Note: This Study Guide can be used with any translation of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. However, it is designed to be used with the one found in Vatican II in Plain English (cited in the footer). Copies can be obtained from PastoralPlanning.com.

Because of the length and breadth of this Constitution, we will not proceed through it from front to back, but will treat certain themes which emerge within it. You will need your copy of the Constitution in hand for this. Be ready to search for various articles as we proceed. If you are working through this material and you have too much for any one session, please just pause at any good stopping point and pick it up at that same point in your next session.

Our method here is to read aloud the various faith statements drawn from the Constitution, alternating readers in the group with each main statement. At certain points, we pause and turn to the article itself, reading it aloud in the group, using the same process. As we go, we also pause to discuss and apply what the Constitution teaches us.

Credit here goes to Prof Gerald Darring, adjunct professor of theology at Spring Hill College, whose work on this Constitution the author here has read and absorbed. Part of what follows may be quotes from Prof Darring’s summary article on Gaudium et Spes into which he had penetrating insights. For more about Professor Darring, click here.
Session 1

We begin with an overview of the whole Constitution. Note that it is written in two parts, unlike any other Council document.

Preface (articles 1-3)
Read this preface aloud together. What strikes you in this article? Why do the bishops begin by addressing the “joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time”?

Introductory Statement (articles 4-10)
Here the bishops make it clear they will address the entire human family in this document. This is the first such statement from an ecumenical council in the entire history of the church.

✓ What do the bishops offer to the world?
✓ What is the motivation of the church in making this offer?

Read through articles 4-10 together and pull out the various principal thoughts as you go. Write them on a flip chart or piece of paper.

Outlining the whole Constitution
Using the outline below, page through the rest of the Constitution now and note any key ideas you see or hear.

Use this method for paging through the document:
✓ Divide the group in two parts.
✓ Assign half to work with Part One and half with Part Two.
✓ Each group may divide the material by chapter if that suits you.
✓ Now for each chapter of the part in which you’re working, provide a very brief one- or two-line summary, based on a light reading of the chapter. Use the subtitles and leading sentences to guide you.
✓ Summarize your main points on flip chart paper and be ready to present it to your peers.

Part One
Chapter One (articles 11-22) “The Dignity of the Human Person”
Chapter Two (articles 23-32) “The Community of Humankind”
Chapter Three (articles 33-39) “Human Activity Throughout the World”
Chapter Four (articles 40-45) “The Role of the Church in the Modern World”

Part Two
Chapter One (articles 46-52) “Fostering the Nobility of Marriage & the Family”
Chapter Two (articles 53-62) “The Proper Development of Culture”
Chapter Three (articles 63-72) “Socio-economic Life”
Chapter Four (articles 73-76) “The Life of the Political Community”
Chapter Five (articles 77-90) “Fostering Peace and the Promotion of a Community of Nations”

Getting started
This Constitution says that the church wants to “enter into dialogue” with the entire human family (3) so that the Church can help shed light on the human mystery and cooperate in solving contemporary problems (10). It addresses this Constitution to the whole of humanity (2). The Church “carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (4).

What would you say are the signs in our own times today, all these years after the Council has ended?

In line with how the bishops read the signs of the times, the Council expressed its own view of contemporary society at that time. It said that we were in a new age of human history, since the social and cultural circumstances of life had profoundly changed (54).

Read article 54. Compare today’s world to the one which the bishops describe in this article. What is the same and what is different now than then?

Returning to the beginning of the Constitution, the bishops point out that the human race has passed from a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one (5). We are undergoing a cultural and social transformation (4) resulting in rapid changes in industrialization, urbanization, communication, and socialization (6) as well as changes in attitudes, values, and norms of behavior (7).

As you scan or read through these articles, how does what the bishops say resonate with your experience of life in the modern world? Do you feel the very structures of society changing under your feet (6)? Do you sense a spiritual uneasiness (5)?
Session 2
Begin this session by re-reading article 1 of the Constitution aloud.

The bishops are describing “life in the modern world” and we continue to examine their analysis as we did at the end of the last session.

