

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE

PLENARY ASSEMBLY 2008

"The Church and the Challenge of Secularisation"

Instrumentum Laboris

English Translation

Presentation of the Theme in the Light of Previous Plenary Assemblies

This *instrumentum laboris* has been prepared for the Pontifical Council for Culture' Plenary Assembly of 2008. It seeks to offer an introduction to the issue of secularisation as it presents itself at the beginning of the third millennium, with a view to stimulating a pastoral action that can address this challenge of our times, considering particularly its cultural dimension, which sometimes transforms into a secularism and tends to exclude the religious sphere from the public square and from culture.

Neither this working document nor the works of the Plenary are aimed at making analyses which would be beyond the mission of this Dicastery for culture. Rather attention is focused on seeking out *pastoral responses* to this challenge of our times. Indeed, secularism is not only a question of explicit negation of the presence of God, but a lived mentality where God is absent from life and human conscience, completely or partially, *etsi Deus non daretur*. The result is an existential emptiness in a post-modernity marked by the paradox of a double belief, of secularisation and of religiosity, of practical atheism and of the ersatz of religion in a pluralist society seeking an ethic whose values can be accepted by those who appeal to "diverse absolutes" and those who make the relative an absolute¹.

Continuity in the Plenary Assemblies of the Pontifical Council for Culture

In March 1971, already more than 35 years ago, the Plenary Assembly of the Secretariat for Non-Believers addressed the theme "The Phenomenon of Secularisation in its Relationship with Atheism". In his discourse to the Members of the Secretariat on that occasion, Pope Paul VI affirmed: "This secularisation, which brings with it a growing autonomy of the profane, is a characteristic of our Western civilisations. It is in this situation that secularism has appeared, as an ideological system: not only does it justify this fact, but it takes it as an objective, as a source, and as a norm of human progress, and it goes so far as to pretend an absolute autonomy of man before his own destiny" (18 March 1971). The Pontifical Council for Culture, successor of the Secretariat for Non-Believers, desires now to come back to this major challenge for our societies, which is particularly sterilising when it instils itself into the interior life and mentalities of the faithful and the clergy.

The 2002 Plenary Assembly examined the deep rupture in the handing on of the faith suffered in secularised societies, highlighting the ruinous consequences of the spread of secularism on the social fabric that had developed over the course of centuries in traditional cultures: it has collapsed, leaving man free to himself, dispossessed, deprived of the compass that let him orient his life in conformity with the values written deep in his being. We noted that as traditional religious reference points and ethical landmarks are wiped away, sects multiply and those whose task it is to teach the faith often use an "outmoded" language, out-of-touch with the understanding of the youth of today, or cede to the temptation to give a reduced version of the Gospel and the Church's teaching.

¹ Cf. Giuliano AMATO and Vincenzo PAGLIA, *Dialoghi post-secolari*, Marsilio 2006.

The 2004 Plenary Assembly looked at the *Challenge of Non-belief and Religious Indifference* and noted the expansion of secularism since the fall of the Marxist Leninist atheist regimes in Europe. Tied to the phenomenon of globalisation, it presents itself more and more as a post-Christian cultural model as if Christianity were surpassed. This same diagnosis had been reached in Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 55 and repeated in the Pontifical Council for Culture's document, *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*: "When secularisation transforms itself into secularism, 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."² Indeed, it is clear that indifference and unbelief are developing in cultural areas impregnated by secularism. More than a public support for atheism, it is a diffuse presence, almost omnipresent in culture. Less visible, it is more dangerous, subtly expanding into the very subconscious of believers from the dominant culture, from the West to Eastern Europe, but also through the great cities of Africa, America and Asia, and into the most isolated villages via radio and, especially, television. Young people are particularly vulnerable to the vision of a world without transcendence and many succumb to the perpetual noise of this secularist culture, which closes the person in on this material universe.

Finally, the words of the last Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery, in March 2006 once more addressed the great challenge of secularisation with the new question: "are we already in an era of post-secularism, in particular with the new generation of youth?"³

Brief Observations from the Responses to the Questionnaire Received from Different Continents

Overall, the West is profoundly marked by the secularism of a society that seeks to construct itself without any reference to God. This model of society is exporting itself into all the big modern cities. The effects of this process are felt in Hong Kong and Shanghai, as in London, Mexico and Yaoundé. It would be vain to distinguish this process along the lines of different countries, with the exception of those people with a strong religious sensitivity, notably India and those Asiatic countries not emerging from Marxist history. The situation does still differ between the countryside and the cities, but the rapid evolution of societies, with the development of communication networks and new information technology, progressively erodes these traditional differences.

Europe carries a threefold injury: in its memory, in its imagination and in its sense of belonging. The memory is injured as the new generation, living in the here-and-now without anchorage in the past, lacks the experience of the faith and a sense of history. The imagination is injured by the invasion of mediocre television programmes and a lack of contact with the great Christian artists of history. The sense of belonging is injured as many are "falling out of love" with the Church, their countries, and the bimillennium Christian culture of their own Continent. But it is important to note that the secularism of society is not always so widespread as the

² PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE, *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, n.23.

