

## TODAY'S WORLD AND GOD'S WORD – A MUTUAL CHALLENGE

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Your Eminence(s),  
Reverend Monsignors,  
Reverend Fathers and Sisters,  
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we are commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, I think it appropriate to begin with a citation from the same text. Number twelve, after affirming that "God speaks through men in human fashion", encourages discernment of the intentions of the sacred writers and affirms that "to understand correctly what the sacred author wanted to affirm in his work, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech and narrative that prevailed at the time of the sacred writer." In short, **cultures cannot be ignored**. For cultures form an integral part of the dynamic meeting between the Word and human hearts. Indeed, as the "message of Revelation always presents itself in the guise of a cultural package", biblical culture has a clear priority, for "the bible, the word of God expressed in the words of men, constitutes the archetype of the fruitful encounter between the Word of God and culture."<sup>1</sup>

The organisers have chosen an apt title for this concluding session: "Today's World and God's Word - a mutual challenge". Whenever two or three are gathered in the Father's name, it is commonplace to denounce the problems of today's society: the breakdown in the process of handing on the faith; the perceived disappearance of values; the seven deadly sins that have become virtues<sup>2</sup>; the shortcomings of governments; the falling standards of education; etcetera. From our Christian perspective, however, it is not our task to add to the problems of a depressed society by throwing oxygen on the flames of this particular fire. Instead we are called to take **this as the context for our primary task of evangelisation, remembering that this is our challenge, not an obstacle**. In the manner of the Good Samaritan, and reading the signs of the times, sharing the joys and hopes, fears and anxieties of all the men and women of our times, we seek to proclaim the Good News in a way our contemporaries can understand, with joy, confidence and hope<sup>3</sup>. But what are these times?

I would like to **compare today's world with yesterday's world**. I think particularly of the world at the time of the promulgation of *Dei Verbum*. There is a much overlooked talk by Paul VI, with whom I worked closely, and who had no small role in the foundation of the Catholic Biblical Federation. It was given on December 7, 1965, the penultimate day of the Council, shortly before he would invite Cardinal Agostino Bea, whose role in the process of drafting *Dei Verbum* is noted, to read the *Breve Ambulate in dilectione* cancelling the excommunication of ten fifty-four. In this talk, he offers, with "a current of affection and admiration", a succinct account of his times. I paraphrase:

It was a time in which the kingdom of the earth was sought before the kingdom of heaven. It was a time in which it became customary to forget about God, and in which it seemed science would eclipse the need for Him. It was a time in which the fundamental act of human personality, more aware and conscious of his possibilities, sought to decide on the basis of own absolute autonomy, without reference to transcendent laws. It was a time in which secularism was considered the legitimate consequence of modern thought and the wisest method of ordering society. It was a time in which the expressions of the

<sup>1</sup> Pontifical Council for Culture, *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, 3. Vatican City 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Pride, Envy, Sloth, Anger, Greed, Lust, Gluttony are said to be replaced by the "virtues" of self-esteem, ambition, ability to relax, ability to express emotions, popularity, sociability and dietetic obsession.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *1 Pet.* 3:15.

spirit reached the heights of irrationality and desolation. It was a time in which the great religions of the world underwent drastic troubles and decadence<sup>4</sup>.

How little has changed! In some senses it is the same story going round and round, history repeating itself – the same mixture being served in the broth of history. But there are differences! We are all aware of the revolutions of May '68, the passing of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin wall, the effects of globalisation, the decreasing visibility of militant atheism, the proliferation of terrorism, the loss of trust in institutions, the exaltation of the individual, the crises in the world of science, and the so-called "return of religion". This means we need to update Pope Paul's analysis. Contemporary culture remains anthropocentric, but is so now in a more individualistic way. It remains materialistic, but the gap between rich and poor is growing. It remains forgetful of God, but is now also indifferent and doesn't even seem to miss Him. It remains a place of egoism, but now there are lawmakers who not only make no reference to transcendent laws and moral norms, but positively reject them. Secularism remains exalted, despite the fact that the errors in its philosophical bases have long since been exposed. Irrationalism and desolation are still commonplace, but are now twinned with isolation and fear. And in this new religious moment, the efforts to instrumentalise the great religions are clearly visible, as is the spread of alternative spiritualities and religions, which together with the spread of the sects, are the predictable results of the currents shaping today's society<sup>5</sup>.

Now after this very brief look at contemporary culture, let us turn to consider the **Word of God, and the Bible in particular, in the new evangelisation** seeking out some points of anchorage.

One of the contemporary problems is that of history. Some refuse to learn the lessons **history** can teach us, others chose to ignore history altogether. Some philosophical currents even continue to deny the very existence of historical reality. It is clear that our faith, which is nothing if not historical, is a medicine for this world.

The Bible also contains the solution for another growing problem of our day: **individualism**. Some political systems, which have arisen at least in part from certain Bible-informed theological perspectives, have a role to play in the isolation of the human person as a minimalist unit. An emphasis on **communion** (*koinonia*), that the story of the People of God offers and that reflects the Trinity, is a counterweight against all expressions of individualism, particularly the breakdown of the family, the privatisation of religion and liturgical life, and the problems of homelessness, poverty, sickness and destitution.