They say that modern women and men are on the road to a more thorough development of human personality. Likewise, they say people are more and more discovering and affirming their rights (41). There is also a growing awareness of human dignity, of rights and duties that belong to everyone and cannot be taken away (26). There is more interdependence than ever before, and this is gradually becoming true around the world (26).

People are claiming the rights which had been systematically taken away from them through injustice or unequal distribution (9). Likewise, the bishops say that there is a new and powerful thirst for a full and free life, one that is truly worthy of humans (9). A keener sense of human dignity is leading to a political environment more protective of human rights by governments in many parts of the world (73).

Read article 26. Are you aware of places in the world where this positive growth of human rights is a reality? How have you seen it unfold?

There is a mounting increase in the sense that we men and women of today are ourselves the architects and molders of our community’s culture (55). We have both autonomy as well as responsibility: we are witnessing the birth of a new humanism in which humanity is defined in terms of social and historical responsibility (55). Under these circumstances it is now possible to free most of humanity from the misery of ignorance (60).

Read article 60. Why do you think it is so difficult for us humans to end illiteracy, disease, and poverty? Why do you think human institutions and even the church get all wrapped up in rules, rubrics, and incidental details, and never accomplish what we are capable of doing in terms of human development?
While the bishops saw all these positive signs, they also noted several negative signs. Splits have developed within individuals, families, races, and nations (8) caused mainly by rapid and uneven change. Many find it difficult to identify permanent values and apply them to changing circumstances (4). People feel uncertain about the future. One of the more serious errors of our age is the split between people's faith and their daily lives. Likewise, people of good heart see different solutions to the same problems (43).

Social disturbances take place, resulting in part from natural economic, political and social tensions, but at a deeper level they result from pride and selfishness (25). We humans have taken on a lot of power. We can build or destroy the very earth itself. We become selfish, seeking only our own good and not that of the community. This threatens to destroy the race itself (37).

**Read article 37.** How can the situation they describe in this article be overcome? We Christians believe that the answer is in becoming selfless, in dying to ourselves and sacrificing in order to support the common good (the last paragraph in article 37). Do you believe this is possible for us humans? Can good win out over evil? Is love stronger than hate? Is peace possible in the face of so much war?

As the bishops point out, war continues its devastation, and the fierce character of warfare threatens to result in unsurpassed savagery. Despite international treaties and agreements, good nations sometimes break the code and use methods of war or interrogation which are immoral and against human decency (79). The arms race eats up money which could be spent on poverty (81). People live in fear of terrible weapons. If we don’t come together as a human race to end war forever, we may be destroyed by it ourselves (82). Even when no war is being waged, the world is constantly beset by strife and violence (83).

The Council concludes that the modern world shows itself at once powerful and weak, capable of the noblest deeds or the most base; before it lies the path to freedom or to slavery, to progress or retreat, to community or hatred (9).

**Read article 9.** What do the bishops mean when they speak of us human beings “craving a life that is full”? What sort of life is “worthy of human beings”?
**Session 3**

The bishops remind everyone in article 40 that the Church lives in the real world. “It is now present here on earth and is composed of women and men; they...are called to form the family of the children of God,” they tell us. The Constitution then sets out to establish a working relationship with the world in which it finds itself, for the Church goes forward together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot which the world does (40). The followers of Christ share the joys and hopes, the grief and anxieties of today’s people, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted (1). In this, we Christians are joined with the rest of society in the search for truth (16).

**Pause here to read article 16 aloud together.** What does this article have to say about your conscience? How is truth found? Be sure to consider all the nuances of this – especially regarding how a conscience must be formed.

The People of God and the human race render service to each other, the bishops remind us (11). The Church has a role in this. Members of the People of God are a sort of soul for human society (40). The Church can contribute to making people and history more human (40), opening up to people the meaning of their own existence (41). The Church likewise can inject into modern society the force of its faith and love. If we but put love into practice for the good of all, the world itself would be saved (42).