³ Card. Paul POUPARD, *Final Conclusions in Cultures et Foi*, XIV - 2, 2006, p.175.

means of social communication and the dominant culture try to make believe. This can be seen in the interest raised by the Holy Father's apostolic voyages, the impact of the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of Pope Benedict XVI, the World Youth Days and the growing numbers of pilgrims to Rome, notably at the weekly Wednesday audience and the Sunday Angelus, the flourishing of the great pilgrim ways, and the rise of the new ecclesial movements.⁴ Paradoxically, popular culture impregnated by Christianity is alive in many places, especially away from the great cities, but it is often not active enough, fleetingly present in social life, and therefore, has little influence. Many of those who say they are Catholics are steeped in their surrounding culture, their behaviour is secularised, and they seem allergic to talk of morals. Coherent Christians are not present enough and are without influence in the omnipresent universe of the media.

While many North Americans are personally religious, the academic world, the media and entertainment industries are mostly secularised, such that the Catholic identity of the Church's scholastic institutions is being diluted. Secularism is professed by a large part of the cultural elite and by a majority of professors in the most influent universities. Besides, the continual reference to God to justify war and the fight against the forces of evil is one of the arguments used most often by those who profess a laicity free of all religious influence in public affairs, which explains why the fight against evil incarnated in the best seller Harry Potter novels has a massive following. This secularism comes at the same time as an increase of the most radical evangelism, a major obstacle to further progress in the dialogue between faith and science.

Latin American culture is characterised by a ruinous ambivalence: while the intellectual elite of the country is strongly permeated by secularism, popular culture remains Christian. Although omnipresent in society, popular culture is unable to make its mark on the public life. At the same time, in Latin America, in parallel with the wave of secularism, the religious factor is seeing a vigorous development in a worrying proliferation of all kinds of sects, powerfully orchestrated by a particularly efficacious propaganda that makes the most of the powerful means of social communication.

⁴ In a book entitled *Le réenchantement du monde*, (The Reenchantment of the World) in reference to a book by Marcel GAUCHET, *Le désenchantement du monde*, (The Disenchantment of the World) published 20 years ago Peter BERGER, a noted sociologist of religions at Boston University writes : "I was one of the principle proponents of the theory of secularisation, that simple thesis according to which modernity inescapably provokes a decline in religion, but it was false. I got it wrong. Our era, with the apparent exception of Europe, is just as furiously religious as the preceding times. In some areas, even more so." and BERGER shows this through the two most spectacular trends of Islam and Evangelism in Latin America, which both reject a with modernity conceived by intellectual progressivists. The institutions which make the biggest efforts to adapt to modernity are almost all in decline. For to live in doubt is too hard, uncomfortable and even intolerable for many. The future belongs to those who can promise to provide and re-establish certainties. Analysing the surprisingly large evangelist shift in Latin America, BERGER stigmatises the superficiality of the culture with no transcendent outlook, that has produced an impoverished human condition that has made itself unbearable. On the apparent exclusion of Europe he has this to say: Europeans show a great disaffection with organised churches, but the fact that religion has become detached from the institutions means neither that religion will die nor that the institutions are unable to respond. The reawakening of religions on the global political scene is a phenomenon which has destroyed the dogma of secularisation.

In Asia, the traditional face of religiosity and piety is changing under the effect of the wave of secularism: people of great religious sensitivity, the Asians also face the phenomenon of the dramatic spreading of sects, which are very active and often founded by ex-Catholics, as has happened for example in the Philippines. Meanwhile, Catholics are indifferent, insensitive and religiously ignorant, attending Sunday Mass less and less frequently. Japan has its own physiognomy: doubtlessly largely engaged by "modernity", it knows not an abandonment of religion. The Constitution stipulates the separation of religion and State, but scientific rationalism and the affirmation of individual autonomy coexist with the *irrationality* of believers in an array of divinities of the Shinto cult as well as Buddhist practices. Hardly agnostic, Japan maintains a floating religiosity, seeking out appeasement rather than truth. The historical and cultural bases of this country, where the Shinto cult and Buddhism coexist, impedes the disqualification of religious faith as a foundation of social life. However, the waves of aspiration to the spiritual in response to the uncertainties of modernity have been translated into a multitude of new movements inspired by the *new age* and enriched with local traditions. Also, beliefs rooted in different sources seek to replace the great systems of meaning of the instituted religions, and communities are constituted around experiences or emotions where followers can seek in such sharing to overcome a conscience of self which is too ego-centred. These syncretistic quests for new sources of meaning of existence are not the fact of segments left behind by society, but more often people very much engaged in modernity.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, rapid evolution of society brings new challenges, notably with the phenomena of displacement of families, urbanisation, unemployment, all sorts of materialist seductions, secularisation, intellectual disturbance made worse by the avalanche of ideas insufficiently criticised, and the influence of the media⁵. Many intellectuals who have attended European Universities, and even Catholic Universities, have contributed to the spread among their own students of a theoretical and practical laicism, which is also spread among politicians by Masonry with its European origins.