The so-called return of religion that we are seeing in these days is unsurprising given that man is fundamentally a religious being: *homo indifferens semper homo religiosus est*, as I said to our Orthodox friends in Minsk recently. They, too, are facing the problems of contemporary culture and are anxious to quench **the tangent spiritual thirst**. The biblical paradigm of the Samaritan Woman at the well is useful in this regard, as was proposed in the document on the New Age, *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life*<sup>6</sup>.

We also need to respond to the need in contemporary society for a collective imagination, a meta-narrative, or a social story, that offers meaning to people who have lost their reference points in their endless quest to satisfy immediate needs and desires: the Bible is our common history, it tells our story, offering **reference points**, shaping languages,

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. PAUL VI, Closing Discourse of the Council, 7 December 1965; Cf. Paul POUPARD, *Eglise et Cultures*, ch. XI, "Quels sont dans la culture contemporaine les points d'ancrage de la foi", Paris, 1980, pp.184-187; *Chiesa e Cultura*, Milano 1986, 168-171; *Iglesia y Cultures*, Valencia y México 1988, 179-182.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Paul Poupard, *Where is Your God? Responding to the Challenges of Unbelief and Religious Indifference Today*, Chicago 2004; *Où est-il ton Dieu? La foi chrétienne au défi de l'indifférence religieuse*, Paris 2004; *Dónde está tu Dios*, Valencia 2005.

<sup>6</sup> PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE AND PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life. A Christian Reflection on the "New Age"* Vatican City 2003.

indeed cultures. I recall when I was young growing up in Angers, France how the life of the village was structured around the school, the church and the municipal offices. But now, due to the forces of globalisation, urbanisation, human mobility, the commuter and the computer, it is apparent that we have lost our anchor points as we are locked away in our private cells, losing our common story and the markers which guide us along our pilgrimage. A recent visit to the Pontifical Council for Culture from a sociologist, who was studying patterns of belief among Catholics and their attachment to the life of the faith, informed me of a constant statistic he finds among what he calls "success stories": they each have six people who are their reference points. This led to the obvious pastoral suggestion: try and ensure that everyone has six people to act as reference points to carry them forward on their journey of faith. Incidentally, this coincides with a pattern I established two years ago, when I was honoured to be invited to preach the Lenten lectures at Notre-Dame Paris, France. There, I offered for reflection, to a public whose thirst for spirituality was evident, six "saints" for our times: Robert Schuman, Mother Theresa of Calcutta, Maurice Blondel, Bakhita, Pier Giorgio Frassati, and John the Twenty-Third<sup>7</sup>. Today, instead, I would propose six biblical characters. Which would I chose? and Why? Time does not permit me to say more than their names and a thematic interest for contemporary men and women:

The Good Samaritan, the paradigm of the spirituality of the Council, and example of putting oneself at the service of those in need.

The Prodigal Son, because the story really shows how the merciful Father is waiting for us with open arms.

The Three Magi, who came to adore, and are examples of spiritual thirst, contemplative silence and universal hope.

St Paul, my patron, who proclaimed the Gospel in the Areopagus.

Mary, whose humble disposition to the Holy Spirit made it all possible.

And finally and perhaps most obviously, Jesus Christ, who made the transcendent immanent.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to return to Paul VI's speech. To meet the needs of his contemporary world, he returned to the key theme of Christian humanism; and it is as pertinent today as it was then. Few would now doubt that the fundamental component of humanism understood properly is its openness to the transcendent. And what is the Word of God, if not the making immanent of the transcendent? He offered a vivid picture of God, of Revelation, and of his Church as interested in the very stakes of man. "A river of affection and admiration has flowed out from the Council on to the world of modern man. [he said...] It has concerned itself with man, man who is unhappy in himself, who laughs and cries; man who is versatile enough to play any part and yet is uncompromising in his insistence on a purely scientific vision of reality; man as he is, the thinker, the lover, the worker, who is always waiting for something, the "filius accrescens" (*Genesis* 49.22); [...] This Council comes to its climax in its ultimately religious significance, which is nothing but a powerful and friendly invitation to contemporary humanity to rediscover God by means of brotherly love: "To turn away from Him is to perish; to turn towards Him is to come back to life; to remain in Him is to be unswerving; to return to Him is to be reborn; to reside in Him is to live" (Saint Augustine, *Sol.*, 3; *PL* 32, 870)"<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> PAUL POUPARD, *La Sainteté au défi de l'Histoire. Portrait de six témoins pour le III<sup>e</sup> millénaire*. Presses de la Renaissance, Paris 2003; *Santi d'oggi. Sei testimoni per il terzo millennio*, Roma 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Paul VI, Closing Discourse of the Council, *op.cit.*, *ibid.* 186-187.

**Summary:** *After noting the essential role of culture for the meeting between the divine word and the human heart, Cardinal Paul Poupard offers a summary overview of today's culture by updating a cultural analysis made by Paul VI at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. He then signals some aspects of the Bible that can engage that culture, before suggesting six biblical figures who can stand as reference points for our times, and re-echoing the call for a new Christian humanism.*