

Leo XIV and the “missionary” hermeneutics of Vatican II

Drawn by the light of Christ¹

Sixty years after its conclusion, Vatican Council II still has much to say to the Church today. Pope Leo XIV’s decision to inaugurate a new cycle of catechesis dedicated specifically to the conciliar texts, represents a precious contribution to assist the entire ecclesial community in making this rich legacy bear fruit. But how should we approach the conciliar teachings today? What role can it play with respect to the most pressing issues that have emerged during the synodal process?

The Holy Father, concluding his first catechesis of the new cycle, expressed the hope that by returning to the documents of Vatican II, “we may question ourselves about the present and renew the joy of running to meet the world to bring it the Gospel of the kingdom of God, a kingdom of love, justice, and peace” (*General Audience*, January 7, 2026). On that same day, the Pope offered the cardinals gathered in the Consistory some brief hermeneutic considerations, recalling the four pontificates (excluding the brief pontificate of John Paul I) that marked the different phases of the reception of the Council. He thus identified qualifying traits that highlight certain aspects of the dynamic of evangelization, focusing especially on the paradigm of “attraction,” proposed by Benedict XVI and developed by Francis.

Leo XIV thus seems to suggest that the primary purpose of Vatican II is precisely to relaunch the proclamation of the Gospel, engaging in listening and dialogue with the contemporary world. This is what emerges from the first paragraph of *Lumen Gentium*, which the Bishop of Rome chose to read in full to his cardinals. A “missionary” note, therefore, that helps the debate on the reception of Vatican II avoid falling into facile interpretative short-circuits that could confine it to a discussion that is currently unproductive, because it becomes an end in itself. The projection of evangelization as a hermeneutical horizon can instead help foster a creative and faithful reception, avoiding the stalemate of facile oppositions with a predominantly ideological flavor.

Even the synodal journey, in the articulation between the two assemblies of October 2023 and 2024, had found in the missionary orientation a turning point and a decisive interpretative key to directing community discernment. This helped overcome the danger of synodality being understood as an *ad intra discussion*, causing the ecclesial community to withdraw into itself.

Re-centering oneself in Christ is the first response to every temptation to self-referentiality. In fact, what has been forcefully denounced in *Evangelii Gaudium* was already inherent in the proposal of the Second Vatican Council. Thanks to Pope Leo’s rereading of it, the “missionary” orientation of the entire conciliar magisterium emerges more clearly. As already emphasized by many, it would be extremely reductive to equate attention to evangelization with the Decree *Ad Gentes* alone. From the very first lines of *Lumen Gentium*, the missionary concern that guided the Council assembly in presenting the mystery of the Church in the light of the mystery of Christ, indeed in that light which is the mystery of Christ, emerges. Re-centering oneself in Christ and projecting oneself into the proclamation of the *kerygma* are not at all two opposing movements, nor even two polarities in tension. It is precisely the focus on Christ as the centre of the Church’s life that requires, as an internal requirement, a movement of continuous “exodus” for the proclamation of the Gospel to all.

The emphasis on the metaphor of “light” stands out as a recurring and characteristic theme in Pope Prevo’s teaching. It is enough to recall his very first words as Bishop of Rome, on the evening of May 8th, “We are disciples of Christ. Christ precedes us. The world needs his light.” This metaphor,

¹ <https://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/2026-01/quo-017/attratti-dalla-luce-di-cristo.html>

deeply rooted in Scripture and in the dogmatic tradition of the Church, reinforces the Christocentric perspective of the evangelization movement, which must never be separated from the reference to the Holy Spirit, as the principal actor of the mission. It is no coincidence that the Council Fathers chose the expression *Lumen gentium* as *the incipit* of the Constitution on the Church, but we wanted to refer it explicitly to Christ. That same expression, in fact, had already been used during the pontificate of Pope Roncalli, but referred directly to the Church. As Leo XIV aptly highlighted, however, the Council’s intention is to underline that the Church is not the source of light, but rather that it reflects the light of Christ; “it is not the Church who attracts, but Christ” (*Address at the Opening of the Extraordinary Consistory*, 7 January 2026). Therefore, “if a Christian or an ecclesial community attracts, it is because through that ‘channel’ comes the lifeblood of Charity that flows from the Heart of the Savior” (*ibidem*).

The need to re-centre ourselves in Christ emerged with particular intensity in the Holy Father’s latest catechesis, held last Wednesday, in which he drew attention to *Dei Verbum*, 2. “In Christ,” Leo XIV affirmed, “God communicated himself to us and, at the same time, revealed to us our true identity as children, created in the image of the Word” (*General Audience*, 21 January 2026). In this way, Pope Prevoost continued to develop his particular interpretative line of the teaching on Revelation, capable of highlighting the relational and existential dimensions. Indeed, “*Jesus reveals the Father to us by involving us in his own relationship with Him*” (*ibidem*). God makes himself known by entering into the network of human relationships, to orient them in a new way. Revelation from the Christian perspective cannot be presented as a simple acquisition of “information” on an intellectual level, but as an experience that involves the human person in all its dimensions. Indeed, “it is therefore a *relational knowledge*, which does not merely communicate ideas, but shares a history and calls to communion in reciprocity” (*ibid.*). It is the communication of the truth that leads to integral salvation, which reaches the person in the concreteness of his existence. This truth shines on the face of Christ, the Word made flesh. God’s Revelation, which finds its fulfillment in Christ, thus makes visible that movement of compassion that characterizes divine life and which leads God to emerge from himself, to communicate himself to us in an act of self-giving filled with love. Every Christian, having become a missionary disciple in baptism, is called to feel inserted in the wake of this inexhaustible movement.

The particular sensitivity with which Leo XIV is guiding us in this rediscovery of the Council, its texts, and its legacy, yet to be developed and brought to fruition, makes us recognize in Vatican II a living source of inspiration and critical stimulus for the concrete existence of individuals and for the life of relationships that animates our ecclesial communities from within.

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