



## INITIATIVES FOR THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL IN SOCIETIES MARKED BY ATHEISM

by Monsignor Peter Fleetwood, Deputy General Secretary, CCEE

Europe is the continent where I live, the one I know best. It is the continent where the great battles between belief and unbelief were fought – until the Constitution of the nascent United States of America was written, until the struggle between nationalism and communism in China ushered in the most devastating cultural change the world has known. What has happened and what will happen in Europe may sometimes ring true for people from every continent, sometimes not. I want to make three suggestions: samples that may not fit every situation.

### Which Europe?

"The Christian culture of Europe... incarnated a sense of divinity which was both intimately personal and present, a god whose tangible religious atmosphere could be found in the village churches and the local monasteries as well as with the crucifix on the walls of taverns and the great celebrations which punctuated the year, a god whose interventions were the stuff of prayer and mysticism, ritual and rural superstition. This transcendence was woven into the texture of the culture, and Christ defined the meaning and the truth about God" (Michael BUCKLEY s.j., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, p. 345f.). That is a respected and respectable depiction by a North American Jesuit of European culture before the mediaeval synthesis was weakened by rationalism, even right at the heart of the Church.

After World War Two, things were different. "Time was when atheism was a testimony of inward independence and indescribable courage. It is still so in the authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states, where it is regarded as a symptom of the hated spirit of liberalism" (Max HORKHEIMER, "Theismus-Atheismus", in *Zur Kritik der instrumentalen Vernunft. Aus den Vorträgen und Aufzeichnungen seit Kriegsende*, Frankfurt 1974, p. 228). These words are from a Marxist whose concept of "authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states" would certainly include where we are sitting now. But he was prepared to say that, in his day, belief in God demanded more courage than atheism: "Under authoritarian rule of any kind, which today forms a universal threat, sincere theism usually takes a stand" (*ibid.*, *loc. cit.*).

Things changed dramatically with the downfall of the Marxist-Leninist states, with their systematic denial of the truth of religious beliefs and rigid persecution of those obstinate enough to persist. Believers who suffered under that system have now had fifteen years' experience of life without it. Former communist countries have fared very differently from each other, with the rise of nationalist Churches in some Orthodox countries and the adoption of paganism as a quasi-official religion in former Soviet republics where hatred of the central authorities in Moscow meant total rejection of the Christian heritage of pre-communist Russia. There are also signs of the rebirth of paganism and abandonment of religion in the Baltic region, where the Northern Crusades are the pretext for the rejection of Christianity and organised religion.

### Opium of the People? The so-called "Return of the Sacred"

The religious landscape in Europe today is so complex that it is hard to assess what is going on. Post-modernists see a disenchanted world that needs re-enchantment; atheists see the disarray within the major religions as a harbinger of their imminent demise; for

others there are clear signs the Age of Aquarius is here. There has been talk of a "return of the sacred", but this is hard to believe. One of the good things we can take from *New Age* and similar approaches to life is the distinction between spirituality and religion. There is a surge away from traditional religion into a vague world of therapies and self-enhancement programmes. The God of theism has no place there, so if the term "sacred" has a home in contemporary Europe it is nothing to do with a transcendent God, but rather an attempt to put God to one side and make the self sacred. The call to become like God has been replaced by the desire to *be* god. "There is no 'return of the religious' or 'return of God' in sight. These fashionable expressions that feed high circulation magazines and reviews are media-driven abuses of language... or the result of far too broad an application of the term 'religious'.... The esoteric deviations of certain movements have absolutely nothing to do with religion" (Georges MINOIS, *Histoire de l'Athéisme*, p. 584).

