

# Where is Your God?

## Responding to the Challenge of Unbelief and Religious Indifference Today

### Introduction

1. The Christian Faith at the dawn of the new millennium is faced with the challenge of unbelief and religious indifference. The Second Vatican Council, already forty years ago, delivered this observation: "Many of our contemporaries have never recognised the intimate and vital link with God, or have even explicitly rejected it. Atheism must therefore be counted among the most serious problems of our time and must be submitted to closer examination" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.19).

To this end Pope Paul VI created in 1965 the Secretariat for Non-believers and entrusted it to the direction of Cardinal Franz König. In 1980 Pope John Paul II called on me to succeed Cardinal König and also asked me to create the Pontifical Council for Culture, which he would unite to the Secretariat in 1993, after it had become the Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Non-believers. His motivation, given in the Apostolic Letter *motu proprio, Inde a Pontificatus*, is clear: "to promote the meeting of the saving message of the Gospel with the cultures of our times, often marked by unbelief and religious indifference" (art. 1) and to promote at the same time "the study of the problem of unbelief and of religious indifference found in various forms in different cultural milieus, enquiring into the causes and the consequences for the Christian Faith" (art. 2).

To carry out this mission, the Pontifical Council for Culture gathered information from competent authorities across the globe in broad ranging enquiry. More than 300 replies came from five continents and the results were put before the members of the Pontifical Council for Culture during its Plenary Assembly of March 2004, along two main axes: how to welcome the "joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties" of the people of our times, which he have called the "anchor points for the handing on of the faith"; and which are the best pathways to follow in bringing the good news of the Gospel of Christ to non-believers, to misbelievers and the indifferent of our times, how to raise their interest, how to make them question themselves on the meaning of their existence, and how to help the Church transmit to them her message of faith and love at the heart of cultures, *novo millennio ineunte*.

To do this, it is necessary to respond to these questions: Who are the non-believers? What is their culture? What are they saying to us? What can we say to them? What dialogue can we establish with them? What can we do to shake up their interest, stir up their questions, nourish their reflections, and hand on the faith to new generations, often victims of the religious indifference mobilised by the dominant culture?

Such questions are dear to the pastors of the Church and express one of the most worrying challenges of "our both momentous and fascinating times" (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 38) : the challenge of a culture of unbelief and of religious indifference that, from the West in prey to secularisation, spreads across the megalopolises of all the continents.

In fact, in the vast cultural areas where the majority do belong to the Church, there is a rupture in the handing on the faith, intimately linked to the process of abandonment of a popular culture long attached to and impregnated by Christianity. It is important to take into consideration the factors that condition this process of distancing, of weakening, and of obscuring the faith in the transforming cultural milieus where Christians dwell, in order to present some concrete pastoral propositions to

respond to the challenges of the new evangelisation. For the *cultural habitat*, where one lives, influences one's ways of thinking and of behaving, one's values and criteria of judgement, and it also raises questions at once difficult and decisive.

Since the fall of the atheist regimes, secularism, tied to the phenomenon of globalisation, has spread as a post-Christian cultural model. "When secularisation transforms itself into secularism (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 55), there is a serious cultural and spiritual crisis, one sign of which is the loss of respect for the person and the spread of a kind of anthropological nihilism which reduces human beings to their instincts and tendencies" (*Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, n. 23)<sup>1</sup>[1].

For many, the waning of the dominant ideologies gave way to a lack of hope. The dreams of a better future for humanity, characteristics of scientism, of the enlightenment, of Marxism, and of the social revolutions of the 1960s have disappeared and their place has been taken by a pragmatic and disenchanted world. The end of the cold war and the risk of total destruction of the planet has given way to other threats and perils for humanity : world-wide terrorism, new hot spots for war, pollution of the planet, reduction of hydro resources, climate change provoked by egoistic behaviour, experimentation on the embryo, legal recognition of abortion and euthanasia, cloning, etc.. Many people's hopes of a better future have disappeared and they have fallen into disenchantment in the seemingly sombre present, fearing an even more uncertain future. The speed and the depth of the cultural transformations which have occurred over the last few decades are the backdrop for the enormous upheaval of many of the cultures of our times. Such is the cultural context for the Church's enormous challenge of unbelief and religious indifference: how to open up new ways for dialogue with so many people who, at first sight, are hardly interested, much less see the necessity for it, even though the thirst for God can never be completely extinguished in the heart of man, where the religious dimension is deeply anchored.

The aggressive attitude towards the Church, without completely disappearing, has given way, sometimes, to derision and resentment in certain quarters and, often, to a widespread stance of relativism, practical atheism and indifference. It is the time of what I would call - after *homo faber*, *homo sapiens* and *homo religiosus* - *homo indifferens*, even among the believers, who are in the prey of secularisation. The individual and egoistic search for well-being, as well as the pressure of a culture without spiritual anchorage, eclipse the sense of that which is truly good for man, and reduce his desire for the transcendent to a vague search for spirituality which satisfies itself in a new religiosity without reference to the personal God, without adherence to a body of doctrine, and without belonging to a community of faith nourished by the celebration of the revealed mysteries.

2. *The Spiritual drama that the Second Vatican Council considered as one of the most serious problems of our times* (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 19), sees a silent distancing of entire populations from religious practice and even from any reference to the faith. The Church today is confronted more by indifference and practical unbelief than with atheism. Atheism is in decline throughout the world, but indifference and unbelief develop in cultural milieus marked by secularism. It is no longer a question of a public affirmation of atheism, with the exception of a few countries, but of a diffuse presence, almost omnipresent, in the culture. Less visible, it is more perilous, for the dominant culture spreads it in a subtle manner in the subconscious of believers, from Western to Eastern Europe, but also in the megalopolises of Africa, America and Asia. It is a veritable sickness of the soul which induces to live "as though God did not exist", a neo-paganism that idolises material goods, the achievements of work, and the fruits of power.

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<sup>1</sup>[1] The Document of the Pontifical Council for Culture [Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture](#), is published in English by the Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1999. It can also be found, along with all of the cited texts of the Magisterium on the Vatican's Internet site: <http://www.vatican.va>

At the same time, we witness what some people call the "return of the sacred". It is actually the rise of a new religiosity. Rather than a return to traditional religious practices, it is a search for new ways of living and expressing the religious dimension inherent in paganism. This "spiritual awakening" is marked by the complete refusal to belong, and the search for an experience which is entirely individual, autonomous and guided by one's own subjectivity. This instinctive religiosity is more emotive than doctrinal and expresses itself without any reference to a personal God. The "God Yes, Church No" of the 1960s has become "religion yes, God no" or even, "the religiosity yes, God no" of this beginning of the millennium : believers yes, but without adhering to the message handed on by the Church! At the very heart of that which we call religious indifference, spiritual desire is again making itself felt. This resurgence, far from coinciding with a return to faith or religious practice, is a veritable challenge for Christianity.

In fact, the new forms of unbelief and the diffusion of this "new religiosity" are intimately linked. Unbelief and bad-belief often come as a pair. In their deepest roots, they show at the same time both the symptom and the erroneous response of a crisis in values and in the dominant culture. The desire for autonomy, incapable of suppressing the thirst for the fullness and eternity which God wrote into the heart of man, seeks palliatives in the gargantuan supermarkets where all sorts of gurus offer recipes for an illusory happiness. Nevertheless, in this spiritual thirst an anchor point can be found for the proclamation of the Gospel, through the "evangelisation of desire"<sup>2[2]</sup>.

Sociological studies based on censuses, opinion polls, and inquests have multiplied in the last years offering interesting but often differing statistics. Some are based on attendance at Sunday mass, others on the number of baptisms, others on religious preference, still others on the contents of the faith. The results, complex as they are, should not be interpreted out of context, as the great diversity of terms employed to express the important variety of possible attitudes towards the faith shows : there are atheists, non-believers, unbelievers, misbelievers or bad-believers, agnostics, non-practising, indifferent, without religion, etc.. Indeed, some of those who attend Sunday mass do not feel as though they are in tune with the Catholic Church's doctrine and morals, and among those who claim not to belong to any religion or religious confession, the search for God and an inquisitiveness after the eternal life are not totally absent, nor indeed, sometimes some sort of prayer.

To understand these phenomena, their causes and consequences, to discern methods to resolve them with the grace of God, is doubtless one of the most important tasks for the Church today. This publication of the Pontifical Council for Culture would like to offer its specific contribution by presenting this new study of unbelief, of religious indifference, and of the new forms of religiosity that emerge and spread presenting themselves as alternatives to the traditional religions.

3. *The responses that the Pontifical Council for Culture received to its inquiry paint a picture that is complex, changing and in continuous evolution, with diversified characteristics. Nevertheless some meaningful things can be drawn out:*

1. **Globally, unbelief is not increasing in the world.** It is a phenomenon seen primarily in the Western world. The cultural model it inspires spreads through globalisation, and exerts an influence on the different cultures of the world, and erodes popular religiosity from them.

2. **Militant atheism recedes and no longer has a determining influence on public life,** except in those regimes where an atheistic political system is still in power. Contrarily, a certain cultural hostility is being spread against religions, especially Christianity and Catholicism in particular, notably through the means of social communication, and is promoted by Masonic sources active in different organisations.

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<sup>2[2]</sup> P. POUPARD, *What will give us Happiness?* Veritas Dublin 1992.

3. **Atheism and unbelief**, phenomena that once seemed to have something rather masculine and urban about them and that were found particularly among those with an above-average culture, **have changed their profile**. Today the phenomena seem to be connected more to lifestyle, and the distinction between men and women is no longer significant. In fact, unbelief increases among women who work outside the home, and even reaches more or less the same level of that among men.