At the heart of the vast socio-cultural space of the Maghreb, some trends deserve attention. In these countries there is a reaffirmation of cultural elements and religious practice such as Ramadan among the youth who, at the same time, have adopted some Western practices. A certain process of secularisation appears timidly with a critical re-reading of the history of Islam in the university areas, the acceptance of the centrality of the person as at the times of the Reformation in Europe in the XVI century, and in the passage from a religious belonging of a sociological type to a personal faith that seeks to reconcile Islam and modernity. New behaviour patterns see the light of day, pretending greater freedom of the press, the development of a critical spirit, a reappraisal of the role of women in society, the creation of a civil society and new forms of association in the towns. Alongside this progress there is also a harder line being taken and exploited on both extremes: frustration provoked by secularism leads some to fundamentalism and to embracing the proposals of evangelical preachers or, on the contrary, to a wait-and-see materialism. If the future of these evolutions remains largely uncertain, there is no doubt that their unfolding will affect a great part of humanity.

⁵ Cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, n.76.

Short Phenomenology of Secularisation on the Basis of the Responses to the Questionnaire

In a world traditionally shaped by the religious, this has first of all been separated, then progressively put aside from some sectors of life, until secularism has been established, which is the total evacuation of religion from the world. That which was of the order of the individual in Pascal's *divertissement* is today collective, and the result of a cultural mutation rather than a personal will⁶. Lifestyles are more and more alike between people in New York and Beijing, Oslo and Johannesburg, as the Western secularised model wherein man lets himself *absorb* and so finds himself without knowing it, devoid of his profound humanity. Those who still ask about what is beyond the limited mediatic intramundane horizons and material wellbeing find themselves alone battling against a powerful current of globalisation that resists transcendence, and suffers the paradoxical sentiment of a great existential loneliness in the desert of congestion. Because of the growing use of technologies and the subjective acceleration of the times, man today is as submerged by acquaintances, information, images, shows, and leisure pursuits that capture his time and subdue his attention. The natural space of time for silence, reflection, recollection and meeting with others, above all the family, disappears. Who knows how to reach the heart of his thoughts and open himself up to the essential if he finds no-one able to help him in this demanding task?

For many, it creates an eclipse in the consciences of the needy and of their desire for all that which is not immediate, reducing the aspiration for the transcendent to a simple subjective need for spirituality. Television targeted at young people constantly makes three commands: *be free, seek adrenalin, connect* all of which is the opposite of *creating a lasting relation*. Happiness is identified as economic and material wellbeing and the satisfaction of sexual urges. It is measured against the barometer of stimuli, so that all that which goes beyond the domain of feeling - prayer for example - is abandoned and judged as not being worthwhile. And the "mystique of success", which is the hallmark of the dominant culture, is totally foreign to the religion of the *agape*, the success of charity being difficult to quantify.

The mediatic overkill of depthless entertainment, so pernicious for the youth when schools are empty of any religious dimension, and the avalanche of knowledge in all fields leaves little time for reflection: the self of desire destroys the sense of the other and makes openness to the All Other unlikely. One of the most characteristic elements of the prevailing culture is the widespread subjectivism which makes of the *Self* the only reference point, egoistic, narcissistic where the individual takes himself to be the centre of everything. Even African cultures which give special attention to belonging to a family or ethnic group, are not untouched by this spread of individualism.

⁶ Cf. *Pensées*, frag. 139: "When I have occasionally set myself to consider the different distractions of men, ... I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber. ... men only seek conversation and entering games, because they cannot remain with pleasure at home."

One of the major defects of secularism is its rejection of an objective moral in matters of sexuality and the repeated attacks against Christian concept, indeed the natural concept, of marriage. The manner of living out sexuality is conceived of as a purely personal affair and the development of Aids shows just to what extent the phenomenon is anchored in everyday mentality. Homosexuality has become a stylish phenomenon and has reached parts of the world where it was practically inexistent. The last decades have seen the phenomenon of cohabitation and shared common life before marriage become so commonplace that it is now the norm, even among those who consequently marry in Church. At the same time, for many believers divorce is no longer an obstacle in itself, in view of another civil marriage, even when the canonical bond remains. A new phenomenon consists in the effort to recognise the so-called "marriage" between homosexuals which is seen in many countries and not just in the West. As for the beginning and end of life, there is a similar adjusting of the culturally prevalent mundane mentality.

I. How is secularism showing itself in the life of the Church?

If secularisation is the legitimate autonomy of terrestrial realities, as was recognised by the II Vatican Council (*Gaudium et spes*, 36), the same Council, as is often forgotten, also states that "if the expression, the independence of temporal affairs is taken to mean that created things do not depend on God and that man can use them without any reference to their Creator; anyone who acknowledges God will see how false such a meaning is. For without the Creator, the creature would disappear. ... When God is forgotten the creature itself grows unintelligible"⁷. This secularism is "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"⁸. This secularism manifests itself today at the heart of the life of the Church, de-naturalising from within and in depth the Christian faith. Consequently the lifestyle and behaviour of believers dramatically weakens their witness to the faith.

The disciples of Christ live in the world and are often shaped or even conditioned by a media culture opposed to the very idea of God: there seems to be no more need of God, to think of Him or to return to Him. Many let themselves be influenced by the hedonistic and consumerist mentality, one of whose consequences, for the faithful as much as for pastors, is a loss of the *sensus ecclesiae*. The *sentire cum Ecclesia* is then transposed into a *sentire cum populo*, that is, with the prevailing culture of widespread ethical relativism.

