



PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE

THE POWER OF SYMBOLS



Reflections by Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, Member

I am one of those people who believe that, if a symbol needs to be explained, it has lost its power or, perhaps, never had the power we thought it had. There were symbolic elements of the Pontifical Council for Culture's most recent Plenary Assembly that spoke to people far beyond the members and consultants, and this is a clear sign of a desire to inaugurate or even to continue a dialogue in a way which, I believe, is faithful to the Second Vatican Council and to the will of Pope John Paul II, expressed in the letter with which he founded the Pontifical Council, when he took up the urgent plea in Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, published 35 years ago, in December 1975: "The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelisation of culture, or more correctly of cultures. They have to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel. But this encounter will not take place if the Gospel is not proclaimed"[1]. But I would like to move into the next paragraph of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: it is often by a "wordless witness" that "Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one"[2]. Cardinal Ravasi and his staff at the Pontifical Council crafted a programme which combined elements one rarely sees in events organised in the Roman Curia, in such a way that people who would normally simply hear about our Plenary Assembly if they happened to be listening to the appropriate radio or television news bulletin could actually meet those involved in relaxed but also intellectually engaging circumstances. The inaugural session took place not in the privacy of a curial building, but in the *Sala Protomoteca del Campidoglio*. What a powerful symbol that very gesture was! Formal greetings gave way to a round table where our speakers set out some of the areas where the Gospel is already a protagonist in public discourse, and I took this as a challenge to committed Catholics to stay involved in the media – particularly television, film and journalism – rather than retreating to a place where we could talk about the media. Only one of those involved in the round table was a cleric, and perhaps the most eloquent symbol here was that the moderator was a dynamic young woman journalist from Catalunya!

Rather than analysing the whole timetable, I would like to mention those things that stand out particularly in my memory, as I think back to the middle of November.

The first thing is the sheer variety of cultural disciplines that came before our eyes, from the unexpected bonus of a presentation with slides by the inspiring architect Santiago Calatrava to a film about Jesus set in a township in post-apartheid South Africa, an internet-based programme of evangelisation and dialogue, an extended meditation on the language of mystagogy and a remarkably honest and clear presentation of how a key player in the world of information technology approaches its responsibilities to society and to its clients. It struck me that we were suddenly able to see in front of us, like so many pieces of a mosaic, the enormous variety of ways we can be – and already are – involved in an evangelising conversation with the cultures to which we belong.

Enzo Bianchi's thoughts on "Mystagogical Communication: symbol and art for the liturgy and evangelisation" set my mind on a journey back home to Great Britain, where I have been a pastor for so long. A word like "mystagogy" made me think of the problems and challenges faced by so many Catholic parents, so many of our priests and catechists. If we cannot unravel the rich strands in what words like "mystagogy" mean, we shall always be on the outside looking in on the culture of the next generations. And it is easy to feel terrified by that task of sharing with them what we ourselves value in our faith. Our natural reticence can be a block to that boldness – *parrhesia* – of which St. Paul so often wrote, and I want to show you one particular way we in my country have often failed our young people. What looks like kindness and a desire not to give them concepts that are too hard for them, we actually fail to pass on what is necessary. I was thinking just how easily they would have absorbed so much of what was being said on our Plenary, which is not always the case for us older folk! Young minds are eager to learn; nowhere is this more obvious than in the sphere of new technology. But there has been a sad tendency for religious education and catechesis to remain on the surface, a failure to engage these young minds with concepts that would help them to develop their theological vocabulary. How many of them understand redemption, salvation or even the need to be saved? And whose fault is it if they do not understand these things? They are certainly not at fault. It is often our well-meaning but mistaken fear of overloading them intellectually which, in reality, leaves them at the level of babies in terms of being able to articulate their experience of the presence and the reality of God.

Just a few weeks before our Plenary, I lived through some remarkable days in the company of our Holy Father, when he came to visit us in Britain. He won so many hearts by the gracious way he spoke, and what he said to children and young people one sunny Friday morning was utterly remarkable, especially when you consider these words came from the mouth of the Pope! He asked the young minds and hearts there to aim for the highest standards. "I hope that among those of you listening to me here today there are some of the future saints of the twenty-first century.... When I invite you to become saints, I am asking you not to be content with second best.... You all know what it is like when you meet someone interesting and attractive, and you want to be that person's friend. You always hope they will find you interesting and attractive, and want to be your friend. God wants your friendship. And once you enter into friendship with God, everything in your life begins to change"[3]. Behind all our discussions at the Plenary Assembly, I noticed that I was certainly not alone in focusing on the fact that, with all the wonderful technology, it is always persons who are engaged in communicating. But my own reflections took me to the world I love, the life of a Pastor who wants to share with others his love of God. I am so grateful that the visit of Pope Benedict reminded me and so many other people that we have nothing to fear, that we really can begin to communicate effectively if we have a share in that boldness – that *parrhesia* – St. Paul encourages us to have.

[1] Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Vatican City 1975, no. 20, a paragraph Pope John Paul II often quoted, but with particular significance in the *Motu Proprio Inde a Pontificatus* with which he founded the Pontifical Council for Culture in May, 1982.

[2] *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 21.

[3] Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to Pupils" in Twickenham, 17th September 2010