4. **Religious indifference or practical atheism** is growing rapidly. And agnosticism remains. A large part of secularised societies lives with no reference to religious authority or values. For *homo indifferens*, "Perhaps God does not exist, it doesn't matter, anyway we don't miss him". Well-being and the culture of secularisation provoke in consciences an eclipse of need and desire for all that is not immediate. They reduce aspiration towards the transcendent to a simple subjective need for spirituality, and happiness to material well-being and the gratification of sexual impulses.

5. **A dwindling number of regular church-goers can be seen in those societies marked by secularisation**. But this undeniably worrying fact does not, however, mean that unbelief is on the increase. Rather, it points to a degraded form of believing: **believing without belonging**. It is a phenomenon of "deconfessionalisation" of *homo religiosus*, who, refusing to belong to any binding confession, jumps into and out of an endless confusion of heterogeneous movements. A number of those who declare they belong to no religion or religious confession, nevertheless declare themselves to be religious. The *silent exodus* of many Catholics heads for the sects and new religious movements<sup>3[3]</sup>, especially in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa.

6. In the West, where science and modern technology have neither suppressed religious meaning nor satisfied it, a **new quest that is more spiritual than religious** is developing, but it is not a return to traditional religious practices. It is the search for new ways of living and expressing the need for religiosity inherent in the heart of man. Often, this spiritual awakening develops in an autonomous fashion and without any links to the contents of faith and morals handed on by the church.

7. Finally, at the dawn of the new millennium, a **disaffection** is occurring both in terms of militant atheism and in terms of traditional faith. It is a disaffection in secularised western cultures prey to the refusal or simple abandonment of traditional beliefs, and affects both religious practice and adherence to the doctrinal and moral contents of the faith. But the man whom we call *homo indifferens* never ceases to be a *homo religiosus*; he is just seeking a new and ever-changing religiosity. The analysis of this phenomenon reveals a kaleidoscopic situation where anything and its opposite can occur : on the one hand, those who believe without belonging, and on the other, those who belong without believing in the entire content of the faith and who, above all, do not feel obliged to respect the ethical dimension of the faith. In truth, only God knows what is at the bottom of our hearts, where His Grace works secretly. And the Church never ceases to walk new pathways to share with all the message of Love of which She is guardian.

This document has two main parts. The first presents a summary analysis of unbelief and religious indifference, their causes, and a presentation of the new forms of religiosity in comparison with the faith. The second offers a series of concrete proposals for the dialogue with non-believers and for the evangelisation of cultures marked by unbelief and indifference. In doing this, the Pontifical Council for Culture does not pretend to propose miraculous recipes, for it knows that faith is always a Grace, a mysterious meeting between God and the freedom of man. It desires merely to suggest some privileged ways for the new evangelisation, to which we have been called by John Paul II, new in its expression, its methods and its ardour, to meet the non-believers and the misbelievers and above all to reach the indifferent: how to meet them in the depth of themselves, beyond the shell that imprisons

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<sup>3[3]</sup> The expression "new religious movements" is not to be confused with "new ecclesial movements". The former is used to refer to "alternative religions" unless the context indicates otherwise. Note too the distinction between "spiritual" and "religious", for not every spiritual movement is in fact a religious movement.

them. This route is part of the "new stage of the Church's journey" that Pope John Paul II invites all the Church to travel "to take up her evangelising mission with fresh enthusiasm", "stressing that it is not a case of imposing on non-believers a vision based on faith", "with the respect due to the different paths of different people and with sensitivity to the diversity of cultures in which the Christian message must be planted" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 1, 2, 51 and 40).

## I. New Forms of Unbelief and Religiosity

### 1. A Cultural Phenomenon

In traditionally Christian countries, a relatively widespread culture gives unbelief, on its platform of religious indifference, a practical and no longer theoretical aspect. It has become a *cultural phenomenon*, in the sense that often one becomes a non-believer not through choice at the end of a long inner struggle, but it just happens *de facto*, because "that's what everybody else does" - «così fan tutti». This is the result of the lack of effective evangelisation, the growing levels of ignorance of religious tradition and Christian culture, and the lack of offers of formative spiritual experiences capable of raising marvel and determining belonging. This is how the Holy Father describes it: "Often knowledge of Christianity is taken for granted, whereas in truth the bible is rarely read and scarcely studied, catechesis is often shallow, and the sacraments hardly received. Therefore, instead of an authentic faith a vague religious sentiment is spread, which easily turns into agnosticism and practical atheism"<sup>4</sup>[4].

### 2. New and Old Causes of Unbelief

It would be naïve to blame the spread of unbelief and the new forms of religiosity on a single cause, all the more so since this cultural phenomenon is more tied to group behaviour than individual choice. Some affirm that the problem of unbelief is more a question of negligence than malice. Others are firmly convinced that, behind this phenomenon, there are organised movements, associations, and deliberately orchestrated campaigns.

In any event, it is good to examine, as requested by the Second Vatican Council, the causes which incite people to distance themselves from the faith. The Church "strives to detect in the atheistic mind the hidden causes for the denial of God. Conscious of how weighty are the questions which atheism raises, and motivated by love for all men, she believes these questions ought to be examined seriously and more profoundly" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 21). Why do some people not believe in God? Why do they distance themselves from the Church? What can we make of their reasoning? What can we do in response?

The same constitution, *Gaudium et Spes* (nn. 19-21), identifies some causes of contemporary atheism. The diagnosis made then remains accurate today and is at the core of the following analysis of the new causes of unbelief and of the religious indifference of our times.

#### 2.1. The All-encompassing Presumptions of Modern Science

Among the causes of atheism, the Council mentions scientism. This vision of the world without any reference to God, pretends to reject His existence on the basis of scientific principles, and has become widespread and commonplace, thanks to its widespread diffusion in the Mass Media. Some recent cosmological and evolutionary theories, abundantly repeated by publications and popular television programmes, and the development of neuroscience, contribute to the rejection of a transcendent personal being, retained as a "useless hypothesis", as they pretend that "there is only the unknown and not the unknowable".

While it remains a problematic, today the faith-science relationship has changed significantly. A certain defiance *vis à vis* science, a fall in prestige and the reappraisal of its role contribute to a greater

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<sup>4</sup>[4] [Angelus 27 July 2003](#), in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28-29 July 2003.

openness to the religious dimension of the human situation and are accompanied by the return of a somewhat irrational and esoteric religiosity. Programmes and courses teaching the complementary relationship of science and religion help to remedy this aspect.

## 2.2. The Absolutisation of Man as the Centre of the Universe

Even if they neither said so nor named them, the Council Fathers had in mind the Marxist-Leninist atheist regimes and their attempts to construct a society without God. Today in Europe these regimes have fallen, but the underlying anthropological model has not disappeared, indeed it has become stronger taking on the philosophical inherited from the enlightenment. Speaking of the European situation, but with a clarity that can be applied to all of the western world, the Holy Father affirms that there is underway an "attempt to promote a vision of man apart from God and apart from Christ". This sort of thinking has led to man being considered as "the absolute centre of reality, a view which makes him occupy – falsely – the place of God and which forgets that it is not man who creates God, but rather God who creates man. Forgetfulness of God led to the abandonment of man". It is therefore "no wonder that in this context a vast field has opened for the unrestrained development of nihilism in philosophy, of relativism in values and morality, and of pragmatism – and even a cynical hedonism – in daily life" (*Ecclesia in Europa*, n. 9).

Perhaps the most characteristic element of the dominant culture of the secularised West is the diffusion of a form of subjectivism. A type of "profession of faith" in the absolute subjectivity of the individual, disguised as humanism, it is actually self-centred, egoistic, narcissistic, whose only centre is the individual.

This exaltation of the individual as unique reference point and the concomitant crisis of authority mean that the Church is no longer accepted as a doctrinal and moral authority. Her "pretence" to guide the life of the people by moral doctrine is rejected as it is considered the denial of personal freedom. This phenomenon of the weakening of the power of institutions does not pertain only to the Church, but touches the traditional organs of State, the Courts, Parliament and Armed Forces, and all of hierarchically structured society.

The exaltation of the "self" leads to a relativism that extends across the spectres: from the political practice of voting in democracy, for example, derives a criteria according to which every individual opinion has the same value as the next, with the result that there is no objective truths or values of higher or lower worth, nor values or truths which are universally valid by reason of nature for every person in every culture at all times.

## 2.3. The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil and the suffering of innocents has always been used to justify unbelief and the rejection of a good and personal God. This rebellion comes from the non-acceptance of the sense of the freedom of man, who is capable of doing both good and evil. The mystery of evil has been and always will be a scandal for to intelligent man, and only the light of Christ crucified and glorified can fully reveal and express it. "In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22).

But if the scandal of evil has never ceased to motivate atheism and unbelief in individuals, today they have a new aspect in the diffusion, amplification and presentation of evil through the mass media, which causes evil to echo ever louder, be it manifest in war, accidents, natural catastrophes, conflicts among individuals or countries, economic or social injustices. Unbelief is more or less tied into this pervasive and subversive aspect of evil, and consequently the rejection and denial of God feed on the continual diffusion of this inhumane spectacle, daily beamed around the world.

## 2.4. The Historical Limits of Christians and the Church in the World

The vast majority of non-believers and the indifferent are not so for ideological or political reasons, but come from the pews of Christianity and describe themselves as deluded or unsatisfied. They express "debelief" or a disaffection towards belief and its practice and perceive it as meaningless, dull and irrelevant. The cause is often tied to a negative or unpleasant event experienced in the Church, often during adolescence; the protest or rebellion of a moment transforms itself over the course of time into a general rejection and finally indifference. This does not mean total closure, for often a desire to retain a good relationship with God remains. On this note, it is good to focus on the "restarters", i.e. those Christians who, after a period of distancing from the faith and religious practice, return to Church.