The Christian life seems to reduce itself in some countries to a mediocrity that makes it more and more difficult to give an account of the Faith. This difficulty comes not only from the influence of secularised culture but also from an inability to behave coherently, due to a lack of Christian formation that means Christians are unprepared to act in faith with the force of the grace of the Spirit, unable to value the meeting with Christ through personal prayer and the sacraments. This is how a sort of practical atheism is spreading, even among those who continue to profess themselves Christian. This worrying phenomenon also sees a real rupture in personal adherence to the fundamental elements of the Christian faith: the incarnation of Christ and his divinity,

⁷ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 35.

⁸ PAUL VI, Encyclical Letter *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 55.

his unicity as Saviour, the survival of the soul after death, the resurrection of the body and eternal life. The doctrine of reincarnation is quite widely believed by some who think they are Christian and even frequent the Church in view of the new life that it proposes within the material world itself. Paradoxically, while positivist mentality is becoming more pervasive, the trend toward esoteria and the New Age is affecting many of the faithful.

Along with the secularisation of the truth there is also the issue of the secularisation of charity: as we stated during the March 2006 Plenary Assembly: "In these last years, truth has suffered being instrumentalised by ideologies and at the hands of the "dictatorship of relativism" and the surrounding scepticism. ... At the same time, goodness has suffered being "horizontalised", being reduced to no more than a social act at the heart of activism and prevailing secularism". Many reduce their Christianity to a generic philanthropic engagement and the quest for a "terrestrial salvation": the removal of poverty, the safeguarding of the environment, social and political action, all good things, but which become damaging when they are made into absolutes and become a prison for the soul which is seeking the Absolute. The Church comes to be considered no more than a mere humanitarian and charity-centred NGO.

The Clergy

This process affects the Church in different ways: the pastors are no less *absorbed* than the faithful and if they do not have an apt spiritual and cultural formation they find themselves unable to set aside time for the necessary prayer and reflection for a pastoral discernment of the cultural ambience. Sometimes the professionalisation of the clergy alienates them from the people and makes them lose their evangelical simplicity.

A secularised mentality even penetrates the cleric: a schism opens between his ministry, limited to certain periods of the day, and the rest of his personal life. Pope Benedict XVI warned the priests of the diocese of Belluno-Feltre et Trévisé on 24 July last during a visit to Auronzo di Cadore against this duplicity, which is opposed to the needs of the consecration of an entire life conformed totally to Christ the High Priest, erodes apostolic zeal and undermines the foundations of the sacrificial life of the priest in love of Christ and the Church. The responses to the questionnaire, far from being generalisations, listed some of the deviations which affect the mission of the pastor in the parish, notably in the celebration of the liturgy⁹: disappearance of distinctive signs in dress, a comfortable life without sacrifices, lowering of the levels of studies despite the growing need, a nocturnal life and fascination for internet and television to the detriment of service to the faithful outside official hours, possession of objects and instruments of luxury, disappearance of silence in the churches and within the celebrations, abandonment of attitudes of adoration, choice of music incoherent with the celebrated mystery, ideological refusal of Latin and Gregorian chant, poor choice of ornaments, poorly prepared preaching empty of spiritual content, reduced or inexistent availability for the work of confessing and spiritual direction, pointless activism. Liturgical celebrations are empty, mystery is lost under an inflation of words obstructing access to the interior life. The sacramental life is

⁹ Cf. the Plenary Assembly of 2006 which reflected at length on the theme *beauty and liturgy*. Cf. CARDINAL PAUL POUPARD and PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE, *Beauty as a Way for Evangelisation and Dialogue*, Cultures and Faith XIV - 2 (2006), 116.

reduced by the poverty of pastoral discernment. In some places popular piety has lost its vitality due to the disappearance of devotional practices judged out of touch with secularised culture.

Where priests have abandoned the personal sacrament of reconciliation, secularism, not only that of the faithful, but also of the pastor himself sees a consequent lowering of regular religious practice. Sacraments are lived as ceremonies that mark particular moments of life without any explicit personal reference to God and are no longer anything more than cultural and traditional customs without a future. This inability to understand the meaning and role of sacraments brings erroneous opinions and ways of doing which have serious consequences: the priest is considered only as a holy functionary and liturgical action is unable to display its deeper meaning of a meeting with Christ the Saviour. The Church is no longer perceived as anything more than a mundane power, without recognising its prophetic dimension. The liturgy is not lived as a moment of communion and meeting with Christ and is limited to being a privileged expression of individual religious sentiment. Habitual recourse to non-ordained extraordinary ministers for Sunday assemblies in the absence of a priest contributes to a lowering among the faithful of a sense of priesthood and sacraments, as well as their unreplaceable role in all of Christian life.

