (2016), which he co-edited with Andrea Vicini.

Pope Francis and the Unfolding of Vatican II in Today’s Church

Dr. Faggioli focused his remarks on a key document from Vatican II: *Gaudium et spes*. Both Paul VI and Francis were shaped entirely by the teachings in this document, he said, and we must examine its theological approach to get at the center of Pope Francis’s thoughts.

Although *Gaudium et spes* is “big in South America” and consonant with most national church experiences elsewhere, here in the United States the bishops keep trying to ignore it and turn back the clock, he noted. “They can’t believe it’s real.”

The U.S. bishops are not alone, Faggioli continued, “Pope Benedict once called *Gaudium et spes* the problem child of Vatican II.” But Francis is reclaiming it, he said, and he’s doing it the smart way, without labeling it: “He is always doing Vatican II but he never says it.”

The recent multi-year family synod meetings are a good example, Faggioli says: They “really were a question of whether we go forward with *Gaudium et spes* or turn back to the 1950s.”

Using perspectives gained from his own experiences of moving to the U.S. from Italy at the age of 37, Faggioli then explored the question of why *Gaudium et spes* is “so complicated” in the U.S. Why was the reception of this Council document interrupted here?

There are both historical and political factors involved, he said, and two completely separate ways of viewing Vatican II. One sees the Council through a lens of continuity and ecclesiological consistency. But the other, the opposite narrative, thinks it’s a “big mess like the 1960s,” without coherence. “Many American Catholics, especially the bishops, see Vatican II as a regime change,” he said, and that’s why so many of them oppose Francis.

AUSCP 2016 Presentations Summaries

Faggioli identified three factors in the reception of *Gaudium et spes* in the U.S. that slow its implementation. One is “*the competitive nature of American church politics*,” which leads to anti-pope accusations. Indeed, he noted, “the amount of disrespect and contempt for Francis is astounding ... He has not gotten that elsewhere.”

A second factor he called the “new Americanism.” What is lacking in American Catholics, including the bishops, “is a truly universalistic, global look, instead of [their] nationalistic view of the Church.”

Third, Faggioli said, is “the role of Augustine in Catholic theology in the U.S.” He cited as one example a quote from German Cardinal Marx, that **the best thing for the Church is a secular state**. “You won’t hear a U.S. bishop say that!” ... *Gaudium et spes* recognizes the secular state. Theologians [in the U.S.] do not get that. The Augustinian imprint blocks their vision. But in Italy, where we had Mussolini, or in the Mideast today with Muslim states, they know a secular government is best for them.”

Catholics are not safe when the state is religious or faith-based, Faggioli added. They are safe when the state is *neutral or secular*, favoring no religion. Because U.S. bishops, and many American Catholics, think of “secular” as a cultural influence, they think a secular state is anti-Christian, anti-religion. But that is not what the rest of the world sees. They understand that a secular state is a neutral government, one that is safe for Catholics.

“There is a transatlantic Church gap,” Faggioli concluded, and it is obvious that some work is needed in the U.S. to develop a global outlook instead of a narrowed one.

For more on the presentations, check your emails in the coming weeks.