Among the causes internal to the life of the Church which push people away, what is most obvious is the apparent absence of a spiritual life in some priests and religious. Whenever some of these lead an immoral lifestyle, many people feel disturbed. Among the causes of scandal, by far the worst due to its objective moral gravity, is sexual abuse of minors. Also scandalous are the superficiality of spiritual life and the exaggerated search for material wellbeing and financial gain, especially in areas where the population is subject to extreme poverty. As many Christians identify the faith with its moral principles, it follows that, faced with certain scandalous behaviour - particularly those in which the protagonists are members of the clergy, many of the faithful suffer a deep crisis in their spiritual journey.

Deeds of this kind, orchestrated and amplified, are used by the mass media to damage the reputation of all the clergy of a country, and to confirm the suspicions exacerbated by the dominant culture.

## 2.5. New Factors

### *A Rupture in the Process of Handing on the Faith*

One consequence of the process of secularisation is the growing difficulty faced in handing on the faith through catechesis, through the school, the family and the homily<sup>5</sup>[5]. These traditional channels for the handing on of the faith struggle to fulfil their fundamental role.

**The Family.** There is a real problem in the handing on of the faith within traditionally Christian families, especially in the cities. The causes are manifold: the rhythm and pace of work, the fact that both parents often work long hours away from the home, the secularisation of the social fabric, the influence of television. The transformation of living and working conditions and the meagre size of apartments has led to separation of the nuclear family from grandparents, who are now often excluded from the important processes of handing on both faith and culture. Moreover, in many countries children spend little time in the family home as they spend long hours at school and in extra curricular activities such as sport, music, and various associations; at home they are often immersed in and isolated by the computer, by video-games, and by the television leaving little space for constructive dialogue with their parents. In traditionally Catholic countries, the growing instability of family life, the rise in the number of so-called "civil marriages" and the increasingly prevalent so-called "common law marriage" accelerate and amplify this process. This does not of course mean that parents have become non-believers, for often they ask for the baptism of their children and wish for them to make their first holy communion, but beyond these sacred rites of passage the faith does not seem to have any role in the family setting, hence the question: if the parents have no living faith, what will they hand over to their children in an environment that has become indifferent to the Gospel values and, as it were, deaf to the proclamation of the saving message?

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<sup>5</sup>[5] *Handing on the Faith at the Heart of Cultures, «novo millennio ineunte»*, was the theme of the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for Culture in 2002, cf. *Cultures and Faith* X n. 2 Vatican City (2002).

In other countries, for example in Africa and parts of Latin America some of the content of the faith and a certain religious sentiment is handed on, but the lived-experience of the faith which requires a personal and living relationship with Jesus Christ is often faulty. Christian rites are followed, but are perceived only as cultural expressions.

**Catholic Schools.** In various countries some Catholic schools have had to close as a result of a lack of resources and personnel, while a weakening, or a rupture in the handing on of the faith in some schools and even Catholic universities, results from a growing number of teachers void of commitment and a solid formation. Too often teaching in these schools has little to do with the faith and Christian morality. The phenomenon of migration also destabilises schools when the large non-Christian presence is used as an excuse to justify abandoning an explicit teaching of the faith, rather than to seize on this opportunity to propose the faith, as has long been the tradition of Church's missionary activity.

### *The Globalisation of Behaviour*

"Modern civilisation often complicates the approach to God, not for any essential reason, but because it is excessively engrossed in earthly affairs" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 19). Western materialism has projected a lifestyle characterised by success, money, unrestricted competition, individual pleasure, etc., creating many practical atheists and leaving neither time nor desire for something deeper than the immediate satisfaction of every craving. In many countries there are no theoretical factors in favour of unbelief, but rather purely practical ones marked by social patterns where little time is available for the human community and for space to experience the transcendent. It is the conceit of a full-up society. This religious atony is far more dangerous for the faith than the ideological materialism of the Marxist-Leninist atheistic countries. The improvement of the level of life and economic development necessarily imply a wholesale cultural transformation which often provokes a loss of faith if it is not matched by adequate pastoral activity.

The fires of indifference, practical materialism, moral and religious relativism are stoked by globalisation and the so-called opulent society. The ideals and models of life proposed by the mass media, through advertisements and by the protagonists of the public, political and cultural society are often vectors of a consumerism which is radically anti-evangelical. The culture of globalisation considers men and women an object to be evaluated according to exclusively material, economic and hedonistic criteria.

This domain provokes in many people, by way of compensation, an interest in things irrational. The need for spiritual experience, to live or return to living an inner dimension of life, as well as the psychological and relationship difficulties often caused by the frenetic and obsessive rhythms of life, push many self-confessed believers to seek other alternative experiences and head for "alternative religions" which offer a strong dose of "affective" and "emotional" participation, without any moral or social responsibility. Hence there are many "do-it-yourself religions" on offer, a sort of spiritual supermarket in which one is left free to pick and choose from day to day according to one's own transforming tastes and pleasures.

### *The Mass Media*

The *Mass Media*, by nature ambivalent, can serve both good and bad alike. Unfortunately, often they amplify unbelief and favour indifference, by relativising the religious factor and sometimes ignoring or even deforming its proper nature. Even from countries where Christians are in the majority, certain parts of the Mass Media, newspapers, magazines, news and current affairs programmes, documentaries and films zoom around the world offering often flawed, distorted or partial visions of the Church. Only rarely are they met with a pertinent and convincing response. A negative perception of the Church results, impeding her credibility to transmit her message of faith. Alongside this lies the Internet, in which information claiming to offer truth about religious matters circulates. "Internet Infidels" are present alongside sites of satanic and explicitly anti-Christian nature, which lead

aggressive campaigns against religion. The abundance of pornographic material on the internet is also to be condemned: it degrades the dignity of men and women and can only distance the human person away from the living faith. Hence a pastoral approach to the mass media is of prime importance<sup>6</sup>[6].

#### *The New Age, New Religious Movements and the Elite*

"The proliferation of sects is also a reaction against secularised culture and a consequence of social and cultural upheavals which have uprooted traditional religion" (*Towards a Pastoral Approach to culture*, n. 24). While the movement known as the *New Age* is not a cause of unbelief, by its nature it contributes to the growth of religious confusion<sup>7</sup>[7].

The opposition and harsh criticism from certain élites, new religious movements, and sects of Pentecostal persuasion contribute to the weakening of the life of faith. This is probably one of the greatest challenges to the Catholic Church, particularly in Latin America. The most serious objections and criticisms made by these sects against the Church are that she fails to face up to reality, that she portrays an image of herself which is far distant from the reality, and that her proposition of the faith is not incisive and is incapable of transforming daily life. These sectarian communities developing in America and Africa attract the youth in large numbers and lead them away from the traditional Churches, but do not manage to satisfy in the long term their religious needs. For many they are the exit-points from religion. Only exceptionally do they return.

### 3. Secularisation of Belief

The problem is not that of secularisation, understood as the legitimate autonomy of the temporal realm, but of secularism, "a concept of the world according to which the latter is self-explanatory, without any need for recourse to God, who thus becomes superfluous and an encumbrance" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 55). Many who call themselves Catholic, and similarly those who belong to other religions, give in to a lifestyle in which God, or religion, is of little importance. The faith appears void of substance and no longer requiring personal engagement. There is incoherence between the faith-as-professed and the faith-as-lived. People no longer dare declare explicitly their belonging to a religion and the hierarchy is systematically criticised. Where there is little witness of Christian life, the abandonment of religious practice ensues. It is not simply a matter, as in times gone by, of a simple abandonment of sacramental practice, or of a scarce vitality in living out of the faith, but of something which strikes at its very roots.

The disciples of Christ live in the world and are often influenced and moulded by the surrounding culture which shows no need for God and no thought for God. In a context so uninvolved and unresponsive to the very idea of God, many believers, above all in the more secularised countries, are overcome by a hedonistic, consumerist and relativist mentality.

The observant critic of our societies sees the lack of clear references in the minds of those who make public opinion and who reject all moral judgement when important aspects of society are thrown into the spotlight by the media, leaving such to the individual appreciation of every individual under the guise of a "tolerance" which simply puts convictions apart and anaesthetises consciences.

Moreover laxism in lifestyle and morality, and the attached pansexualism, have negative effects for the life of the faith. Premarital and extramarital cohabitation have become the norm in many traditionally Catholic countries, especially Europe, even among those who later marry in Church. The manner of living out human sexuality has become a purely personal question. For many believers, divorce does not cause problems for the conscience. Abortion and euthanasia, denounced by the Council as "abominable crimes" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 27) are accepted on mundane criteria. There is too a

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<sup>6</sup>[6] Cf. [Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture](#), n. 9.

<sup>7</sup>[7] On the New Age see the Provisional Document published jointly by the PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE and the PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE, [Jesus Christ, The Bearer of the Water of Life](#), Vatican City 2003.

levelling out of the fundamental dogmas of the Christian faith: the incarnation of Christ, his uniqueness as Saviour, the survival of the soul after death, the resurrection of the body, eternal life. The doctrine of reincarnation is quite widely held by those who identify themselves as believers and who frequent Church, alleging that it is easier to believe in than the immortality of the soul after death and the resurrection of the body, as it offers a new life within the material world itself.

The standard of Christian life in some countries seems quite mediocre, which underlines a difficulty to explain their own faith. It is a difficulty caused not only by the influx of the secularised culture, but also by a certain fear of taking decisions on the basis of faith, the consequence of a weak Christian formation which has not empowered people to trust in the power of the Gospel and has not recognised the importance of a meeting with Christ through prayer and the sacraments.

Hence a form of practical atheism is spreading even among those who consider themselves Christian.

#### 4. New Religiosity

Alongside the spread of religious indifference in the more secularised countries, a new aspect clearly emerges from the inquiry on unbelief. It is often identified as the return of the sacred for those who find difficulty in opening themselves to the infinite, to go beyond the immediate, and to set out on and follow an itinerary of faith<sup>8[8]</sup>.