The universality of the Church enables it to serve as a bond between diverse human communities (42). For we are a world-wide organization with only the good of humankind as our goal. The Church respects all the true, good, and just elements found in human institutions (42), and Christians living and working in the world are bound to animate the world with a Christian spirit (43). The Church can and ought to be enriched by the development of human social life, and indeed the Church has profited richly by the history and development of humanity (44). Whoever works to better the world contributes to the Church as well (44). The Church’s mission is religious and not in the political, economic or social order, but this religious mission can help the human community structure itself properly (42).

**Pause here to read article 40 aloud together.** What does this article have to say about your conscience? How is truth found? Be sure to consider all the nuances of this – especially regarding how a conscience must be formed.

Divide into two groups. In one group read article 40 together and in the other, read articles 41-42. Using our notes above, each group can sketch the role which the bishops see the Church having in society and culture. List your findings on flip chart paper and be ready to share them later with your peers.
Exercise. Find each of these citations in the text of the Constitution, using our guide. We want to consider how the mission of the Church in today’s world is described by the bishops. This mission includes religious and less specifically religious goals.

- To reveal the mystery of God (41).
- To make God present and in a sense visible (21). Recall the opening of the Constitution on the Church where we learn that Christ is the Light of the nations and the Church is a sign to the world (or sacrament) of Christ.
- To communicate God’s own very life (grace) to people and cast the reflected light of that life over the entire earth (40).
- To carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the Spirit (3).
- To preach the Gospel to everyone and dispense the treasures of grace (89). Remember the Constitution on the Liturgy #6 where we read that we are plunged into the Paschal Mystery, bringing to the world the idea of dying to self and sacrificing on behalf of others. This is the key.
- To guard the heritage of God’s Word and draw from it moral and religious principles (33) which can be shared with all.
- To work that the Reign of God may be fully established here and now, and that the salvation of the whole human race may come to pass because of that (45).
- To scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel (4).
- To hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and judge them in the light of God’s Word (44).
- To promote unity among all men and women, with respect for people of all faiths (42).
- To stimulate and advance human and civic culture (58).
- To foster and elevate all that is found to be true, good and beautiful in the human community (76).
- To shed on the whole world the radiance of the Gospel message, and to unify under one Spirit all people of whatever nation, race or culture (92).

The Constitution takes the position that the faith of the Church opens people up to the meaning of their own existence (41). It goes on to address the human person and human activity and experience. It says that people are more precious for what they are than for what they have (35). The dignity of the human person applies to

- the human body, good and honorable, which God created (14)
- the human intellect, which shares in the light of the divine mind (15)
- and the human conscience, the most secret core and sanctuary of a person where one is alone with God (16), which we just saw above.

Human dignity demands the freedom to direct oneself toward goodness (17).
The Council argues against a concept of religion which includes only worship and moral living: it asserts that religion also includes involvement in earthly affairs (43). It also argues against discriminatory attitudes involving religion. All discrimination based on religion is contrary to God's intent and must be overcome and eradicated (29), and we ought to respect and love those who think or act differently from us in religious matters (28). How do you experience this in today's society and culture, either positively or negatively?

Atheism.
If time permits, add this segment to your work.

Noting with approval that there is a steadily growing respect for people of other religions (73), the Council attempts to conduct a respectful dialogue with atheists.

Atheism, they tell us, is one of the most serious problems of our age (19). The word atheism is used to cover a number of different attitudes and approaches (19). Atheism arises from different causes, and believers themselves frequently bear some responsibility for the atheism of others, concealing rather than revealing the authentic face of God (19).

Pause here to read article 19 aloud. Why do you think the bishops feel so strongly about atheism as a challenge for the modern world?

Atheism often reflects a desire to be totally independent of God, so that humans can be an end unto themselves (20). Atheism can also result from the anticipation of human liberation solely through economic and social efforts, while viewing religion as an obstacle because it arouses hope for a deceptive future life (20). Atheism raises weighty questions, which should be examined seriously (21). The remedy to atheism is a proper presentation and living out of our faith (21). There must be dialogue so that believers and unbelievers can work together for a better world (21).