Consecrated Life

Secularisation is particularly visible in the institutes of consecrated life. The Servant of God, John Paul II remarked in his Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* "Without this concrete sign [of religious life] there would be a danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold, that the salvific paradox of the Gospel would be blunted, and that the 'salt' of faith would lose its savour in a world undergoing secularisation" (*Vita Consecrata* n.105). The temptation of secularism shows itself in the manner of living, or of no longer living, according to the Evangelical Counsels and the abandonment of all exterior signs of this consecration goes against the very nature of the institutes of consecrated life by which "the characteristic features of Jesus — the chaste, poor and obedient one — are made constantly "visible" in the midst of the world" (*Vita Consecrata*, n.1). The laudable desire to be near the men and women of our times, believers and unbelievers, the poor and the rich, can lead to a secularised lifestyle or the promotion of human values without referring to the faith that nourishes them. The individualism of surrounding cultures runs into the privatisation of the apostolate of some religious and the secularised mentality shows itself in the mediocre quality of the witness of faith in prayer, daily behaviour, use of means of social communication, lower cultural level and poor use of free time. The diminution of vocations and the disappearance of some religious congregations are the consequences among other things of the abandonment of making visible the religious life, engendered through the adoption of secularised lifestyles. The return to the use of the habit by some new congregations and in some ancient Orders - contemporary cultures, even when secularised, remain sensitive to signs - is not appreciated by the more secularised, who are sometimes intolerant on this matter, a stance which provokes sterile and disastrous divisions within the Church. Secular institutes have the vocation of combining the values of the consecrated and the secular, respecting the primacy of the first, while witnessing to the possibility of living in the world as religious. It is the great challenge that must be

displayed with the help of a generous and faithful spiritual life, nourished by prayer and sustained by the common life, necessary antidote to prevailing secularism.

Teaching of the Faith

One area where the influence of secularism is felt is that of theology. Whenever it is detached from the ecclesial community and its liturgical prayer, the intelligence of the faith turns into a private quest for its reference points: the interpretation of Scripture in the Church, the teaching of the Fathers and the Magisterium, as Pope Benedict XVI underlined introducing his *Jesus of Nazareth*.¹⁰ The last century saw theology take on new ways and seek to become more "scientific" using different methodologies that led to more specialisation. This meant establishing a greater distance between theology and faith, such that theology risks no longer being the intelligence of faith in the Church, in a trusting collaboration between bishops and theologians.

One of the consequences of secularisation is the growing difficulty of handing on the faith through catechesis, the school, the family and preaching.¹¹ These traditional channels of the transmission of the faith struggle to fulfil their fundamental role, for language has come to condition the substance of the message: both the "ecclesiastical language" born of the cultural separation between clergy and people and the "secularised language" used by clergy diluted in the prevailing culture of speaking weakly, that is, characterised by subjectivism and relativism,¹² are unable to tell of the faith and its richness. The clergy and the laity excel in some countries at using a language out of touch with the current language, and catechesis is reduced sometimes to learning to "be good" without reference to the experience of the friendship lived with Christ, the source of Christian life, which means a reduction to being nothing more than secular humanism.

Witness in Society

In society, a phenomenon of laxity or discouragement affects some faithful as a recurrent trend proclaims the incompetence of religions in the modern world: they are considered "irrelevant" for the domains of education, science, culture and politics. Many who say they are Catholics engage in a public life and even a personal life in which Christ is no longer the source of their being and doing. The faith devoid of substance is no longer expressed through a coherent personal engagement. Christians dare not affirm clearly their belonging to the Church and the systematically criticised hierarchy. This attitude spreads due to the Church's incapacity to react to situations of refusal of Christian heritage: confessional teaching disappears, replaced by a teaching

¹⁰ "Beginning in the 1950's, the situation changed. The rift between the "historical Jesus" and the "Christ of faith" became wider and wider; the one pulled away from the other before one's very eyes. But what meaning can there be in faith in Jesus Christ, in Jesus the Son of the living God, if the man Jesus is so different from how the evangelists present Him, and from how the Church proclaims Him on the basis of the Gospels?", Joseph RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth, Preface*, Doubleday 2007.

¹¹ *Handing on the Faith at the Heart of Cultures* was the theme of the Pontifical Council for Culture's Plenary Assembly in 2002. Cf. *Cultures and Faith*, X (2002).

¹² In his report during the Assembly of the clergy of Moscow on 5 December 2006, Patriarch Alexis II denounced the effects of secularisation and "the choice of terms of the discourse, of language," that he judged 'eloquent': "the assassination of a child before birth is called 'interruption of a pregnancy', concubinage in sin is called 'civil marriage', and cupidity 'material interest'".

of religious phenomena in general; there is the abolition of religious signs, the abandonment of oaths sworn on the bible, the elimination of religious names given to hospitals, streets or public schools, and an inability to recognise the role played by the Catholic faith in society in the learning of values and in forming culture.

Without witness to Christian life, it is religious practice that is abandoned for a *à la carte* religion, without adherence to dogmas of faith. It is not a matter, as in times past, of a simple abandonment of sacramental practice or the lack of vitality of the faith, but something which touches its very roots. This passage from *occasional belonging* to *regular practice on my terms* and at the level of belief *from stable to unstable* is characteristic of the process of secularisation and needs to be inverted by an adequate pastoral response.

In some countries, Catholic Media is almost inexistent, so that information is the proof of a very critical attitude regarding Church teachings, which are seen as moralising, retrograde and contradictory to the commandment of Jesus: love your neighbour.

Scope of Reflection in the Assembly

This picture is painted with broad strokes. The Pontifical Council for Culture is not called on to limit itself to making a sociological type of analysis, but must above all highlight the situations and behaviours of Christians in the different current cultural contexts where secularism is replacing the authentic Christian vision **in order to propose lines of action** that a pastoral approach to culture must offer to the pastors of the Church in this third millennium. So it is a matter of proposing, in the different areas of the life and mission of the Church, a careful and concrete pastoral approach to culture, through which the different forms of secularism can be unmasked, lived by the single believers as also by the Christian community. This in order to promote an adequate path of Christian education and formation, for an adult and responsible faith able to permeate the culture and lifestyles, “revitalizing a de-Christianized world whose only Christian references are of a cultural nature” (Cfr. *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, n. 1).