It is a romantic form of religion, a religion of the spirit and of the self which has its roots in the crisis of the subject who remains more and more narcissistic, and rejects all historical and objective elements. Hence it is a strongly subjective religion, almost an exclusive reserve for the spirit, in which one can take refuge and contemplate matters in an aesthetic research, where the individual is under no obligation to give an account of his reasons or behaviour.

##### 4.1. A Faceless God

The new religiosity is an adherence to a God that often has no face nor personal characteristics. Questioned about God, both declared believers and declared non-believers affirm that they believe in the existence of a force or superior transcendent being, but who has no personal attributes, much less those of a Father. The fascination of oriental religions, transplanted into the West, resides in the depersonalisation of God. In scientific circles, the old atheistic materialism is giving way to the return of pantheism, where the universe itself is divine: *Deus sive natura sive res*.

The Christian proposal is based, however, on the revelation of the God-in-three-persons, in the image of Whom each person is called to live in communion. Faith in the tri-personal God is the basis of the whole Christian faith and also of the constitution of an authentically human society. Further awareness of the concept of person seems necessary in all fields: in prayer, in inter-personal dialogue, in inter-personal relationships in daily life, in the destiny of man after death.

##### 4.2. The Religion of the Self

The constitutive element of the new religiosity is that it is centred on the *self*, on *me*. If the humanist atheism of the past was the religion of humanity, post-modern religiosity is the religion of the *Self*, based on personal success and the achievement of one's own goals. Sociologists speak of a "Biographical Do-It-Yourself Religion" in which each person creates a new image of God at different stages of their lives, starting from divers material as though it were some form of "Holy Patchwork".

This religion of "me" is a far cry from Christianity, the religion of "You" and of "Us", of relation which has its origins in the Trinity, in whom the divine Persons are substantial relations. The history of salvation is a process of loving dialogue between God and man, marked by successive covenants which feature this experience of relation as both personal and personalising. One constant feature of Christian spirituality is the call to interiority and to put at the heart of life, the mysteries of the cross

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<sup>8[8]</sup> Cfr. [Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture](#), n. 26.

and resurrection of Christ, the supreme sign of a relation which goes to the extent of gift of self for the other.

#### 4.3. Quid est Veritas?

Another characteristic trait of this new religiosity is the lack of interest for the question of the truth. The teaching of John Paul II in his encyclicals *Veritatis Splendor* and *Fides et Ratio*, respected even by unbelieving intellectuals, does not seem to have been adequately received by the faithful even in the Catholic Universities, although there are exceptions. At a time in which "weak thought" (*pensiero debole*) is dominant, strong convictions meet with rejection: rather than believing, people think they believe, leaving room for a safety margin and a sort of "emergency exit". Hence the very questions on the truth of Christianity and the existence of God are put aside and considered irrelevant and meaningless. The question of Pilate, in reply to the explicit declaration of Christ is still relevant: What is truth? For many, truth has a negative connotation, associated with concepts such as "dogmatism", "intolerance", "imposition", and "inquisition", on the grounds of a few historical episodes in which the truth was exploited to impose choices of conscience, which had nothing to do with respect of the person and the search for the Truth.

In Christianity however, Truth is not merely a theoretically defined thought, an ethically valid judgement, or a scientific demonstration, but it is a Person whose name is Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of the Most Holy Virgin Mary. Christ presented himself as the Truth (Jn 14:6). Tertullian observed that Christ said: "I am the Truth", and not "I am the Tradition". Today to speak of the truth of the Gospel is a task that requires facing up to the fact that Truth appears in the poverty of the impotent, of He who for love accepted to die on the cross. In this sense, truth and love are inseparable: "In our time, truth is often mistaken for the opinion of the majority. In addition, there is a widespread belief that one should use the truth even against love or vice versa. But *truth and love need each other*. St Teresa Benedicta is a witness to this. The "martyr for love", who gave her life for her friends, let no one surpass her in love. At the same time, with her whole being she sought the truth [...]. St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross says to us all: "*Do not accept anything as the truth if it lacks love. And do not accept anything as love which lacks truth!*"<sup>9[9]</sup>. So "only love is worthy of faith", love becomes the great sign of credibility of Christianity, because it is inseparable from the Truth.

#### 4.4. Outside History

This new religiosity springs from the contemporary secularised, anthropocentric and self-centred culture, and pretends to do without objective historical reference points. What is important is the capacity to find ways of feeling well. In the past, religious criticism was often orientated at representative institutions, and was based more on the lack of coherence and of living witness of its members. Today, the very existence of an objective mediation between the divine and the subject is denied. The return of the spiritual seems then to deny the transcendent, with the consequent uselessness of religious institutions, and the refusal of the historical dimension of revelation and of the personal character of the divinity. Such denial is supported by some widespread publications and broadcasts which seek to destroy the historicity of biblical revelation, its main protagonists and its central events.

The Church however is tied to history. In the Creed there is even the reminder of the figure of Pontius Pilate, who anchors the faith to a particular moment of history. Hence adherence to the concrete realities is fundamental for our faith and responds to the needs of many who desire to find accordance between the truth of Christianity and biblical revelation and historical data. The Church is sacrament of Christ, it is the extension through history of the incarnation of the Word of God, 2000 years ago. Bossuet, *l'aigle de Meaux* said it in clear words: "The Church is Jesus Christ, spread and shared".

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<sup>9[9]</sup> JOHN PAUL II, [Homily for the canonisation of Edith Stein](#), in AAS 91 (1999) 249.

#### 4.5. New Contrasts

To complete this brisk description, as a response to the appearance of this nameless and faceless multiform religiosity, there appear some new forms of the religious panorama of the contemporary culture.

– *New religious movements are seeing the light of day within the Church*, with clearly defined structures, a strong sense of aggregation and belonging. The existence and vitality of these movements, answers the new spiritual search, witnesses for a strong and non-narcissistic religiosity, and above all is rooted in the personal and ecclesial encounter with Christ, in the sacraments of the faith, in prayer, in the liturgy, lived and celebrated as *Mystagogy*, in the participation in the mystery of the living God, spring of life for each person.

– There is a surge of *fundamentalism* within Christianity as within Islam and Hinduism : in an age of uncertainty they seek security by fossilising religion in the past. This responds to the need for spiritual and cultural identity in a world in prey to deep changes. Fundamentalism is the negative aspect of the new religiosity.

– *The search to elaborate a new civil religion*, is also being felt in various countries, particularly in Europe and North America. This arises from the need to find common symbols and an ethic founded on democratic consent. The reawakening of values tied to nationality, the search for an ethical consent, through the creation of *ad hoc* committees, the symbolism of major sporting occasions such as the Olympic games and the Football World Cup now seem to show the need to rediscover transcendent values in the solid-shared basis of human society in a pluralist culture.

By integrating these phenomena in their positive and negative aspects, the Church's pastoral approach to culture seeks to respond to the challenges that the new religiosity presents to the announcement of the Good News of Christ.

## II. Concrete Proposals

A challenge is not an obstacle. The challenges of today's cultures and of the new religiosity offer Christians the chance to deepen their faith and to seek ways of proclaiming the Good News of the love of Jesus Christ to reach those in the prey of unbelief and indifference. The Church's mission is not that of impeding cultural transformation but ensuring that faith in Christ is transmitted at the heart of cultures undergoing profound change.

Dialogue with non-believers and the pastoral approach to unbelief spring from the twofold mandate given to the Church to announce the Gospel to people and to cultures: "go out to all the world and preach the Gospel to every being" (Mk 16:15), and "go teach all nations" in (Mt 28:19). This missionary task belongs to the whole Church without exceptions. It can not be separated from the whole life of the Church, nor is it a specialised activity to be entrusted to a few experts. The mission is transversal and includes catechism and teaching, liturgy and ordinary pastoral activity in families and parishes, seminaries and universities.

Every pastoral initiative in the face of unbelief and indifference springs from the life of the Church, a community life grounded in the Gospel. Without the dynamism which springs from a lived-out faith, any pastoral proposal would remain void of apostolic value. Inviting us to make holiness the primary and indispensable part of every pastoral programme, the Holy Father reminds us of the importance of prayer, the Sunday Eucharist, the sacrament of reconciliation, the primacy of grace, listening to and proclaiming the Word<sup>10</sup>[10].

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<sup>10</sup>[10] JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* – Apostolic letter, nn. 30-31, in AAS 93 (2001) 287-288; and in Supplement to the Osservatore Romano 8-9 January 2001, p. VII.

In this presentation of concrete proposals, the dialogue with those who declare themselves explicitly non-believers is accompanied by the proclamation of the Gospel addressed to all, be they baptised, non-believers, misbelievers, the indifferent, etc., i.e. the evangelisation of the culture of unbelief and of religious indifference.

## 1. Dialogue with Non-believers

Rather than unbelief, we do well to remember we are addressing non-believers; each atheist and agnostic has his own story. Hence the most appropriate pathway is the dialogue which is personal, patient, respectful, loving, sustained by prayer, and which has at its heart the proposition of the truth in appropriate ways, at the just time, and in the firm belief that the truth is only imposed on its own terms<sup>11</sup>[11], and moved by the desire "that all come to know you, Father and he whom you have sent, that is Jesus Christ" (Jn 17:3).

### 1.1 Prayer for Non-believers

Friendly dialogue must be accompanied by intercessory prayer. An exemplary initiative is seen in the group «Incroyance-prière», founded by P. Jean-Baptiste Rinaudo in the diocese of Montpellier, France, with the support of the Pontifical Council for Culture. It has 3000 members spread across 50 countries of the world. Sure of the power of intercessory prayer, they commit themselves to pray each day for those who are distant from God. The following formula can serve as a model for other initiatives:

I (...*name*...) commit myself to pray each day in all humility that God may lighten with His Holy Spirit a non-believer, as well as myself, in order that His immense love may be known to us and that we love Him as Father.

