

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN FAITH AND CULTURE

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Paul Cardinal POUPARD

Coming to Manila brings back happy memories of my earlier visit here in the mid-seventies. This fascinating megalopolis, bustling with life and activity, with its teeming millions, played host to Pope John Paul II last January when he was greeted by a record breaking, veritable sea of humanity! Warmth and welcome, ritual and religiosity, music and melody, song and dance, are woven into the very fabric of Filipino culture and hospitality.

It is no mere coincidence that this Colloquium on the "Dialogue between Faith and Culture" is being held at the University of Santo Tomas, thanks to the gracious generosity of the Rector and the Faculty. This University, the oldest in Asia, founded in the year 1611, and so efficiently managed by the Dominican Order, has been not only a bastion of Christian orthodoxy and doctrine, but also through the diversity of its faculties and disciplines, a meeting point at the confluence of faith and culture. On its spacious parade grounds, last January the Holy Father addressed the Faculty, Staff and Students on the role of the university. On that occasion the Pope stated:

"A university, therefore, should not only impart knowledge according to the proper principles and methods of each area of study and with due freedom of scientific investigation, it should also educate men and women who will be true leaders in the scientific, technical, economic and cultural and social fields. It should thus be a community with a mission *to train leaders in the all-important field of life itself*; leaders who have made *a personal synthesis between faith and culture*, who are willing and able to assume tasks in the service of the community and of society in general, bearing witness to their faith, both in private and in public" (*Speeches of His Holiness Pope John Paul II*, Word and Life Publications, Makati, Metro Manila, 1995, p. 22).

1. Faith and Culture Need to Dialogue

These words of the Holy Father provide us with a point of departure for this our Colloquium. The exchange, the dialogue, the symbiosis between faith and culture is what concerns us this morning. It is precisely a synthesis of this kind that is both necessary and fruitful. My task is to inaugurate this Colloquium, to set the ball rolling, as it were. Or, if I may be permitted to change the imagery, to paint a broad enough vista, and offer a sufficiently wide overall view so as to provide a large enough frame work for the galaxy of experts to follow, to have sufficient space and creativity to fill in the landscape with relevant and specific details.

"The question about the relationship between faith and culture is in one sense as old as Christianity itself. It arose in a particularly acute form in the first century when the early Church was faced with difficult questions about the admission of Gentiles into the Christian community ...It continued to exercise the early Church towards the end of the second century as the Church made her pilgrim way from a largely Jewish matrix into a Hellenistic culture. This same question haunts the Church to-day as she makes her painful way from being a predominantly European reality to being a world Church" (Dermot Lane, *Faith and Culture: The Challenge of Inculturation*, Religion and Culture in Dialogue, a Challenge for the Next Millennium, The Columba Press, Dublin 1993, p. 11).

Who can deny that this dialogue and synthesis are necessary? "The synthesis between culture and faith is not only a demand of culture but also of faith, because a faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived" (John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 1995, n. 78). Like a tree that cannot bear fruit unless it takes root in the soil where it has been planted, so too faith needs to be implanted and contextualised in the culture where it takes root so that it can bring forth fruit. But in order to do this, faith needs to dialogue with the world wherein it is contextualized. Faith, as a matter of fact, must both initiate and promote this dialogue. Dialogue demands the difficult discipline of listening: and not just listening with the ear, but rather listening with the heart. Listening with the heart calls for compassion, criticism, challenge, and confrontation. This listening, that is at the core of the dialogue between faith and culture, is reciprocal. It is precisely in the reciprocity of this listening that both faith and culture are enriched. When this listening is absent, dialogue remains sterile and barren. Then, we do not have so much a dialogue as a monologue of the deaf where everyone is speaking and no one is listening!