The Members and Consultors may prepare their interventions with the help of the following questions - and others if they seem necessary - using the questionnaire addressed to the Consultors in order to prepare this document.

II.

What can be done in each ecclesial area to render the faith of believers stronger and more aware, to live out the concrete requirements of conversion, which springs from the meeting with the unique Saviour, and to transform from within cultures marked by secularism?

The damage produced by secularism in the lives of pastors and consecrated men and women as described above makes it clear that the responses cannot be limited to the intellectual order or to matters of principle, but are situated in the choice of a lifestyle: it is a matter for those who wish to follow Christ in priesthood or the consecrated life of *converting* and not just of reconverting in changing one's way of life into a truly evangelical way of life. This new lifestyle builds on the fundamental option of each person in responding to a personal call, but also of deep-seated choices by bishops and religious superiors to form in the seminaries and communities men and women conformed to the *evangelical life*.

What cultural instruments can be provided to seminarians and young religious to let them courageously face up to a secularised and ideologised culture, without suffering from inferiority complexes, and to help them avoid being contaminated by the secularised mentality? What must formation consist of in the seminaries in order to help candidates to the priesthood make radical lifestyle choices?

The secularised mentality tends to disincarnate the faith and reduce it to a "matter of conscience", or an ideology. Faith must be re-centred on a real meeting with Jesus the Saviour, to wake up the hope and joy which are so lacking among many Christians, and raise within the cultural *agora* a questioning about faith. Missions for the rediscovery of faith need to be relaunched: this is the great experience of the Evangelisation Congresses of Vienna, Paris, Brussels, Lisbon, and Budapest which began in the spring of 2003, which have seen the living forces of the Church cooperate in a mission of evangelisation producing many fruits. The exchange of gifts with the oriental Churches offers a true opportunity for the discovery of the richness of Christianity and helps the understanding of the unity of the Church in the diversity of rites and cultures. And a rediscovery of Eucharistic adoration, of pilgrimages and of the Rosary can be seen attracting the interest of the young. Schools of prayer, spiritual retreat houses that attract families and individuals are also becoming increasingly popular.

How can the Church live in the times and seize the spaces where the truth of the Gospel responds to the needs of the men and women today? How can parish missions be relaunched and inspire new experiences for mission in today's cities? Can dioceses set up teams of street evangelists able to witness and proclaim the faith joyfully through human relations, in sincere, humble and respectful dialogue? How can the faithful be introduced to the great cultural patrimony of the Church, born of the Gospel Proclamation and matured through the centuries?

The spread of the *secularist mentality* among the faithful, and *a fortiori* among the pastors, is clearly linked to the abandonment of the sacrament of reconciliation, which comes with the loss of the sense of sin. One of the first consequences is the

abandonment of the direction of souls, an integral part of the pastoral ministry of the priest as the Conciliar decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 30 recalls.

How can pastors be helped to rediscover the beauty of the ministry of reconciliation and the direction of souls? How can priests who have abandoned the practice be helped to rediscover the reality of sin and the sublime mystery of mercy? How can the faithful be helped to rediscover this sacrament?

The rediscovery of hagiography, notably aimed at children through cartoons, produces remarkable fruit within families and schools. At a higher level, the rediscovery of Memory and Tradition, with a research for the authentic spirit of the liturgy and sacredness of the divine-human mystery of our faith, a deeper understanding of the Bible, the rediscovery of *lectio divina*, and the reading of the Church Fathers, equip the people to resist the false claims of sects and other deformations of Christianity.

How can the faithful be helped to understand, in an often hostile culture, the necessity of continuing formation? How to put within their grasp the example of the saints, the treasures of the Patristic writings, Christian theology and mystery.

The Church as *mater et magistra* has to teach in time and against time. She teaches the faith before morals. Today, many resort to non-intellectual (irrational) religions, lived as a sentiment and a togetherness of certitudes, rather than as a quest for the truth, a research responding to Jesus' questioning: *And you, who do you say I am? For you, who am I?* The Holy Father's teaching example - his Wednesday audiences attract ever growing crowds and are conveyed into countless Church foyers such as fervent families, parishes, prayer groups, communities, Catholic cultural centres, etc. - is followed by bishops and priests who dispense analogous teachings in their cathedrals and other apt places. In Quebec, the bishops have set up a continuing teaching of the catechesis in their parishes, for youth and also for adults.

How can we help our contemporaries rediscover a passion for the discovery of the treasures of the doctrine of the faith? What are the "best solutions" to let this doctrine be taught, heard and understood? Make proposals for the parishes and dioceses.

One of the strongest trends of secularism seeks to limit faith to the private domain and reduce religion to a simple matter of personal conscience. The Chief Rabbi of Paris, René-Samuel Sirat, considers the situation of the Church today similar to that of the Jewish communities at the beginning of the 20th Century, and he explains the renewal of Jewish communities in France as being built on the reinforcement of Jewish education and the rediscovery of the Word of God.