*Dated and Signed*<sup>12</sup>[12].

Monasteries, places of pilgrimage, sanctuaries and centres of spirituality carry out an important role by their prayer, by offering spiritual guidance and direction, by listening and paying personalised attention to all those who seek spiritual help. Some monasteries have found «open-days» to be effective tools to create an aura of familiarity with these ecclesial institutions.

### 1.2 The Centrality of the Human Person

A fertile terrain for dialogue with non-believers can be found in an anthropological approach centred on the fullness of the human person and without instrumental fragmentation. We can not succumb to the temptation to stand by as though impotent and watch the "calm apostasy". On the contrary, we are called to reengage on our apostolic initiatives in faithfulness to the mandate of Christ (cf. Mt 28:19-20), taking into account the inextinguishable need, even if it is sometimes unconscious, for peace, reconciliation and forgiveness present in every person. Our mission is to meet this person, taking his hand if necessary, but without pretending to create an ideal according to our needs and desires, to then pretend to be the guides for a perfect humanity, i.e. a humanity which is made to measure our desires. Such an error would mean that we reply to questions never asked, and find ourselves as safe and sure guides, but with nobody to lead.

Suffering is an inevitable travelling companion for every person, shouldered in total sympathy by the *man of sorrows*, and an anthropological meeting ground. Faced with sickness, suffering and death, pain provokes the loss of meaning and a *kenosis*, and makes space for the search for a word, a face, someone capable of offering a ray of light in the depths of darkness. The Gospel mission asks us to make our faith be believed through strong spiritual experiences, and it pushes us to become, not intransigent

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<sup>11</sup>[11] Cf. [Dignitatis Humanae – Declaration on Religious Liberty](#), n. 3, in AAS 58 (1966) 931.

<sup>12</sup>[12] «Je soussigné(e)... prends l'engagement de prier chaque jour, en toute humilité, pour que Dieu éclaire par son Esprit un non-croyant –en même temps que moi même– afin de pouvoir le découvrir dans son immense amour et l'aimer comme un père. Fait à...Le... Signature». The address of Incroyance et prière is: 11 Impasse Flammarion, F-13001 Marseille, France.

crusaders, but humble witnesses, true signs of contradiction at the heart of the cultures on the earth, in rejoining our brothers without constraining them or wiping them out, but in accepting to "lower" ourselves for their benefit. The anthropological category of interhumanity has a particular meaning for our mission. It evokes this globalised world where the person risks being reduced to an "anthropological slumber". It is with this person that we have been called to enter into dialogue, because, it is the person, who is in every culture, who is the way of the Church (cf. *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 14).

The challenge is ever present, particularly when the sacraments of Christian initiation are requested from within the families of non-believers or the indifferent. Indeed, through the meetings to prepare for the sacraments with those parents who do not believe or who are indifferent, sometimes it is possible to discern human and religious resources that are ever present, but often imprisoned. As believers, we cannot ignore this anthropological dimension : baptism, for example, is requested because it is a family tradition - the faith of the fathers - and desired to inscribe the child in the family genealogy. Meeting with these people gives us the chance to recognise that baptism represents something deeper, even beyond what the same parents might be prepared to admit. In fact, if their children are not baptised, in a sense there will be a hole in the history of the family. So we find ourselves in a seemingly paradoxical pastoral situation that brings us into contact with non-believers and the indifferent, but always grafted onto strong ancestral religious roots : such is the typical situation of post-modern culture. Hence, sincere and friendly human contact, prayer, a disposition marked by welcoming, listening, respecting, openness, courtesy, trust, friendship, politeness, graciousness, esteem and other such virtues are the basis on which it is possible to build in a personal rapport a pastoral approach in which each person feels respected and welcomed, for what he is, often without knowing it, a Being personally loved by God.

### 1.3 Content and Manner of the Dialogue with Non-believers

Constructive dialogue with non-believers, rooted in study and pertinent observation, can focus on some privileged themes:

- the big existential questions: the why and meaning of life and of responsibility; the ethical dimension of human life; the why and meaning of death in culture and in society; religious experience in its divers expressions, the inner freedom of the human person; human problems with religious consequences, and even the faith.
- the major themes of society: education of the young, poverty and solidarity, foundations for living side by side in multicultural societies, values and human rights, cultural and religious pluralism, religious liberty, work, the common good, beauty, aesthetics, ecology, biotechnology, peace and bioethics.

In some circumstances dialogue with non-believers takes on a more formal aspect and acquires a public nature, with discussion and debate with organisations that are explicitly atheist. While individual dialogue from person to person is the task of all the baptised, public dialogue with non-believers needs well-prepared agents. Hence the then Secretariat for Non-believers published the 1968 document *Dialogue with Non-believers*<sup>13</sup>[13], containing useful suggestions. In France, the members of the service *Incroyance et Foi* often participate at debates, colloquia and round table meetings at cultural centres and educational institutes, be they Catholic or other. In Italy, the "Chair of Unbelief" run by the Archdiocese of Milan permits dialogue between *belief and unbelief*, in a sincere meeting of Catholics and others under the guide of the Archbishop<sup>14</sup>[14]. In Lisbon, the Patriarch has

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<sup>13</sup>[13] SECRETARIAT FOR NON-BELIEVERS, *Dialogue with non-Believers*, Rome 1968. Cfr. by the same secretariat the *Nota circa studium atheismi et institutionem ad dialogum cum non credentibus habendum*, Rome 1970.

<sup>14</sup>[14] The Cattedra is structured as follows: each evening a theme is presented in an atmosphere of silence at the state University, with neither applause nor occasion for the public to speak. Each speaker is presented by the

engaged in specific dialogue with intellectual atheists through correspondence published in a major newspaper<sup>15</sup>[15].

Within the context of dialogue with non-believers Fundamental Theology, as a renewed form of apologetics, has the tasks of giving an account of faith (1 Pt 3:15) and of justifying and expounding the relationship between faith and philosophical reflection through the study of Revelation in relation to the needs of today's cultures. It has its place in the *Ratio Studiorum* of seminaries, Faculties of theology and centres of formation for the laity in as much as it "should show how, in the light of the knowledge conferred by faith, there emerge certain truths which reason, from its own independent enquiry, already perceives" (*Fides et Ratio*, n. 67).

## 2. Evangelisation of the Culture of Unbelief and Indifference

The evangelisation of people does not exhaust the mandate entrusted by Christ to His Church. It is also necessary to evangelise the conscience of a people, its *ethos*, its culture (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 18). If culture is that by which man becomes more man, the spiritual atmosphere within which he lives and carries out his activity, it is clear that the spiritual health of man hangs on the quality of the cultural air which he breathes. As unbelief is also a cultural phenomenon, the Church's response must wrestle with the cruxes of the culture of every society and every country.

The evangelisation of culture aims at letting the Gospel penetrate the actual situation of the lives of the people of a given society. "Pastoral practice must undertake the task of shaping a Christian mentality in ordinary life" (*Ecclesia in Europa*, n. 58). More than at convincing, such evangelisation aims at preparing the ground and at enabling listening, a type of pre-evangelisation. If the basic problem is indifference, the necessary task is to attract attention, to stir up the interest of the people. Identifying the footholds or points of anchorage for the proclamation of the Gospel, the proposals here outlined offer various guidelines –*nova et vetera*– for a pastoral approach to culture which will help the Church to proclaim the faith in response to the challenge of unbelief and religious indifference at the dawn of the new millennium.

### 2.1. The Presence of the Church in the Public Forum

"Until the end of times, between persecutions of the world and the consolations of God, the Church pursues her pilgrimage"<sup>16</sup>[16] in the trust and certainty of being sustained by the Lord. The visible presence and tangible action of the Church, universal sacrament of salvation, in a pluralist society is today more necessary than ever to put the people of the world in contact with the message of the Truth revealed in Jesus Christ. It is a widespread and diversified presence, in the great debates, social events, and meeting places capable of raising the attention, interest and curiosity of the indifferent world, so as to present the person of Christ and His message in a manner capable of holding the attention and provoking reception of the dominant culture:

*A public witness which involves the youth*, such as the World Youth Days meets with and provokes surprise, marvel and attention up to the point of attracting the young people often devoid of reference points and religious motivation. To this end the commitment and work of various spiritual movements for youth is of great worth. The World Youth Days are particularly useful in overcoming the false impression that the Church is a merely oppressive, ageing and decadent institution.

*New city missions* that carry the Church out into the market place such as those that are currently being trailed across Vienna, Paris, Lisbon and Brussels. Also, over the last ten years apostolic marvel has

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Cardinal and there are musical interludes. At the end of each evening the Cardinal invites the participants to write down their observation and objections. On the final evening, He seeks to respond to these written comments.

<sup>15</sup>[15] *Debates on the Faith*, should be the title of the book collecting this correspondence.

<sup>16</sup>[16] ST AUGUSTINE, *Oeuvres*, t. II, The City of God, XVIII, 51, 2.

been raised across the world by the *pilgrimage of the relics* of St. Therese of the Child Jesus<sup>17</sup>[17]. Even the local ordinaries are sometimes astonished by the pious gatherings for these travelling relics, of thousands of people, many of whom are unaware of the route to their own parish church.

*Christian movements and associations* engaged in the public sphere, the mass media, and in governmental circles help to develop a culture which is different from the dominant one, not only at an intellectual level, but also at a practical one. To live fully the mystery of Christ and to propose by the witness of a lifestyle inspired by the Gospel according to the ideal of the *Letter to Diognetus* remains the privileged witness of Christians to the heart of the world.

*The collaboration of the Church with organisations of non-believers* to do things that are good in themselves, and to favour powerful moments of sharing and dialogue. The pastoral directives in John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in terris* enlighten: "if to do some temporal good, believers collaborate with those who through error do not believe or lack the fullness of faith in Christ, such contacts may possibly provide the occasion or even the incentive to bring them to the truth" (n. 158). This is the case where Christians collaborate, for example, with the *Agnostic pro-life league* in the fight for life.

