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I would like to begin, as I have often done before, by asking you a two-part question that I believe remains essential for our discernment as pastors in this moment of the Church's life:

Where have we been, and where are we going?

In his new Apostolic Letter on education, Pope Leo asks the same question, when he urges educational communities to “raise your eyes” and “know how to ask yourselves where you are going, and why.”¹ This act of questioning—of examining the direction of our journey—is an essential part of Christian discernment. It's something that every bishop must do when thinking about the Church entrusted to his care, and it's something that we must do in our shared journey as shepherds of the Catholic Church in the United States.

Today, I would like to offer a reflection on this question by placing it under a guiding light: the teaching and vision of the Second Vatican Council. I am convinced that Vatican II remains the key to understanding what kind of Church we are called to be today, and the reference point for discerning where we are headed.

Pope Leo also is convinced of this. Two days after his election, he told the Cardinals: “I would like us to renew together today our complete commitment to the path that the universal Church has now followed for decades in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.” He then said that “Pope Francis masterfully and concretely” set forth this path in *Evangelii Gaudium*—several points of which he highlighted as fundamental to our ongoing ecclesial journey.² We know, of course, that *Evangelii Gaudium* was Francis's way of expressing the teaching of Vatican II

¹ Pope Leo XIV, Apostolic Letter *Drawing New Maps of Hope* on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the Conciliar Declaration *Gravissimum educationis*, 27 October 2025, §11.2.

² Pope Leo XIV, Address to the College of Cardinals, 10 May 2025.

and applying it to the Church’s missionary mandate today. Leo clearly wants us to continue in that direction.

Given the tremendous importance of education in the Church in the United States, the recent publication of *Drawing New Maps of Hope* offers timely guidance. Writing on the 60th anniversary of *Gravissimum Educationis*, Pope Leo situates education “at the very heart of evangelization—the concrete way in which the Gospel becomes an educational gesture, a relationship, a culture.”³

With that same spirit of discernment, we now turn to the Council itself.

I. Vatican II as the Self-Description of the Church for Our Age

What was Vatican II? In the words of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, it was “*the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century.*”⁴ The Council offered us, not a new faith, but a new way of describing and living the one faith in the modern world. As such, it is a reliable guide for ecclesial discernment in this time of epochal change.

The documents of the Second Vatican Council gifted the Church with a map for the journey ahead. Yet the territory that this map outlined was, in many ways, uncharted. The vision of the Council was a vision for the future—a prophetic orientation toward a world that was only beginning to take shape. When the Council Fathers issued those texts, the churches were still full; the effects of secularization had not yet become deeply visible. Many of the realities that the Council intuited had not yet manifested themselves in the life of the world or of the Church.

For this reason, the Council’s documents were not fully understood in their time. They were not a description of where the Church stood, but a map drawn for the territory into which she was being sent. Today, that territory is our daily experience. We now inhabit the world that the Council foresaw—a world marked by profound cultural shifts, technological change, and a secularized mindset that

³ *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, §1.1.

⁴ Pope St. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, 6 January 2001, §57; Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter “*Motu Proprio Data*” *Porta Fidei* for the Indiction of the Year of Faith, 11 October 2011, §5. Emphasis original.

challenges faith at its roots. Now is the time to unfold the Council's map and walk its path—to rediscover in those texts the light and courage needed to navigate this moment with fidelity and creativity.

From this perspective, the vision of the Council finds continuity in the magisterium of all the popes since then, who call us to embody the missionary and pastoral dynamism that Vatican II anticipated. Their pontificates are not a departure from the conciliar spirit but its maturation—a reminder that renewal is always a work of the Spirit, unfolding in time and responding to the concrete realities of the world in which the Church lives and evangelizes.

II. From Francis to Leo XIV: Continuing the Council's Path

When asked about a Third Vatican Council, Pope Francis replied that the time is not ripe, because we are still laboring to fully implement the Second. His pontificate was marked, not by innovation for its own sake, but by a call to live more fully the vision of the Council. *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Fratelli Tutti* both reflect that vision: a missionary Church, joyful and outward-looking, a community that builds fraternity in a divided world. Again and again, he warned against turning the Gospel into ideology or letting partisanship eclipse communion. Francis called the Church to speak with a single evangelical voice—prophetic, merciful, and united in service to the poor.

We have now walked together through another pivotal moment: the transition from Francis to Leo XIV. Even if some may be inclined to pursue paths that turn aside from the pastoral vision of Pope Francis, we know that the way forward is not to diverge, but to advance along the road he helped to illuminate—a road on which Pope Leo continues to lead us. Many believers have been encouraged, by the witness of Francis, to live the Gospel in greater simplicity, mercy, and openness. And Leo, by carrying forward and expanding upon the magisterium of his predecessor, is helping us to keep walking as the “pilgrim Church” which *Lumen Gentium* described.

As the 20th century approached, Pope Leo XIII gave the Church *Rerum Novarum*, which equipped her with the language and vision to confront the challenges of the industrial age. Now, as the 21st century unfolds, the new Leo seeks to guide us through equally profound transformations—technological, cultural, and moral.

In his first Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi Te*, which Francis had begun, the Holy Father's reference point continues to be Vatican II, this time as it addresses our mission among the poor. Recalling Pope Paul VI who said that “the ancient parable of the Good Samaritan served as the model for the Council's spirituality,” Leo writes: “I am convinced that the preferential choice for the poor is a source of extraordinary renewal both for the Church and for society.”⁵ He says that “The Second Vatican Council represented a milestone in the Church's understanding of the poor in God's saving plan.”⁶

And here is a man who knows what it means to serve the poor!

Just as Leo XIII responded to the upheavals of his time by grounding the Church in her perennial teaching while addressing new realities, so the present Pope Leo is anchoring us in Vatican II's vision in order to face the challenges of globalization, technological transformation, cultural shifts, and ecological crisis.

