



## THE CHALLENGE FOR THE PASTOR AND THE FAITHFUL OF SECULARIZED COUNTRIES. THE PREREQUISITES FOR DIALOGUE AND THE EVANGELIZATION OF CULTURES

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I am grateful for this opportunity to be with all of you in this Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture.

In the time allotted, I shall address briefly the three questions: (1) What kind of dialogue can there be in secularized societies?; (2) What are the pre-requisites for dialogue and evangelization?; and (3) What are the pastoral challenges? A fuller reflection is given in the paper which will be available after this session.

### 1. What kind of dialogue can there be in secularized societies?

On the historical axis people today reach in two directions at once: return to a rooted past and ahead to a transformed future. Many individuals are reaching for a new form of society beyond the present one and they reach back to the past for guidance and spiritual energy, hesitating to give any new solutions absolute status.

Today's challenge is primarily cultural because to harvest the tradition and to unleash the imagination is precisely a cultural task. Rebuilding appreciation for fostering community among people is also a cultural task growing out of a redefinition of the relation of the individual and society. Contemporary economic and political strategies persuasively employ power, force and control, but it will be the cultural strategies that release the energy which can call forth in people the spiritual energy which is needed.

#### *Secularization and its Effects*

Secularization is a phenomenon as old and prevalent as the Church itself and holds that individuals, or groups, or even an entire era should at various times reject prevailing religious bonds and seek autonomy, and at the same time be conscious of their ethical responsibility for their existence and destiny. This phenomenon can take place in many different forms and walks hand in hand with a process of the concrete emancipation of human life and historical reason. What secularization means is to be judged chiefly in the light of how the Church is understood in the process, especially its relationship to the world.

When we read the message of the New Testament, the relationship between the worldly and the corresponding Christian realms is such that neither can be said to predominate over the other, to exclude the other, or even to be hostile to the other. The New Testament teaching is simply that the religious sphere is totally different from the world, so that neither can substitute for the other, since the two are on different planes. Faith has not the function of replacing knowledge. It gives no worldly wisdom, just as it does not suppose it. It merely shows that knowledge, scientific and commonplace, has only relative value. It is not an absolute on which the salvation or loss of man ultimately depends. If such knowledge is constructed into an absolute and used against God, then it becomes foolishness and is opposed to faith (*1 Corinthians 1:17-2:9; Romans 1:21f.*). And the wise need the Gospel as much as the ignorant (*Romans 1:14*).

In brief, apart from Christ, the New Testament recognizes nothing sacred about persons, realms, things or structures. The Christian enjoys the freedom of the children of God through, with and in Christ and is lord of the world, where everything is holy and unholy at

the same time, according to how truly it is in Christ or under the dominion of sin. St. Paul's conviction is that "nothing is unclean in itself". In Paul's words the maxim for Christians dealing with secularity could well be: "The world of life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's" (1 *Corinthians* 3:22f.).

Distinguishing secularization from secularism, which is an atheistic ideology, one can view true secularity of the world, which consists of the truth that there is nothing in the world which is too "holy" to be accessible to a worldly approach and must be reserved for religion exclusively. Mystery abides universally, but in the realm of action there are no intramundane effects which can be brought about only by "religious" means or practices.

The Council Fathers of Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 36) spoke of the proper autonomy of earthly realities for earthly matters and that the concerns of faith derive from the same God. If however, "the expression, the independence of temporal affairs, is taken to mean that created things do not depend on God, and that man can use them without any reference to their Creator", then falsity enters. For without the Creator the creature would disappear.

### *Emergent Challenges*

Recent social science research is discovering certain emerging challenges which will influence conversation and dialogue in the decade ahead.

There are indications in today's society that people are in fact becoming more inclined to be self-reliant. They will be cautious in how they encounter the various resources available and the answer given them about the various questions of life. Many seek the best of all worlds as they discern and make decisions. They will continue to be more discriminating and critical in making choices and have higher expectations of leadership. At the same time, people will become increasingly more tolerant of diversity, even in the area of religious faiths. A significant factor in personal decisions will be experience, and the questions: What will this do for me? What is expected in return? This reasoning, however, does not always connect time with eternity.