*The promotion of public events on the great cultural themes* fosters contact and dialogue at a personal level with those who work in the different domains of culture and are in themselves a way for the Church to be present in society.

*The meetings or colloquia* organised by the Pontifical Council for Culture together with the Italian *Ente dello Spettacolo* on spiritual cinema, and the *congress* or *convivium* organised together with the Lutheran Church in Oslo, Norway on *Church and Cinema* are examples of meetings which bring out the potential of the language of film to sustain and encourage spiritual values in today's cultures by the use of images. Another initiative under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for Culture lies in the *Meeting on Religious Theatre*. Such appointments make the most of the potential of the arts, offer opportunity for reflection, and help ensure a Christian cultural presence.

Each year the Holy Father assigns the *Pontifical Academies' Prize*, an event overseen by the Pontifical Council for Culture to encourage young academics and artists whose work and research offer notable contribution to the promotion of Christian humanism and its artistic expression. *Intellectual Catholic Weeks* and *Social Weeks* also give public visibility to the meeting between faith and culture and highlight the travails of Catholics in the social problems of our times.

The fundamental role of the *Mass Media* must also be underlined. Image, word, gesture and presence are necessary elements for an evangelisation engaged in the cultures of the communities and peoples, even if it means being careful not to let image become more important than reality and the objective content of the faith. The enormous social and lifestyle transformations being witnessed and caused by the mass media necessitate an apt pastoral strategy: «Many young lay people have an inclination to work in the media. A pastoral approach to culture will ensure that they are prepared to be an active presence in the world of radio, television, books and magazines, the bearers of information which are also the daily reference-point for the majority of our contemporaries. Neutral, open and honest media offer well-prepared Christians a front-line missionary role: it is important that they should be well-trained and supported» (*Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, n. 34). The professional and qualified presence of Catholics with a clear sense of identity in the mass media, in news agencies, in press offices, in newspapers, journals, magazines, behind internet sites and in Television companies is important to ensure accurate and fair news about the Church and to help today's world understand what is so special about the mystery of the Church and avoid undue focus on the marginal, the unusual, and ideological simplifications. Prizes, such as the *Catholic Prize for Cinema*, the *Robert Bresson Prize* at the Venice Festival, scholarships, *Christian Cinema Weeks*, and the creation of Catholic professional

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<sup>17</sup>[17] Mgr Guy GAUCHER, «Je voudrais parcourir la terre». Thérèse de Lisieux thaumaturge, docteur et missionnaire, Cerf, October 2003.

networks and associations to encourage and show support for the hard-but-necessary work being carried out in this important field, but without falling into the trap of creating a Catholic ghetto.

As is well known, one person's speech does not always guarantee another's understanding. An enormous effort is asked of us to use the language of today's people in order to share their needs and to respond to them sincerely and in an accessible manner. Such an approach, for example, was behind the success of the Archbishop of Gdansk in presenting a *Charter of Human Rights* with notable public impact, and honoured the positive approach of the Council in its pastoral Constitution: "The joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men and women, who, united in Christ, are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the kingdom of their Father and who have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for all. That is why this community realises that it is truly and intimately linked with the human being and its history" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1).

In conclusion, ensuring the *presence* of the Church in the public arena in dialogue with non-believers, means bridging the gap between the spiritual realm and daily life, to raise the questions and provoke the quest for the invisible in the heart of the visible. It means prodding up real questions before proposing convincing responses. Indeed, in the absence of the very question - and hence a personal interest - they will not captivate attention and will not be considered relevant. To employ an image: Christians must step out of the sanctuary and enter the market place, show off, without grotesque publicity, the joy of belief, and the importance of the faith for the reality of life. Engaging dialogue and credible witness can raise the desire to enter into the mystery of the faith. Such is the invitation to set out on the pathway of Jesus: "Come and See" (Jn 1:38).

## 2.2. In the Family

If for some, unbelief is an abstract theory, it becomes real for parents when they see their children abandon the faith and live as though God did not exist. This causes acute pain. There is a need to help parents hand on, together with their cultural heritage, the inheritance of the faith and experience of God. The assistance offered to couples during their period of engagement, in preparation to marriage and after it is more than ever necessary. The experience of the *Équipes Notre-Dame* is important, as Christian homes offer each other help as they grow in their faith lives, by sharing the daily difficulties and joys and by deepening together their faith. There where the Gospel is written on the hearts of the youth by their families and teachers, the problems of adolescence become surmountable. The family, first school of the Gospel, is a key place where a lived-out faith can be transmitted, and can take form in concrete expressions which become part of daily Christian experience: in the proper celebration of religious feasts, in family prayer in the evening, at bedtime and at mealtime, in the recitation of the rosary, in the visiting of churches, and in the setting aside time for *lectio divina*. Within the naturally enriching experience of family life, where trials, joys and tribulations nurture Christian virtues, by physically accompanying offspring to church-based liturgical activity and by being a family in prayer, parents and guardians are the first evangelisers of their children and build up solid roots on which to offer the special support needed at the time of preparation to receive the sacraments and to form a Christian conscience. Hereby they live a fuller version of family and ecclesial life. "Family catechesis" are one example, where the parents themselves, and particularly the fathers, exercise their parental responsibility in the proclamation of the Gospel.

The family is a place of culture, of life and for life, where each member learns from the other the fundamental values of community living, in appreciating each other's diversity and riches. In order to install in Christian families the "criteria of judgement, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 19), i.e., a culture inspired by faith, it is important to dedicate more time to family life. In this way can be born a new way of

seeing and of living, of understanding, of acting and of preparing the future, and of being promoters of a new culture. Moreover, in an image-driven culture, it is important to educate the children to control their use of the television, to watch it together with them, discuss its content and answer their questions with availability and love. Otherwise, television might steal the time necessary for interpersonal relationships that are so important for the handing on of the faith.

### 2.3. Christian Initiation and Religious Education

Ignorance, both religious and cultural, is one of the main causes of unbelief, bad belief and religious indifference. To confront ignorance it is necessary to reinforce existing forms of education and formation, especially the basics. The key role is in the hands of teachers, who before anything else must be witnesses. Teaching moments are omnipresent and of great importance, as Jesus himself showed, spending most of his public ministry teaching.

In this field there is a need to identify more clearly what is unique to Christianity both in terms of research and also in terms of preparing catechists, particularly in comparison with the New Age<sup>18</sup>[18], sects, and New Religious Movements<sup>19</sup>[19]. Superstition and magical tendencies are the result of a lack of education. Ignorance of the essential contents of the faith favour the growth of sects and the appearance of false prophets. The differences between eternal life and the spirit world, transcendental meditation and Christian contemplation, miracles and faith-healing, the liturgical year and the ecological cycle need to be clearly explained and clearly grasped.

#### *Christian Initiation, Catechesis and the Catechumenate*

The need to give greater care to Christian Initiation is widely felt and is accompanied by the desire for a more enriching and enduring sacramental catechism, *conditio sine qua non* for a continuous growth into the divine life and in the love of the Church. Many feel the need to introduce or reintroduce catechesis for adults, not just seek to fill the cognitive gaps, but to lead to a personal and ecclesial experience of faith. The catechumenate is proposed in various forms, among which the ecclesial movements are proven providers of formation and growth in the faith, such that in some countries the catechumenate is in continual progress and is giving life to a new generation of believers who find together the joy of believing in Jesus Christ and of sharing in the Church a fervour, a communicating enthusiasm and a living hope.

Bible study and reading in parishes are enabled by appropriate programmes. Various initiatives are underway to ensure each baptised person's right to receive a true doctrinal education, which goes hand in hand with the duty to continue reading and studying the contents of the faith and to hand them on from one generation to the next<sup>20</sup>[20]. In this context activity specifically orientated to certain groups has been found useful: children, students, the newly-graduated, young adults, pensioners, and community leaders. Initiatives offering formation at various levels on matters biblical, moral, of the social doctrine of the Church, help to enable the participants to be more pro-active in the discernment, by the light of the Gospel, of the goings on of their societies.

#### *Educational Institutions*

The Church has at its disposition a substantial network of teaching centres, from primary and elementary schools through to Universities. Each day young people in their millions find themselves in contact with Catholic schools and teaching establishments. This situation has enormous potential, but care must be taken to ensure that formation is truly Catholic and that the faith become the unifying element for all activities of such institutes. Of significance also is the teaching of religion in state

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<sup>18</sup>[18] Cf. [Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life](#), cit.

<sup>19</sup>[19] Cf. <http://www.cesnur.org>

<sup>20</sup>[20] *Code of Canon Law*, [Can. 229, 748](#) and [Canon 226 § 2](#).

schools, wherethrough up to 90% of school age children can be exposed to the Catholic faith. Contact with the youth in school is fertile ground for a pastoral approach to culture.

Where religion lessons are not possible, it is important to maintain a religious presence at school. In some states of the USA, Catholic and Protestant parents and teachers, have united in campaign to ensure prayer space in state schools. An initiative not from on high, through decrees and parliament, but from grass-roots, with signature gathering and local campaigning. In the same way they have ensured that the importance of the determining role played by religion in culture is given in lessons such as history and art.

Of importance is the presence of the Church in the university<sup>21</sup>[21], both in terms of academic teaching and in pastoral presence. Even where faculties of theology have not been established, the Church seeks to maintain a pastoral presence in the university, but this is not to be confused with pastoral care of the youth. It should focus primarily on the evangelisation of the intellect, on the creation of a synthesis between faith and culture, and be orientated to the staff to ensure the formation of Catholic intellectuals.