III. Drawing New Maps of Hope — Education and Ecclesial Renewal

The Second Vatican Council continues to guide our journey as a Church. Its teaching on worship, the mystery of the Church, the Word of God, and dialogue with the world converge in one vision: a Church rooted in faith, animated by hope, and engaged with humanity through love.

Within this horizon, Pope Leo XIV's *Drawing New Maps of Hope* takes on special significance. Issued on the 60th anniversary of *Gravissimum Educationis*, it recalls that education belongs to the very heart of evangelization: “it is the concrete

⁵ Pope Leo XIV, Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi Te* to All Christians on Love for the Poor, 4 October 2025, §7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, §84.

way in which the Gospel becomes an educational gesture, a relationship, a culture.”⁷ Leo uses the image of an “educational constellation”: a living network of schools and universities, movements and institutes, lay associations and religious congregations, national and international partnerships. “Each ‘star’ [in this constellation] has its own brightness, but together they chart a course.”⁸ It is this convergence, this unity-in-diversity of institutions and charisms, that gives Catholic education its prophetic strength and broad reach within society.

Gravissimum Educationis remains a sure guide. It affirmed the right of every person to an education ordered to truth and dignity, the role of parents as first educators, and the inseparable bond between faith and reason in forming the whole person. Pope Leo now develops that heritage, urging educational communities to be builders of bridges, not walls—allowing reconciliation and peace-making to become “the method and content of learning.”⁹ He urges educational communities, not just to impart skills, but to heal relationships, form consciences, and choose not what is convenient but what is just. He calls these educational constellations a “luminous design that guides our steps in the darkness of the present time.”¹⁰

For the Church in the United States, this vision renews our dedication to formation in all its dimensions: to families as first educators; to schools that are both strong and accessible; to universities that serve culture through “an inclusive outlook and attention to the heart”; and to policies that protect the poor—since, as the Holy Father reminds us, “‘losing the poor’ is equivalent to losing the school itself.”¹¹

For more than a century before the Second Vatican Council, parish schools, academies, and universities had formed generations in faith and civic virtue, helping immigrant families take root and contribute to the life of the nation. Catholic education remains one of the great “success stories”—and enduring strengths—of the Church in the United States. Yet even at its height, when Catholic identity was strong and enrollment robust, the Church stood on the threshold of change. Vatican

⁷ *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, §1.1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, §8.1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, §10.3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, §10.2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, §10.4.

II did not create this educational mission, but it gave it a new horizon: calling Catholic education to look outward, to engage a rapidly changing world, and to form disciples ready to bring the Gospel into new cultural and social contexts. The true vitality of Catholic education—its ability to bear lasting fruit for the Gospel—depends on how deeply it embodies the vision of Vatican II, discerning the signs of the times and renewing its methods and structures in fidelity to the Gospel. Where that vision is received and lived, Catholic education continues to be a radiant witness of evangelizing hope; where it is neglected or narrowed, the light grows dim.

Catholic education thus offers a window into the wider story of how the Council’s teaching has been received across the Church in this country. The vitality of the lay apostolate—in education, in social service, in public life—is one sign of that legacy. Parish life, charitable outreach, and countless apostolic works have flourished as the faithful embrace their baptismal vocation. Yet this vitality bears its truest fruit only when it remains rooted in communion with those ordained to shepherd the Church and carried out in the synodal spirit of collaboration, not substitution.

At the same time, the Council’s call to unity challenges us to resist the divisions that fracture our witness. Polarization too often allows Catholics—even within the same parish or family—to identify more with tribes or ideologies than with the Body of Christ. The synodal path invites us to a different way: a style of being Church that makes communion concrete, allows dialogue to become discernment, and catholicity to become shared mission.

If we embrace this full inheritance of Vatican II—the educational, pastoral, and social dimensions alike—the Church in the United States can continue to be what she has so often been: a leaven within this nation, a sign of hope that transcends division, and a servant of the common good grounded in the dignity of every human being.

V. A Call to Represent the Church of the Council

Having received so much from the Council's vision, the question now becomes: what does that ask of us as bishops? How are we to represent the Church the Council described?

It touches every aspect of our ministry.

- In our priesthood and episcopal vocation, we are called to be men of communion—pastors who walk with the People of God rather than standing apart.
- In evangelization and ecumenism, we must avoid both ideological narrowing and vague generality, proclaiming the whole Gospel with clarity and love.
- In our engagement with public life, we are not chaplains to parties or distant commentators, but shepherds who bring the breadth of Catholic social teaching into civic discourse in a way that transcends partisanship.

And we must never forget the call Pope Leo XIV places at the heart of *Dilexi Te*: to renew our saving relationship with the poor, whose poverty takes many forms—migrants seeking dignity, victims of human trafficking and abuse, families denied a fair chance to improve their lives. To be faithful to Vatican II is to be the Church of Christ among—and *with*—these brothers and sisters.

Conclusion: Where Have We Been, and Where Are We Going?

The Council is not behind us; it stands before us, the map for our journey. To the questions with which we began—Where have we been, and where are we going?—the deepest ecclesial answer is this:

- We are a Church rooted in the grace of the Second Vatican Council;
- a Church still receiving and embodying its vision;
- a Church sent forth in unity, as disciples and shepherds, bringing hope, joy, and mercy to a world in need.

The Council's documents continue to form us and guide our discernment of this moment. Pope Leo XIV now carries that same vision forward, interpreting it anew for the world of today.

If we walk faithfully with him, we will be the Church the Council envisioned: a pilgrim people, a sacrament of communion, a beacon of hope, and a servant of the poor—drawing, even now, new maps of hope for the generations to come.

Thank you.