In other words, we Christians are called to live our lives so convincingly that all who see us recognize the goodness of our faith. This goodness is found in generosity, forgiveness, kindness toward enemies, fair treatment of prisoners, a heart for the poor, and so forth.
Session 4

After laying out its theoretical program, the Council turns its attention to several problems which it says are of special urgency (46). Read article 46 together to set the stage for sessions 4 and 5.

1. The first topic which they tackle is marriage and family. The bishops note that modern economic conditions are causing serious disturbances in families (47). They acknowledge that serious and alarming problems arise in many parts of the world because of unfettered population growth. And they recognize that this creates anguish of conscience for many. This is important, they say, because the condition of families has a decisive bearing on the dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of human society as a whole (48). Everyone should work for the welfare of marriage and the family: parents, children, those who exercise influence in society, Christians, researchers, pastors, and various organizations (52).

How have marriage and family life changed in the years since this Constitution was written? What issues are before us today? What principles does this section of the document lay out for us?

2. The second topic taken up in the Constitution is culture. People arrive at full humanity only through culture, those things by which people develop and perfect their bodily and spiritual qualities (53). Read article 53 aloud together to get a feel for the question being opened up here by the bishops.

A more universal form of human culture is developing, one which promotes and expresses the unity of the human race (54). For the first time in human history all people are convinced that the benefits of culture ought to be and actually can be extended to everyone (9).

Define the term “culture” as the bishops use it here. Put it in your own words and keep it in front of you as we proceed.

The Church is not bound to any particular form of human culture (42), to any particular way of life or any customary pattern of life (58). Because there are many ties between the message of salvation and human culture (58), the Church is involved in a living
exchange with diverse cultures of people (44), although sometimes it is difficult to harmonize culture with Christian teaching (62).

The Council lays down the following guidelines for evaluating the role of culture in society. Read through these together and for each, tell how you see it playing out in reality today, four or five decades after it was written:

- Culture needs to develop freely among peoples, and they need to be autonomous from dictatorial rule in order to allow it to grow (59).
- We ought to respect and love those who think or act differently from us in social, political, and religious matters (28).
- Culture should be subordinated to the development of the whole human person (soul, spirit, intellect, will, body, and social life) and the common good of society (59).
- All cultural discrimination is contrary to God's intent and must be overcome and eradicated (29). There should be no discrimination in the satisfaction of the right to culture because everyone has the right to their own culture and even a duty to develop themselves culturally (60).
- Women must be affirmed as participants in cultural life (60), and they ought not to be denied the right to cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men (29).
- Increased exchanges among cultures cannot be allowed to disturb the life of communities or destroy ancestral wisdom and the peculiar character of each people (56). In other words, we must protect people’s cultural heritage and not allow it to be eroded.
- The refinement of the culturally competent cannot stand in the way of others participating in the cultural values of the world (56).
- The arts and disciplines should be free to use their own principles and methodologies, and people must be free to search for the truth, express opinions, and practice art (59).
- Culture cannot be made to serve as an instrument of political or economic power (59).

Read article 62 aloud together. What principles for creating harmony between culture and Christian formation do you read here? List them and share them.
3. The third topic taken up by the Council is socio-economic life. It teaches that people are the source, center, and purpose of all economic and social life (63), and that the purpose of economic production is to serve people in their material needs as well as in the demands of their intellectual, moral, spiritual, and religious lives (64). The Church is not bound to any particular economic system (42), but it is critical of the excessive economic and social differences among people or groups of people which violate social justice, equity, human dignity, and social and international peace (29). It is also critical of the dangerous lack of balance between developed and other countries, and also between agriculture, industry, and the services (63).

What is the economic situation in today’s world and how does it measure up to the bishops’ teaching in this Constitution?

Session 5

3. (continued) Of special concern to the Church are poverty and the poor. The followers of Christ share the joys and hopes, the grief and anxieties of all people, but especially of those who are poor (1). The Council notes with sadness that even with unprecedented wealth, resources and economic power, we are still tormented by hunger and poverty (4): the greater part of the world is still suffering from so much poverty that it is as if Christ himself were crying out in these poor to beg the charity of the disciples (88).