In the seminaries and faculties of theology, philosophy and fundamental theology are key disciplines for dialogue with modern culture. New courses and programmes in the field of dialogue between faith and science are considered appropriate. As an example stands Project STOQ (Science, Theology and the Ontological Quest)<sup>22</sup>[22], which has sprung up in Rome from the combined forces of several Pontifical Universities under the patronage of the Pontifical Council for Culture with the purpose of forming competent personnel for the faith-science dialogue. It is an experience which is paradigmatic for other centres.

Other initiatives to be encouraged in terms of concrete proposals are: the creation of Academies for Life, Resource Centres - libraries, video-libraries and bookshops, and the encouragement of printing and publication of newspapers of Christian inspiration, and aimed at large diffusion.

Organisations specialising in the dialogue with non-believers and the culture of unbelief are also needed, and should work in conjunction with the Commissions for culture and for unbelief of the Episcopal Conferences. In the Faculties of Theology, departments and observatories on unbelief are useful, as can be seen in those that exist at Zagreb, Split, and at the Pontifical Urban University. Small study groups for informal purposes to continue these reflections are also useful. Chairs for the study of atheism can be adapted to promote the study of atheism, to reflect on the new forms of unbelief and thus be of greater assistance to the pastoral mission of the Church.

#### 2.4. The Pathway of Beauty and of Cultural Heritage

*Beauty* is one of the privileged pathways to bring people nearer to God and to quench their spiritual thirst. Beauty "puts joy in hearts, is a precious fruit that resists the wear and tear of time, unites generations, and makes them share things in admiration"<sup>23</sup>[23]. With its symbolic language, beauty is capable of uniting men and women from different cultures on common values. Through their roots in a common anthropological identity and in the original experience of their humanity, these common values permit man to keep his heart open before the enticement of mystery and of the absolute<sup>24</sup>[24]. In this context the Church opens herself to new epiphanies of beauty, that is, she enters on a new *via pulchritudinis* that goes beyond the concept of beauty of ancient Greek philosophy. The Scriptures

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<sup>21</sup>[21] Cf. CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION - PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE LAITY - PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE, *Presence of the Church in the University and in University Culture*, Vatican City 1994. In EV 14, 1371-1375.

<sup>22</sup>[22] Cf. <http://www.stoqnet.org>

<sup>23</sup>[23] VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Message for Artists*, in AAS 58 (1966), 13; EV 1, n. 497; Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Letter for Artists*, n. 3, in AAS 91 (1999) 1155; EV 18 (412-413); *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, n. 36.

<sup>24</sup>[24] Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 15 and 31.

reveal the Messiah to us, "the most beautiful of the sons of men" who lowered himself for each one of us, presenting himself as "a man of sorrows" (*Is* 53:3). In a culture marked by globalisation where *doing, creating and working* occupy a fundamental place, the Church enriches the person by promoting *being, praise and contemplation* to reveal the dimension of the Beautiful One. The need for an adequate pastoral approach to artists and the arts, and also the appropriate use of cultural heritage can not be sufficiently stated.

The Fathers of Vatican Council II recognised the importance of dialogue with the cultivators of the arts and the value of a continual and benevolent presence of their works in the Church as a means of raising the human spirit to the Lord. It is good to open up and maintain *dialogue* with artistic institutions and societies to foster mutual relationships, capable of enriching both the Church and the same protagonists of artistic creativity. Indeed many artists have found in the heart of the Church a place of personal creativity, where the welcome has been accompanied by proposals, critical judgement and discernment. Evidently the formation of the laity and the clergy in cultural and artistic matters favours dialogue with all those "who are passionately dedicated to the search for new "epiphanies" of beauty so that through their creative work as artists they may offer these as gifts to the world"<sup>25</sup>[25].

*Cultural Weeks, Arts Festivals, Exhibitions, and Sacred Art Prizes, and Arts Programmes*, promoted sometimes in collaboration with civil authority, assist in the pastoral approach to the pathway of beauty, as a privileged way for the inculturation of the faith. Such activity can be accompanied by other activities which aim at offering more people the experience of beauty so that the person of Christ and the mysteries of the faith continue to be a preferred source of inspiration for artists.

In the field of literature, the creation of literary circles, and meetings such as those organised by the Pontifical Council for Culture for poets, writers, thinkers and scholars of both Catholic and secular interest permit healthy exchange.

At the same time, the cultural heritage of the Church remains a means of evangelisation. Buildings of Christian inspiration constructed through centuries of faith are an authentic witness of a culture shaped by the Gospel of Christ, and sure guides for a good Christian education. The restoration of churches, particularly their façades, and other sacred places, perhaps with state assistance, incites a response to the invitation of Jesus: "Let your light shine in the sight of men, that they may see your good works" (cf. *Mt* 5:16).

The organisation and promotion of concerts of sacred music, exhibitions of sacred art and choreographed events of Christian inspiration help many people grow in their faith through the pathway of the experience of beauty, meeting the Saviour in an intimate manner through the contemplation of a work of art. Exhibitions such as London's *Seeing Salvation*, Spain's *Las edades del hombre*, and at Rome's *Le Dieu caché*, have attracted an enormous public and are typical examples of the capacity of art to reach the unsatisfied heart of modern man. Indeed many people today are discovering the impotence of rational and technical culture to fill the deeply-felt need for meaning which resides in every person, and they have difficulty understanding the complex situation of the world and of the human person, of his mystery, in the single affirmation of freedom and research for a well-being that is often artificial.

In some countries there is a growing need and desire for religious teaching at university level for students of the arts and humanities. Such students often lack the basic and elementary concepts essential to Christianity which leaves them incapable of understanding their own artistic, historical and cultural heritage. Specific courses on Christianity for students of the arts and history, through cultural heritage offers one opening to put them in touch with the Good News of Christ.

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<sup>25</sup>[25] Thus the dedication of the Holy Father's [Letter to Artists](#).

The pathway of beauty is of particular importance in the liturgy. When, in due accord with liturgical norms, the dimension of the sacred manifests itself through artistic presentations, the mystical celebrations can stir up the indifferent and entice the new forms of non-believers to ask the big questions. The *via pulchritudinis* also becomes the way of joy, manifest in the celebration of religious feasts as well as other occasions to rejoice in the faith.

### 2.5. A New Language to Spread the Gospel: Reason and Feeling

Cardinal Newman, in his *Grammar of Assent* wrote of the importance of a two-sided approach to evangelisation, heart and head, i.e. through feeling and reason. A growing importance is given to the emotional dimension of the person in our days, and many Christians re-find in this angle the pleasure of believing. They feel the need to strengthen their reasons for believing, by means of an appropriate formation, in cultures suffused by irrationalism, where the Church is the Good Samaritan for down-and-out reason.

The first problem is that of language. With which language can we share the Good News of Christ, unique saviour of the world? The culture of indifference and of relativism, borne of the secularised west does not favour communication based on objective discourse. In such conditions, dialogue and even communication are seriously compromised. If those who live in this culture have difficulty discovering the *res significata*, i.e. Christ himself, it is necessary to rethink the *res significans*, i.e. all that leads to Him and the mysteries of the faith, according to the culture of the addressees of the Gospel message, for a renewed evangelisation.

Being near to the young, seeking to understand their way of life and their culture, is a first step in finding a language capable of communicating the experience of God to them. Some television channels, such as MTV<sup>26</sup>[26], base their success among the youth by combining anger and sympathy, sarcasm and tolerance, responsibility and unfretted egoism. Adopting to a certain extent this kind of strong emotive language, and of course purifying it, the Church's dialogue with the youth is facilitated, and through a direct and meaningful relationship established with the people, the aspects of their culture which are negative can be transformed from within, and those which are positive sustained. The mass media in particular are able to communicate a positive experience of conversion and of faith, as it is lived by real people with whom it is possible to identify.

Clearly, the Church can dip into her long-standing tradition to touch people by the allure of music, whether liturgical or popular. Indeed music has enormous potential to open people up to the religious dimension, and it has an appeal even outside ecclesiastical circles, as recent use of Gregorian chant has shown.

The *culture of the meaningful relationship* is indispensable if Christian witness is to involve "the other" in an itinerary of faith. The primacy of the person and of personal relationships is essential for evangelisation. Authentic missionary contact comes through dialogue and through the building up of interpersonal relationships. Such openness is realised by being "near" all those who struggle to develop good relationships whether within the family, or within the Christian community itself, and by providing wise and competent educators for the accompaniment of school children, adolescents and couples in their various activities. The elderly too need a specific pastoral care adequate for their own requirements. All this requires an effort by the Christian community to ensure that each person feels welcome, understood, loved and not just a component of an institution. Even in the present climate of the religious supermarket, in which feelings and an emotional and aesthetic approach to reality dominate, the Church can offer seekers, a safe and exhaustive embrace stemming from the truth and

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<sup>26</sup>[26] Music TeleVision (MTV) is the international television channel at the centre of the popular music culture - the equivalent, from a cultural point of view of CNN whose 24 hour news programmes undergird the information culture.

goodness of faith in Jesus Christ, Who alone provides in his life, death and resurrection the answer to all the interrogatives about the great mystery of life.

The *New Age* and the sects have often attracted people by playing on the emotions. To respond to this challenge, answering Blessed John XXIII's invitation to use the «medicine of mercy rather than that of severity»<sup>27</sup>[27], the Church goes out to meet all those who are in search of the Truth, showing particular care for those who are passing through moments of fragility and anxiety, which leave them as easy prey for the sects. To these people we are called to present the mystery of the cross: in it, without falling into the traps of absurdity or sentimentalism, we can share the sufferings of injured people, and help them find the possibility of giving meaning to their distressing situations.

*Personal relationships* within the Church, above all in the larger parishes, are important. Smaller communities tied to ecclesial movements which take into consideration the particular anthropological, geographical, cultural and social strata specificities of the people, help renew and strengthen the life of communion. The joy of belonging to the family of God is the visible sign of the message of salvation, and the Church, family of families, appears as the veritable "place" of meeting between God and man.