Given the number of faithful who think they can miss out on the Sunday Eucharist, how can the baptised be helped to understand the duty of sacramental practice? And what needs to be done to permit the faithful to rediscover a taste for the Word of God?

The secularised mentality tends to reduce Christianity to the backdrop of a general philanthropic engagement and a quest for terrestrial salvation, diminution of poverty, safeguarding of nature, and, sometimes, social and political action.

In his first Encyclical, Deus Caritas Est, the Holy Father responded to this attempt to deprive the charitable action of the Church and Christians from its primary source which is the Divine Agape. What actions can be taken to let this teaching penetrate the different works and organisms of charity, in the parishes, the dioceses, at the national and international levels?

III.

The mission of the Church to the non-believers, the indifferent or those simply curious about the religious world who live completely immersed in secularised culture and who have the desire, more or less explicit, to rediscover a deeper and more authentic human and spiritual dimension.

Western societies are facing a new situation: for several decades religion has been ignored by many, especially the protagonists of the dominant culture. The stereotypes about religion are widely exploited and nourished by the sad spectacle of terrorism and war that claim to justify recourse to violence by invoking the name of God. Should we not be concerned by the fact that today more than ever the Church is in the spotlight of the media and yet has never had such little impact on the people, inside and outside of the Church? Also, how come the first evangelisation has left behind such a violent and aggressive allergy to our faith, and above all to the Church?

How can we help people today have a better understanding of what religion is? How can we let the voice of the Church be heard and restore her authority in a world that has no intention of listening to it? How can we sustain and encourage Catholics in public and defend the Church? How can we communicate to our contemporaries the experience of the faith as a meeting with the living person, Jesus Christ, and not as an adherence to an idea or a system of moral precepts?

In the context of secularism, people's spiritual life is not dead, but tends to transfer itself away from the Church and become weaker, requiring new initiatives to go out and meet them and let them rediscover the beauty of the Christian faith. Some parishes, religious communities and other ecclesial entities are engaged in an authentic pastoral approach to culture, favouring the meeting with non-believing men and women, or the indifferent, or those distanced from the Church due to the "atmosphere". These meetings often give rise to a desire, more or less explicit, to discover a more authentic and deeper spiritual dimension. Then a more profitable dialogue can be built, but it needs, time, care and an ability to meet the needs our contemporaries feel.

How can Catholic cultural centres be developed to engage in the parishes and the dioceses, when possible, an authentic pastoral approach to culture, and encourage the bishops to organise cultural meetings with the protagonists of the world of culture to open up a rich spiritual dialogue?

Coming to terms with the challenge of secularisation means letting ourselves be looked at with the eyes of the other and listening to the reactions to the ways the Church is present in society. Many "cultural prejudices" of the secularised societies make it unlikely, in the eyes of many, that the Church will be able to engage with modernity and so have a short or long-term impact: the Galileo affair, the crusades, the inquisition, the wars of religion, colonisation, and the so-called participation of the Church in the deculturalisation of colonised countries, the bloody conflicts reductively labelled as religious conflicts - for example in Ireland - the positions of the Church regarding contraception, abortion, euthanasia, the confusion of the sexes. Moreover, the Church in some countries gives the impression of seeking to conserve a place in society rather than being "a sacrament, that is at once the sign and the means

of intimate union with God and the unity of all mankind" according to the teaching of *Lumen gentium*. The meeting between faith and culture requires a completely missionary vitality that some local Churches need to rediscover, for the contemporary secularised man wants to meet someone who loves him, walks with him, shares the weight of the day freely and openly. The experience of the beauty of love shared is a force that attracts and convinces long before many theoretical arguments. To see people with the eyes of Christ, a look of mercy, forgiveness, demanding commitment, love and truth, exerts a Christian vision, a perspective purified of all damaging secularised images, as a fundamental basis for evangelisation in the third millennium.

How can the Church, in secularised society, be brought to witness to what it really is? What are the most apt actions to change the deformed understandings of the Church and its mission in the world? What are the great challenges of secularisation for the work of evangelisation?

The West in general and Europe in particular are seeking to base human society on values erected on non-negotiable principles: respect for human dignity, liberty, democracy, equality, State of Law, respect for human rights, protection of minorities. The value of "family-marriage" has become vacuous¹³, such that some pressure groups seek to introduce new values, notably to open up all societies to the marriage of homosexuals, euthanasia, etc. And multiculturalism in the big cities has become for some a new ideology, reducing Christianity to being but a relic from the history of traditionally Christian nations and just one religion among many.

The followers of a strict laicism deny the Church its right to intervene on the faithful when political orientation runs contrary to the social doctrine of the Church and her moral teaching. The "principle of neutrality" in the context of conflicting value systems - as happens in pluriconfessional societies - leaves people to be the master of their own life choices without letting anyone present them with other ideals. The Magisterium of the Church then appears as an insupportable intrusion in the inviolable domain of the liberty of conscience, in a culture where each person wants to be their own measure.

How can the question of values be addressed? What should be the pastors' attitude to secularised societies faced with these values and the recurrent efforts to exclude the Church from the political domain? How can the Social Doctrine of the Church be made better known, especially among those Christians engaged in the professional world of economy, finance, industry, etc.? How should the relation between Church and multiculturalism be envisaged, to help societies pass from multiculturalism to interculturalism, to maintain one's own identity while recalling that Christianity does not seek to deny the identity of peoples but to help it to blossom? How can we help people understand the Church's role as Mater and magistra, and carry out her duty to shed light on consciences while avoiding the air of giving out lessons?