The good news is that people today seek meaning and express strong desires for good family spirituality. Whatever schism or departure from Church that might occur will continue to be in the areas of private and public issues of morality. Many individuals today ask the Church to connect people to the larger wholes of society, the teachings which give a positive indication leading to a personal growth with God. They seek a new sense of community beyond the organic sense of community which they see as bound to rigid tradition and ruled over by hierarchies of strict domination. They value personal relationships, look for greater security and seek meaning in what they do to become successful.

Listening to people of the younger generations, one soon discovers that the governing virtue for them is creativity. They inquire about how creatively to tap the tradition; How creatively to imagine a future beyond the logic of the mechanistic model; How creatively to network and empower communities of ordinary people; How creatively to reshape modern technology and capital, and draw them back to the benefit of all people.

### *Effective Dialogue*

Having very briefly reflected on the historical and societal effects stemming from the various historical influences of this Century, and visiting what appear to be the emergent challenges of people, let us turn to consideration of the kind of dialogues that can respond to these emergent trends among people.

Dialogue is seen by the Council Fathers as a part of our apostolic mission to share the Gospel (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 92). In order to demonstrate the fullness of the Church's mission we need to manifest among ourselves as Catholics those expressions of mutual esteem, reverence and harmony which are attractive to those people who are legitimately different from us and who can then become more inclined to respond to our invitations to dialogue.

Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, has observed that the "Councils guidelines... of open, respectful and cordial dialogue, accompanied by careful discernment and courageous witness to the truth, remain valid and call us to a greater commitment" (*Apostolic Letter on the Coming of the Third Millennium*, no. 36).

This commitment which we have needs to be characterized in action by the four marks of (1) *clarity* in language that is understandable and acceptable; (2) *meekness* in communicating the truth that does not impose itself violently, proudly or bitterly; (3) *trust* not only in the power of one's words, but in the good will and integrity of others; (4) *prudence* which is attuned to the sensitivities of others so that we might adapt our presentations in ways that are comprehensible and pleasing. (Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, no. 81).

A dialogue which is shaped by these characteristics, Paul VI says, helps "one discover how different are the ways which lead to the light of faith and how it is possible to make them converge on the same goal. Even if these ways are divergent, they can become complementary by forcing our reasoning process out of the worn paths and by obliging it to... final fresh expressions" (no. 83).

Assuming that we appreciate dialogue as a part of our mission, and that we exhibit the virtues or characteristics of good dialogue, there nevertheless often remains a fear of the new generations, the new questions, the new experiences and needs, and the new ideas. Anticipating attack, we are tempted to avoid self-criticism and fear frank evaluation of the form of messages we share. At times we fall for listing the events of ecclesial life in parallel columns as victories or defeats in a kind of zero-sum contest.

We noted in the emergent challenges in this presentation that there is and will be a hunger for substantive exchanges of ideas, informed by Church teaching and witness. People seek to have confidence that their heartfelt concerns for living the Gospel faithfully will be heard and not slighted or betrayed. They most often come to dialogue in a mood of good will and with an openness to learn from one another.

## **2. Prerequisites for Dialogue and Evangelization of Cultures**

**A.** The first prerequisite for effective dialogue is to *know, appreciate and appropriate the teachings of our faith*. Catholic doctrine provides enduring truths concerning divine and human reality. Sacred Scripture and Church teachings should enlighten people's minds, guide their daily living, and inform their spiritual striving. Certainly we must preserve and defend the treasure of truth and grace that we have inherited through Christian tradition.

Our challenges in teaching today include the fact that Church doctrine is refined and carefully nuanced. It is expressed as a carefully articulated structure, rather than as an undifferentiated block. There is a hierarchy of truths which vary in their relation to the foundation of Christian faith. Moreover, Catholic belief is not static, but is assisted by the Holy Spirit toward an understanding and application.

While the Church's teachings are a marvelous and life giving grace for our time, there remains the task of studying how better to offer them in a manner which facilitates their reception more readily and understandably.

**B.** A second and important prerequisite for dialogue is *availability*. Availability, in fact, is the primary condition for every dialogue that is to lead to a redemptive insight.

An effective participant in dialogue opens himself to a good measure of vulnerability and this requires a lot of faith in God and oneself, and indeed much prayer. So often a participant is tempted to share the idea, the teaching, the problem, but not his personhood and his own personal experiences, reflection and insight. This latter kind of sharing humanizes and personalizes the process of dialogue. After all, in some cultures persons do not readily share their ideas and hopes with strangers. They listen for the one who humbly and truly offers self as a witness to the Word of God in the flesh and blood of him who declares and demonstrates it in action.

