



## WHAT KIND OF DIALOGUE CAN THERE BE IN SECULARISED SOCIETIES?

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At the heart of every culture, according to *Centesimus Annus*, lies the attitude that human beings take to the mystery of God (*Centesimus Annus*, 24) A secularised society tries to build itself on the assumption that the attitude that human beings take to the mystery of God is of no social relevance. It is a culture which, on the surface, appears to feel no need for God.

### Experiencing the hunger and the wonder

The central point that I would like to make might be summed up in the phrase, 'Experiencing the Hunger and the Wonder'. The most crucial element in any dialogue between faith and non-belief today is to touch the deep questions of the meaning of human life, the dignity and destiny of the human person. These are the questions to which faith speaks.

When we hear a question like "What kind of dialogue can there be...?" the immediate reaction is to think of centres and seminars, of programmes and publications. There have been many excellent initiatives in these areas, largely due to the efforts of the Pontifical Council.

These are immensely valuable **on condition** that we keep reminding ourselves of the deeper underlying question. Anyone who wishes to engage in dialogue has to experience the hunger so as to be able to witness to the wonder of the Gospel promise which alone is capable of satisfying the deepest human hungers. People will only hear the Gospel from a witness who is perceived as sharing the anguish of the deepest human questions and filled with wonder at God's response.

I think of the remarkable passage in *Evangelium Vitae* in which the Holy Father speaks of the contemplative outlook which is necessary if we are truly to celebrate the Gospel of life:

It is the outlook of those who see life in its deeper meaning, who grasp its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility. It is the outlook of those who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image (*Evangelium Vitae*, 83).

I think of an address that Paul VI gave to his priests when he was Archbishop of Milan:

St. Augustine says, "The fountain is greater than my thirst. And I must marvel at this. I must always be ready to marvel, to feel amazement; and the old things that I have celebrated for so many years must always appear to me as something new. The birth of Jesus, his passion, his death, the coming of the Holy Spirit. All these mysteries that gradually will become habit, must become fresh again, immediate, and I must rejoice their greatness... To see! To see!" (MONTINI, J. B., *The Priest*, Helicon Dublin 1963, p. 137).

I think, finally, of the poet Emily Dickinson, who spoke for many poets and artists when she wrote:

"Consider the lilies" (Mt 6:28) is the only commandment I ever obeyed (quoted in: Norris, K., *The Cloister Walk*, Riverhead, New York 1996, p. 222).

The artist has a particularly important role in the dialogue. The human being is a tension in unity between material and spiritual, the temporal and the eternal. That is precisely what a secularised society loses sight of. Both art and faith are expressions of the paradox by which the infinite is expressed in the finite, the universal in the particular. Karl Rahner indicates the link that must exist between the artistic word and the word of faith:

(The Christian) must be able to hear the word through which the silent mystery is present, he must be able to perceive the word which touches the heart in its inmost depths, he must be initiated into the human grace of hearing the work which gathers and unites and the word which in the midst of its own finite clarity is the embodiment of the eternal mystery. But what do we call such a word? It is the word of poetry... (RAHNER, K., *Theological Investigations IV*, Darton Longman & Todd, London 1966, p. 363).

Even negative, nihilistic forms of artistic expression are a kind of protest, which implies that absurdity is something that ought not to be. Even blasphemous and anti-religious works may sometimes express the artist's resentment of religion because he/she perceives it as having failed to offer the meaning it promises.

### **Bewildered and restless**

The starting point for the dialogue must be to find areas of life where people are open to experience the hunger for God. In previous eras, the question of God – of death and meaning, of judgement and eternal life – were close to the surface of people's consciousness. They obviously still arise in the life of individuals – no one can escape experiences of illness and bereavement. We need, however, to be alert if we are to detect and respond to the relatively rare moments when such questions may be close to the surface in a more general way. One of the characteristics of a secularised society is that, when these questions arise, people are less likely to look to the Church or to the Gospel for a response that would give meaning to the experience.

The dialogue between faith and non-belief must in many instances, therefore, be less programmed, more ready to respond to crises and experiences that arise, sometimes unpredictably, in the life of individuals and in the life of society. The world which appears to be self-contained and without the capacity to hear the deepest questions can, sometimes quite unexpectedly, reveal itself to be, in the Holy Father's phrase, "bewildered and restless" (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 61).