The missionary stance towards those who have become distant from the Church, and whom we would call non-believers and indifferent, is always that of the Good Shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep and draws them back into the fold. The same attentive and fraternal welcome is also fundamental for those who, in ever greater numbers, are only occasional visitors to the Church<sup>28</sup>[28]. Dialogue with these people can be much easier than is often thought. Often just a little courage is needed to give them a personalised and warm invitation, or to give life to a sincere friendship, to gain trust and better understanding of the Church<sup>29</sup>[29].

Inculturating the faith and evangelising cultures through interpersonal relationships permits people to *feel at home* in the Church. The missionaries who went from the West such as Matteo Ricci and De Nobili achieved success because the Asian people saw them immersed in their cultures, in their language, their customs, and with the respect and desire to learn from them in a reciprocal exchange. To evangelise today's cultures requires a loving and intelligent immersion into them, to understand them in depth and to be present therein in all its aspects and with true charity.

## 2.6. Catholic Cultural Centres<sup>30</sup>[30]

"Catholic cultural centres offer to the Church the possibility of presence and action in the field of cultural change. They constitute in effect public forums which allow the Church to make widely known, in creative dialogue, Christian convictions about man, woman, family, work, economy, society, politics, international life, the environment" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 103).

Catholic Cultural Centres, especially those structured as Cultural Laboratories, "are a rich and varied phenomenon, whether it is a question of names (Cultural centres or circles, academies, university institutions, houses of formation), of orientation (theological, ecumenical, scientific, educational, artistic etc...), of chosen themes (cultural trends, values, intercultural or inter-religious dialogue, science, art etc...), or of the activities undertaken (conferences, debates, courses, seminars, publications, libraries, artistic and cultural events, exhibitions etc...). The very concept of a «Catholic

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<sup>27</sup>[27] JOHN XXIII, *Discourse for the Opening of the Council*, 11 October 1962.

<sup>28</sup>[28] In this manner stands the pastor who welcomes the disconnected to the Christmas Mass, replacing the offensive "We'll see you this time next year" with the affectionate "We miss you, come back and stay with us!"

<sup>29</sup>[29] Cf. a project undertaken by the Redemptionists in Edinburgh. Inserting an advertisement in the local newspaper under the slogan "Once a Catholic? Why not give it another try?", and offering a pamphlet they received about 2000 telephone calls.

<sup>30</sup>[30] Cf. PONTIFICIO CONSIGLIO DELLA CULTURA - SERVIZIO NAZIONALE PER IL PROGETTO CULTURALE DELLA CEI, *Centri Culturali Cattolici. Perché? Cos'è? Cosa fare? Dove?*, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2003; [Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture](#), n. 32.

cultural centre» brings together the variety and the richness of the different situations in a country: there are institutions linked with an ecclesiastical body (parish, diocese, Bishops' Conference, religious order etc...) as well as initiatives on the part of Catholics which are private, but still in communion with the Church" (*Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, n. 32).

Catholic Cultural Centres are privileged places to develop the pastoral approach to cultures, where serious debate with the help of films or lectures can consider current cultural issues. The response to the questions posed by culture unfolds many of the obstacles to the faith, gift of God received through hearing (Rm 10:17).

## 2.7. Religious Tourism

In some parts of the world there are people with much free time on their hands, in others inhumane working conditions continue to enforce a form of slavery. The promotion of *religious tourism*, after the tradition of pilgrimages, remains important. Among the various initiatives apt to respond to the legitimate cultural needs of the indifferent and new non-believers, and uniting the fruition of religious heritage with the Christian duties of welcoming, handing on the faith, and charity, the following stand out:

- open an office for the co-ordination of ecclesial activities with the requirements of tourists, aiding them to understand the specificity of local Christian heritage, which is above all cultic;
- set-up activities, events, diocesan museums, cultural itineraries where local art, preserved for future generations, can become instruments of catechesis and education;
- help people to know popular piety through devotional itineraries, letting the people touch upon the richness, diversity and universality of the faith as it is lived in various peoples;
- create organisations of catholic guides for the various local monuments, capable of offering a service that is both cultural and marked by the witness of faith, thanks to a serious Christian and artistic education;
- use and create diocesan web-sites to publicise and advertise such activities.

## 3. The Way of Love

"What does most to reveal God's presence, however, is the *brotherly charity of the faithful* who are united in spirit as they work together for the faith of the gospel and who prove themselves a sign of unity" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 21). The witness of charity is the most convincing argument to prove the existence of God; it is the "better way" of which St. Paul wrote (1 Cor 13). In Christian art and the life of saints, shines the sparks of beauty and of God's love that incarnates himself in ever new ways in people's lives. In the end it is beauty that will save the world<sup>31</sup>[31]: a morally upright life in the example of Christ attracts each and every individual person to the good. It is no coincidence that for the ancient Greeks the ideal of human life was the "kalokagathia", i.e. the possession of all physical and moral qualities, the beauty and the good. The philosopher Jacques Maritain has made beauty a transcendent at the same title as good and truth : *esse est unum et bonum et verum et pulchrum convertuntur*. This synthesis is manifest in the life of the Christian and above all in the Christian community : it is not a case of "showing off" at any cost, but of sharing the joy of the experience of faith in Christ, the good news for all people and their cultures. Thereby our contemporaries can be touched at the heart of their unbelief and their indifference. The great saints of our time, especially those who have offered their lives for the poor, united with the host of saints of the Church, make up the most eloquent argument to evoke in the hearts of men and women the questions about God and to offer an

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31[31] F. DOSTOYEVSKI, *The Idiot*, p. III, ch. V; cfr. JOHN PAUL II, [Letter to Artists](#), n. 16.

adequate response: it is Christ the Beautiful, "εγω ειμι ο ποιμην ο καλος" (Jn 10:11), who attracts hearts to the Father, with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

The witness of pardon and of fraternal love between Christians extends to all men and women and becomes an ardent prayer. It is a call to every Christian, as St. Augustine recommends: "Brothers, in all earnestness we invite you to this charity, not only to your companions in faith, but also to those outside, be they pagans who do not yet believe in Christ, or be they separated from us ... Brothers, let us feel pain for them as for our brothers ... It is time that we show them a largesse of charity, an infinite mercy in supplicating God for them that he finally grant them ideas and sentiments of wisdom to mend their ways and to surrender to the fact that they have absolutely no argument with which to oppose the truth"<sup>32</sup>[32].

#### 4. In Synthesis

A synthetic vision of the indications, suggestions and proposals by people coming from different cultures, from five continents and from their various pastoral experiences, allows us to set out the following points which merit particular attention.

- The importance of witnessing the beauty of being a person loved by God.
- The need to renew Christian apology to give an account with gentleness and respect of the hope that animates us (1 Pet 3:15).
- Reach *homo urbanus* through a public presence in the debates of society and put the Gospel in contact with the forces that shape culture.
- The urgency of learning to think, from school to university, and to have the courage to react, faced with the tacit acceptance of a dominant culture often marked by unbelief and religious indifference, by a new and joyous proposal of Christian culture.
- Show to the non-believers, indifferent to the question of God but open to human values, that to be truly human, is to be religious, that man finds the fullness of his humanity in Christ, true God and true man, and that Christianity is a good news for all men and women in all cultures.

#### Conclusion: "At your word Lord, I will cast the nets" (Lk 5:4)

The Fathers of the Vatican Council II affirmed firmly : "One is entitled to think that the future is in the hands of those who will be able to offer coming generations reasons for living and hoping" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 31). For Christians, this is the hour of hope. This theological virtue is the theme of the Apostolic Exhortation *Novo Millennio Ineunte*; at the end of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, it is the horizon of faith for the whole Church at this turning-point of history. Now, as yesterday, only Christ is able to offer reasons for living and hoping. The enigma of death and the mystery of suffering, above all that of the innocents, remain scandalous for many, today as ever, in all countries. But the desire for eternal life has not been extinguished in the heart of men. Only Jesus Christ, who has conquered death and has re-given life to men, can offer a decisive response to suffering and to death, He alone is the true bearer of the water of life that quenches the thirst of men. There is no other path than to contemplate His face, to experience the communion of faith, of hope and of love in the Church, and to give to the world the witness of charity and the primacy of grace, of prayer and of holiness. Faced with the new challenges of unbelief and religious indifference, of the secularisation of believers and of the new religiosity of "me", such are the reasons for hope, based on the Word of God : "Your word is a lamp for my steps, a light on my path" (cf. Ps 119:105).

The combined phenomena of spiritual void and homelessness, of institutional defiance and of emotional sensitivity of the West, call for a new fervour and authentic Christian life, of courage and of

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<sup>32</sup>[32] ST. AUGUSTINE, *Commentary on the Psalms*, Ps 32,29, in Corpus Christianorum series Latina 38, 272-273.

apostolic creativity, of uprightness of life and doctrinal correctness to witness through renewed believing communities to beauty and truth, the greatness and incomparable force of the Gospel of Christ. The interrelated challenges of unbelief, religious indifference and the new religiosity are just as much calls to evangelise new cultures and the new religious desire appearing under a pagan and gnostic form at the dawn of the third millennium. This is the urgent pastoral mission for the whole Church in our days, at the heart of all cultures.

After a night of hard work with no result, Jesus invited Peter to return to the lake to cast the nets. It seemed futile work, but Peter, trusting in the Lord, replied without hesitation: "Lord, at your word, I will cast the nets" (Lk 5:4). The nets filled with so many fish that they almost broke. Again today, after nearly two thousand years of work in the boat of history, the Church is invited by the Lord to cast out into the deep, far from the riverbank and human safety and to cast again her nets. The time has come to reply with Peter: "Lord, at your word, I will cast the nets".