Reflecting on the earlier Church, Augustine's dialectic is not only the knowledge of how to define, analyze, and synthesize; it is not only the knowledge of how to ask and answer correctly; it is not only the knowledge of how to argue; it is not only the knowledge of how to draw correct inferences; rather, it is the knowledge of self knowledge, *sola scit scire* (Second part of Book 3 of *Contra Academicos* 3:11.26ff). This is the greater gift one brings to dialogue: to know who we are in Christ, associated with what we do daily and with and for other people.

**C.** A third prerequisite is to *know the dialogue partners and the larger context of the cultures and philosophies* (or operating priorities) of people.

Everyone preparing for dialogue comes to the table with assumptions, presuppositions, philosophical biases, certain theological understandings and preferences and personal attitudes and values. There can be the temptation to focus narrowly on only what we know and like, or on what is comfortable.

These accompaniments have to be viewed in light of the existential realities and phenomena which exist in the world and among people in our time. As a businessman would say, "one must know the market, the market forces, and what will attract the customer".

Avoiding the temptation to use a mechanistic approach, or manipulation, one who is preparing for dialogue would benefit from knowing the environment, the tenor of life and the cultures which will have an influence on the dialogue and its redemptive potential.

The Gospel clearly warns us of the need to think and act quite differently from the world around us, which we are nevertheless striving to influence and evangelize. The fact that we are distinct from the world does not mean that we are entirely separated from it. Nor does it mean that we should be indifferent to it, afraid of it, or contemptuous of it. In fact, when our Church distinguishes itself from humanity, it does so not in order to oppose it, but to come closer to it.

Knowing our dialogue partners in the larger context of reality and revelation, we can explore more fully how we are to adapt our Church's mission to the particular age, environment, educational and social conditions of people's lives, avoiding the dangers of relativism, but reaching out to approach everyone introducing the way to salvation to all people.

Influenced by the phenomena gathered, analyzed, and interpreted in our effort to know those with whom we dialogue, we need to avoid an immoderate desire to make peace, have dialogue, and sink differences at all costs (irenism and syncretism), for then we introduce skepticism about the power and content of the Word of God which we desire to teach. The dialogue for which we prepare must not weaken our attachment to the Faith.

### **3. Challenge for Pastors and the Faithful**

Parishioners long to exchange ideas, informed by Church teaching and witness, with a confidence that their heartfelt concerns for living the Gospel faithfully will be heard and not slighted or betrayed.

The first pastoral challenge is to discover the forum or occasion that will best serve parishioners' needs and interests. Existing structures, e.g., adult parish catechesis, can be of service if they are developed in light of today's family pressures and work demands.

It is important to emphasize that with all that is done Jesus Christ, present in Scripture and Sacrament, is central. It is important that we affirm the basic truths of the Faith and stand accountable to Sacred Scripture and Catholic Tradition, witnessed and conveyed to us by the Spirit-filled, living Church and its magisterium exercised by the bishops and the chair of Peter.

Pastors and catechists are called to help the faithful see the Church as a communion, a spiritual family, requiring that a hermeneutic of suspicion or critique be balanced by a hermeneutic of love and reconciliation.

Finally, pastors and the faithful face the call to build unity and harmony with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The major challenge is to have the community answer the call to reach out to others in service, in justice and in love.

The younger generations look to their pastors and the faithful with an eye for what of the Gospel is actually lived and effective. Declarative witnessing has to be associated with demonstrative faith, faith in action, service to humankind, and prayer which reflects a solid and appreciated relationship with God.

## **Conclusion**

Seeking the fundamental dimension of the Spirit which places people in a relationship with one another and unites them calls for, in the words of John Paul II, a "Synthesis between culture and faith that is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith".

Given the faith, a question for our further consideration will be how our Church's teaching and lived expression will interact with the phenomenon of secularity. Will the faithful hear that secularity is a lamentable negative occurrence, a religiously neutral process, or theologically a positive challenge and reality? Will our teaching emphasis in the decade to come be some combination of these points of view? Will we craft a message of hope and one which invites engagement? Will our teaching help the self-reliant people of our time learn of God, His grace and His love?