I will give one concrete example. Just over two years ago, the death of Princess Diana showed that bewilderment and questioning on a large scale. Obviously the death of a young woman in a road accident is always a tragedy, but it is also, sadly, a daily phenomenon. There were some people who expressed incomprehension at the scale of the public reaction. For millions of people, however, this death seemed to spark off a number of issues, including the following:

In practice, we sometimes live as though fame and celebrity were the very purpose of human life – but they do not make one immune to the fragility of the human condition and, ultimately, to death. We have a capacity to identify with someone who is seen to be vulnerable, especially when he or she is able to show empathy for the vulnerability of others. We relate more deeply through our weaknesses than our strengths. Faced with a tragedy that arouses fundamental human questions we need rituals and symbols (flowers, vigils, candles, messages of sympathy – in this case often written to nobody in particular or to the dead princess herself) to express shared fragile humanity. The hugely public nature of the mourning may have enabled people to express their grief about their own previous bereavements and to express their own sense of fragility in a way that would seem impossible in the ordinary life of a secularised society.

All of these are potential cracks in the wall which usually prevents people from addressing their most fundamental questions. All of them might have been fruitful starting points for the dialogue between faith and a largely non-believing culture.

Another area of bewilderment is the sense of disillusionment that marks a great deal of modern life – disillusionment with institutions and with public figures, disillusionment about one's own relationships, the disillusionment that leads to drug abuse and to despair. A young drug addict was recently asked what he was trying to escape from. He replied, "from the fact that I exist".

The sign of hope is that these questions arise only because we human beings are, in our deepest hearts, seeking for perfection. We want to be able to trust people, to believe that people can be relied upon to be generous, truthful and trustworthy. We want our own relationships to be faithful. The marriage promise, for instance, looks to a future that may bring good or bad fortune, riches or poverty, sickness or health and proclaims that the relationship will endure whatever may happen in the future. The pain of broken relationships, betrayed trust, lack of integrity, is so intense because we believe that something greater is possible. We are made for better things.

This too is a starting point for dialogue with the Gospel which promises a life where every relationship will be utterly reliable and we ourselves will be utterly reliable because we live in the presence of God, sharing in his infinite faithfulness in which he betroths us to himself forever in uprightness and justice, in faithful love and tenderness (Cf. *Hos 2:21*).

One might also point to other areas where people may be open to deeper questions, such as moral relativism and consumerism. For the first time in history, many people can find no agreed sources or criteria for discovering what is right or wrong. To a degree that never was present before, people are invited to fill needs that they did not know they had, while, at the same time, escaping from the deep needs which are the essence of our humanity.

Another starting point might be the experience of "gigantic remorse" (*Dives in Misericordia*, 11) at the injustices of our world and at our inability to heal them. This overwhelming and often unacknowledged guilt needs to be brought into dialogue with the sense of sin against a God of infinite mercy who promises justice to the living and the dead.

### **Dialogue – how?**

I will finish with one point about ways in which dialogue might be conducted in the new century. The complexity of modern life is one source of the secularised lifestyle. Even committed Christians live most of their lives in circumstances where the Gospel has not been inculturated. Multi-national companies, the Internet, the advances of technology, growing urbanisation, globalization of the economy, multi-culturalism, none of these have existed in the same way before. The danger is that large sections, even of the lives of believers, remain unevangelised.

But these technological advances are also an opportunity. In this context, I see an important role for *Faith and Culture Centres* using the closer networking made possible by new technologies of communication. The range of questions is too great to be dealt with by any one Centre; the response needs to be prompt and continuous. There are great possibilities for co-operation in the provision of linked websites where ongoing dialogue and interchange could take place. If one centre has no experience of a particular issue or area, it should be a simple matter to enable an enquirer to link with another centre which has. Such a network would be in a position to respond quickly and to encourage reflection on issues that arise, and to identify questions which are frequently asked and which need to be addressed, to foster discussion with scientists and artists and people in all the areas of modern life that need to be evangelised.