¹³ The Russian Orthodox Church, according to Patriarch Alexis - cf. note 12 - "to help the faithful understand the importance of the family for the construction of the future of Russia", has created a "special distinction of the Patriarchate to be awarded to mothers of families as a benediction for the love that they show to their children in recognition of the service of self denial".

As we have already said, the dominant culture absorbs our contemporaries in a "distraction" such that the continual waves of high impact information and knowledge of all kinds suppress the space necessary for its assimilation. So it becomes difficult for those who are inserted into a culture where everything rests on individualism and relativism to assimilate a doctrine which seems too big for this culture. In some strongly secularised countries, those who want to care for the souls have difficulty organising significant occasions for the practice of the sacraments, particularly that of reconciliation, for the children preparing for the first communion and above all confirmation, which is only received by a minority. Meanwhile new kinds of apostolate are appearing, centred on specific activities: spiritual retreats, family sessions, pilgrimages, camps where sport, prayer and catechism are mixed with time for philosophy, theology and spirituality, desert walks, etc.

How to make the best of the positive experiences to reenergise the Church's spiritual offerings and help the faithful raise their heads above the panta rei of the prevailing culture? How can we accompany directors of Catholic establishments and catechists to let children and young people live an authentic spiritual experience, to root their still fragile faith, and to make them capable of resisting the noise of secularisation?

Secularism has its roots in a philosophical vision that denies the existence of God, or refuses a dependency on God of human and social realities. Where theological teaching is enrooted in an authentic philosophy of the human person, despoiled of the pseudo-intellectual tricks of so-called modern thought, Catholic truth maintains its force and speaks to the young. Many, with today's excesses of hedonism and materialism, reject an anthropology without God, without however knocking on the door of Christian humanism. A renewal of teaching of a philosophy which is not a rigid and dry Scholasticism is needed to reconstruct a bridge between Christian humanism and the anthropocentric vision of moderate secular humanism, to put in place the dialogue of faith and reason. The young need philosophical instruments that will let them understand the validity and pertinence of the Church's moral teaching. The Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est* by Pope Benedict XVI is an example: it shows how the human dimensions of love, far from being denied by *agape*, are transformed and made sublime by it.

How can we favour those centres where the teaching of the Church is explained, diffused and defended, and what instruments should be used in order to reach the men and women of our times? How can the faithful be helped to nourish their intelligence as well as their hearts? How can questions of sense be raised?

Globalisation offers no satisfying responses to the needs of society and with the excesses of violent integralism, many people are appealing for a new alliance between faith and reason, and a greater visibility for the religions of peace in the public sphere. Associating to the idea of post-modernity the hope of a post-secularisation, many defend a Catholic post-modern programme¹⁴ that can meet, on the basis of new criteria, the needs of the sciences or the insufficiencies of the modern

¹⁴ Cf. the failed dialogues between modern Catholics and post-modern Catholics in the United States: JOHN D. CAPUTO, "Philosophy and Prophetic Postmodernism: Toward a Catholic Postmodernity", in *The American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 2000, vo. 74, no.4 pp. 549-567.

State, in researching the convergences on "ethical absolutes" that respect the dignity of the human persona and the value of liberty¹⁵.

What reply can be given to the question raised at the last Plenary: Are we already in a post-secularist era? Does a new humanism have to be invented for the XXI century? What comes after the Ratzinger-Habermas dialogues?

The mystery of God reveals itself to each person, often in a surprising manner. Sacred art, which evokes this mystery, ceaselessly breaks down barriers and sees old models give way to new inventions, cf. Brunelleschi's dome which replaced the gothic building model. Every great spiritual work leads to the renaissance of spiritual forces and speaks to the heart of cultures. These are by nature moving, and art has the power to fix them momentarily in a new style. This alchemy is at work in the dialogue between faith and culture, from the light of the Gospel with the hope written in human hearts.

Having been surprised himself, the artist is able to surprise others. The way of beauty is a privileged way to surprise the non-believer and the indifferent and rouse them from their distractions and torpors. Yet we need to be aware of the emerging phenomena, apply cultural discernment, and understand the polyvalence of the signs, for not all can be assumed by Grace.

How can the service of beauty, goodness and truth in this dialogue of artists be awoken in the world of today? When sacred art has been distanced from the great expressions of the past, the liturgy has lost its sense of beauty and the sacred. What contributions can be made to renew the expression of the sacred and the celebration of the mystery of the faith, there where secularisation tends to discard the givens of revelation from its supernatural dimension? How can we reply to the currents of secularisation of sacred art, and stimulate new evocative artistic creations of the mystery of the celebrated faith, perceptible to the new needs and sensibilities?

¹⁵ Cf. the famous dialogue between Joseph RATZINGER and Jürgen HABERMAS at Munich, 19 January 2004 at the Bavarian Catholic Academy on what religion can offer to cover the insufficiencies of the modern State, the "liberal secularised State" which "lives off presuppositions it cannot guarantee". Cf. Giuliano Amato and Vincenzo Paglia's *Dialoghi post-secolari* cited in note n.1.