Subhuman living conditions are opposed to life, thereby poisoning human society and dishonoring God (27). Moreover, human freedom is often crippled when a person encounters extreme poverty (31). Economic development sometimes results in contempt for the poor (63), but the Council calls on us to react differently: love of neighbor means that we cannot imitate the rich man who had no concern for the poor man Lazarus (27). People must help the poor, and not merely out of their superfluous goods (68). At the same time, those in extreme necessity have the right to procure what they need from the riches of others (68). The Council condemns the arms race, which it says ensnares the poor to an intolerable degree (81), and it proposes the establishment of an organism of the universal Church which would be set up to cultivate both the justice and love of Christ toward the poor (90).
The Council offers a vision of a just socio-economic order. This vision is based on the principle that the right to have a sufficient share of earthly goods belongs to everyone (68). Read articles 67-71 and draw out of this section the various principles which the bishops envision as a means to bring greater balance between rich and poor.

4. The next topic taken up by the Council is political life. Read article 73 as a way of beginning to understand this section. In just a few words, what are the bishops saying here?

Political community exists for the common good—the sum of social conditions within which people attain their perfection (74). The Council welcomes the fact that more and more people are becoming politically active (73), and it teaches that the Church is not bound to any particular political system (42, 76), and can work under any kind of government that recognizes basic human rights, the demands of the common good, and the freedom of the Church to exercise its own mission (42).

How does the political system in your nation help or hinder your culture? Does it support human freedom? Does it contribute to the reduction of poverty, illiteracy, and disease? Is it fair and open to the participation of all?

The Constitution goes on to say that people should be free to choose their political system and their rulers (74). Political authority must be based on appeals to people’s freedom and sense of responsibility. It must always be exercised within the limits of the moral order and directed towards the common good (74). It can never be based on dictatorial systems or totalitarian methods which violate human rights (75). Political systems should not hamper civic or religious freedom, victimize people through avarice and political crimes, or serve special interests (73). People have the right to defend human rights from abuse by public authority (74).

Citizens and governments have duties to each other which must be carried out for the common good. People have the right and the duty to use their free vote to further the common good. Political parties can never give their interests priority over the common good (75). How does your government score in this regard? Is your political system working well or poorly?
5. The final topic taken up by the Council is peace. Read article 77 to get started.

Peace is an enterprise of justice and the fruit of love: it is not merely the absence of war, or the maintenance of a balance of power, or the calm enforced by dictatorship (78). It must be born of mutual trust among nations and not be imposed through fear of available weapons (82). Excessive economic and social differences among people or groups of people violate social and international peace (29), and building up peace involves rooting out the causes of discord, especially injustice (83).

Christ is himself the cause of the justice and peace we seek. He is the author of peace, the Prince of Peace reconciling all people with God (78). In Christ can be found the key, the focal point and the goal of humanity and of all human history (10); he is the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and of civilization, the center of the human race, the joy of every heart and the answer to all its yearnings (45). Only in Christ can the human mystery take on light (22). He entered the world's history as a perfect human, taking that history up into himself and summarizing it (38).

How can Christ bring peace to the nations? Lay out the plan whereby the followers of Christ become the peacemakers?

Governments have the right to legitimate defense when peaceful means of settlement have been exhausted. Those in military service who fulfill this role properly contribute to the establishment of peace, but conscientious objectors should be protected by law. Orders that are immoral should not be obeyed, such as those designed for the methodical extermination of an entire people (79).

The new circumstances surrounding war force us to evaluate war with an entirely new attitude (80). In its own evaluation of war, the Council declares that any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of cities and populations merits condemnation (80). It teaches that the arms race is not a safe way to preserve peace, and may even aggravate the causes of war. It is a trap for humanity, ensnaring the poor to an intolerable degree (81). Our goal should be a time when all war is outlawed by international consent (82). Christians should work with all true peacemakers, and especially praiseworthy are those who renounce the use of violence in the vindication of their rights (78).

Read articles 86 and 87 and outline the bishops’ norms for moving to a more peaceful and less warlike world.