



## FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA

Making Manifest the Church's Pastoral Concern for Culture and Cultures in the North American Context



The first meeting in a series of events under the umbrella title *From Sea to Shining Sea* was held under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for Culture to discern possible routes for the Council to stimulate and support engagement with the contemporary culture in the USA. Those present included the newest US Member of the Council, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, representatives of the several Catholic Universities, seminary educators, a blogger and social commentator, philosophers and theologians. Dr Max Bonilla, academic vice-rector of Steubenville university co-ordinated the meeting, which took place in Ohio, 2-4 December 2009. Two public talks were built into the program of the meeting. The first by Mr Rouse gave an overview of the activities and initiatives of the Dicastery over the last 27 years giving some pragmatic insights and a broad vision of “the pastoral approach to culture” within the life of the Church and the Dicastery’s role in promoting it. He spoke of relations with other institutions, events such as meetings with artists and directors of cultural centres, academic conferences, and some themes of particular concern – from beauty to secularisation to religious indifference. The second public talk, the Henkels Lecture, was given by Mgr Sanchez de Toca and gave an overview of one aspect of the religion-culture dynamic “The Church's Engagement with Science after Darwin and Galileo : Overcoming Cultural Icons”. The remaining sessions of the private think-tank meetings were dedicated to different themes with the aim of further underlining both the challenge and the opportunity: Human Creativity (The Arts), Modern Reality (Secularisation, Atheism and Religious Indifference), The American Context (Politics, Law and Economics), Human Self-Understanding (Science and Technology).

The liveliest debate and interest surrounded the theme of art, and a keen desire appeared to give some sort of follow up in America to the meeting of Benedict XVI with Artists in the Sistine Chapel. The difficulty is in deciding what structure this would take. As artists express themselves by their work rather than by abstraction or description, an ongoing dialogue would need to foresee their being able to express themselves. By all means, academic conferences – together with the divulgative techniques of the best communication practices – can be associated to some event, but what can the Dicastery do to support the schools of art and art history, both Catholic and non, Associations of Artists, Catholic and non, the Episcopal Conference and local bishops, etc. in an activity which is their own ministry? Similarly there is already a large amount of art on display in Museums, but there is a need to find a way to strengthen the apologetic and informative character of such works, which again comes down to the age-old question of resources. We discussed too what role for the Church to commission art, as patron – a living relationship that goes beyond the building, restoring, renovating and financing mentality. One area discussed was the idea of a heritage Sunday, but the risk is that of being channelled into issues of

cultural diversity among migrant communities, rather than bringing to the fore the themes of meaning, hope, and truth etc. in the post-modern art world in a prospective of service to a new humanism through the field of culture.

The discussions on secularisation were less upbeat: while America is deemed “the most religious and the most secular society”, the theme of secularisation provoked an aura of disinterestedness, although the “new secularity” as a different proposal of engagement with the world raised some interest. While leaving fuller studies to the appropriate institutions and academics of the human sciences, beginning with CARA (the Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate), consensus was that Americans seem to be expressing their religiosity in new ways: amassing things, distracting themselves in sport, filling out the rhythm of life with new seasons and patterns. The response to this lies in a renewal of Catholic identity and a presence in and for people in their cultures, but without creating a Catholic ghetto, especially given the problems of media-imbibed ignorance. It is clear that the Dicastery’s role is not that of duplicating the various catechetical offices that already exist, but of highlighting the cultural and philosophical presuppositions that lead a nation that is 85% Christian to see itself primarily as a multiplicity of diverse cultures. The issue also permitted the group to focus its attentions on the mission *ad extra*, without ignoring the issues *ad intra*. Endorsing Catholics working in the intellectual tradition both within and outside Catholic Universities and focusing on those who have little or no real knowledge of or contact with the Church’s teaching match this Dicastery’s mission, more than seeking to overcome the veritable chasm that exists between those Universities which have become so engaged with secular culture as to be accused of having lost their Catholic identity by others.

For some group members, defining what is useful and helpful meant making a positive offering capable of transmitting meaning and sense – including answering the practical question “what are you going to do for me?” This is difficult in the post-modern world where form and text are several thresholds of communication distant from the understanding and interpretation of our dialogue partners. But when themes of politics, law, business and economics are raised the common interest opens a gateway for dialogue. Decreasing prejudice against the Church in popular culture is a major concern, where ipod, iphones, and technogadgets are increasingly forming and shaping mentalities and personalities – these are also the tangible signs of efficiency and personal freedom, the new values. In this new experience we are invited to remember the old adage: our experience shapes our theology, and respond discerning how to engage people’s decision-making processes, where the competitive, entrepreneurial mentality, with its values of efficiency and choice reign supreme. Perhaps it is by magnifying what Catholics have done best, that is education, charity and liturgy, that we can promote a new narrative of salvation. Perhaps it is by working to support the “Mediating Institutions” between the naked individuals and the forces of government, thus proposing a new narrative of meaning, conveying virtues, ethics, happiness, where autonomous individual rights are framed in a relational and social context, and hence move from being a filling-the-gaps institution to autonomous vector of values derived from a transcendent Source. Amidst all this, together with What is Truth?, we would have to pose the question What is Freedom?

Mr Richard Rouse

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