### **What to avoid**

Facile dismissal of atheists and their beliefs is unhelpful. Their "conviction must be respected and not played down speculatively. As if their atheism were not genuine, as if their unbelief were belief, as if atheists were 'secret' believers in God. As if Feuerbach, Marx and Freud, together with the atheists of today, were 'anonymous Christians' – an idea that would seem to them, if not arrogant, then at least comic" (H. KÜNG, *Does God Exist?* p. 339). It seems fair to say, in parenthesis, that atheism has always run parallel to religion. It would be unrealistic to give the heirs of systematic atheism an inflated significance, in the sense of seeing them as a huge threat. The greatest challenge comes from people who simply do not care whether there is a God. It is more often than not a question of providing something positive rather than correcting a false theory.

### **What we can offer**

Three quotations that we hear frequently in Catholic circles like this could be keys that open the door to the world of unbelievers.

First of all, we hear that "People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories" (JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, 7 December 1990, § 42). Various religious orders and congregations offer young people the chance to share in their mission on a temporary basis, for example working for a year or two on the foreign missions or in urban missions in their home countries. People who would never contemplate religious life or priesthood on a permanent basis are delighted they can make a positive contribution to the Catholic Church. Perhaps dioceses or Bishops' Conferences could develop similar initiatives. This would offer people practical involvement in the Church without a hint of indoctrination. A period spent on the foreign missions takes people far beyond the boundaries of their native land or culture and – without the need for courses in ecclesiology – introduces them to the reality of the universality or catholicity of the Church. It is worth remembering that, when the men who later became his apostles asked Jesus where he lived, he did not give them a visiting card but said, "Come and see". With Jesus it was never a case of words or ideas alone, but what we might call a hands-on learning process. The Master really was an excellent pedagogue.

Second, we hear that "beauty will save the world" (F. DOSTOEVSKY, *The Idiot*, Part II, chapter 5, quoted in JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Artists*, 4 April 1999, § 16). The Holy Father wrote that "all artists experience the unbridgeable gap which lies between the work of their hands... and the dazzling perfection of the beauty glimpsed in the ardour of the creative moment: what they manage to express in their painting, their sculpting, their creating is no more than a glimmer of the splendour which flared for a moment before the eyes of their spirit" (§ 6). I found it inspiring and moving to discover, in an answer to a preparatory questionnaire for an earlier Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture, that a Nuncio in Eastern Europe had offered a prize for the best depiction of God by a child. This simple idea harnessed the energy of many children, most of whom were not from believing families. Beauty does not belong to any Christian denomination, to any religion or ideology: it is a universally available, universally eloquent element in human life. Initiatives like this

unleash talent, but also open the door to spiritual experience and, ultimately, to questions about God. They do not need to cost a great deal of money, and yet they can reach a wide audience. As any parish priest knows, the best way to arouse the interest of parents is to capture the imagination of their children. The third quotation is the most important. According to the Holy Father, "the core of the great legacy" that the Jubilee Year 2000 left us is "the *contemplation of the face of Christ*: Christ considered in his historical features and in his mystery, Christ known through his manifold presence in the Church and in the world, and confessed as the meaning of history and the light of life's journey" (JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 6 January 2001, § 15). Catholics are often not as well-informed about their faith as they should be and could be, so a fundamental effort before particular initiatives are contemplated is the renewal of catechesis. I realise that is more easily said than done, but I also believe that a difficult task is not an impossible one. If we really have found treasure hidden in a field, it is our task to dig it up and share it, with creativity and conviction. Jesus Christ is an unknown quantity to so many, even in lands that were once largely Christian, but especially where Christianity was almost eliminated. Talks about religion can be dull, but I think Catholic cultural centres could make a remarkable impact by introducing people to Jesus as the one who inspired an icon or a painting, a piece of music, a Mass and so on. The face of Jesus and the character behind the face still fascinate people, and the greatest proof I saw of this was the exhibition *Seeing Salvation* at the National Gallery in London some years ago.

To sum up, I think the Church has many ways of proclaiming the Gospel, but I have selected three that I think may be useful in countries where the Church was impeded for so long in her task of evangelisation: encouraging young people to share a particular form of the Church's mission, to harness the creativity of children, and to use lectures, exhibitions and other events to introduce people to the person Jesus Christ.