2. The Role of Faith vis-a-vis Culture

Having stated the need for an ongoing dialogue between faith and culture, what, we may ask, is the role that faith plays in this dialogue? Faith, to my mind, has a triple role vis-a-vis culture. Its first task is to acknowledge and admit as well as to accept and appreciate the values that are embodied in culture. There is something good in the worst of us, just as there is something bad in the best of us, for we have the strengths of our weaknesses and the weaknesses of our strengths. Every culture has a deposit of values. Every culture has its own treasury of traditions. Every culture has riches and values that need to be cherished and cradled for growth. Such values could be for example the recognition of a Supreme Being, reverence for life, respect for the environment. Faith needs to acknowledge and admit the good that is in every culture, for all good, like truth, has but one Source, God Himself. But faith also needs to accept and appreciate the good that is embedded in culture. In fact, no faith is ever born in a void or in a vacuum. It is always conceived in the womb of culture; there it is born and there too it is nourished and grows. Paul Tillich perceptively remarks:

"The form of religion is culture. This is especially obvious in the language used by religion. Every language, including that of the Bible, is the result of innumerable acts of cultural creativity...There is no sacred language which has fallen from a supernatural heaven and been put between the covers of a book..." (*Theology of Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 47).

Is this not what the mystery of the Incarnation teaches us? For Christ was not born in a void. He took flesh in the womb of Mary; His life was interwoven into the prevailing social and cultural fabric of His time. As the Word of God He spoke in human words, a specific language with a particular accent and a definite cultural heritage. Pope John Paul II has rightly observed: "For the incarnation of the Son of God, precisely because it was complete and concrete, was also an incarnation in a particular culture" (*Speech to the University of Coimbra* quoted in "Faith and Inculturation" of the International Theological Commission; cfr. *Origins* [1989] vol. 18, n. 47, p. 800). This is not to identify the Word of God in any exclusive way with any specific or particular culture. While cultures are necessary as a vehicle or a medium to express God's revelation that is at the core of faith, revelation always transcends cultures. If we may go back to our analogy of the incarnation, even though Jesus was born into the Jewish culture of His time, as the Word of God He surely transcends that culture. Jesus was of Jewish descent but He embraces the whole of humankind. And so too must it be with faith: it ought to be local in the manner it expresses itself in a given cultural context but universal in its theological content. One needs to bear in mind...

"...the cultural framework in which evangelization in Asia is to be carried out. The religious traditions of very ancient cultures remain powerful forces in the East...The church esteems these spiritual traditions as "living expressions of the soul of vast groups of people...While the Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in the great religions (*Nostra Aetate* 2), she can only hope that one day this preparation for the Gospel will come to maturity in ways which are fully Christian and fully Asian" (*Speeches of His Holiness Pope John Paul II*, Word and Life Publications, Makati, Metro Manila, Philippines, 1995, p. 87).

Besides accepting and appreciating what is good in culture, the role of faith is to criticise and construct culture. Faith judges culture for its forms and formulations are made by culture even as its religious substance makes culture possible. "In fact there is a risk of passing uncritically from a form of alienation from culture to an overestimation of culture. Since culture is a human creation and is therefore marked by sin, it too needs to be "healed, ennobled and perfected"" (Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* [1990], n. 54). Faith needs to challenge and confront culture. Today, there is a growing emphasis on personal choice and moral freedom so much so that our modern culture frowns on any value or doctrine that checks, controls or corrects the abuse of personal choice and freedom. "The gradual transformation by which sin becomes immorality, immorality becomes deviance, deviance becomes choice, and all choice becomes legitimate, is a

profound redrawing of the landscape...The change has been revolutionary" (Jonathan Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1991, p. 50). To act thus is surely not liberty but licence, not freedom but a fraud. Unfortunately, liberty today has several masks and masquerades and if one is not discerning one can mistake the wood for the trees. It is precisely untruths like these that have to be challenged, exposed and condemned, for an untruth that is repeated often, with the passage of time, comes to be regarded as the truth! "The morally admirable person, as Rabbi Sacks remarks, is no longer the one committed to values or to service; but the person whose motto is "I did it my way!" Personal autonomy comes to mean that one is not answerable to anyone" (Donal Murray, "To Serve the People Faithfully", in *The Furrow*, Maynooth, Ireland, vol. 46, n. 11 [1995], p. 609). Like the salt of which the Gospel speaks that preserves from corruption, faith needs to preserve culture from self-destruction. Like light that dispels the darkness, faith needs to dispel the darkness that can, and at times does enshroud culture.

3. The Challenge of Faith and some Disvalues in Modern Culture

a. Individualism

Faith has the prophetic duty of combating individualism, consumerism and secularism that are so characteristic of modern culture. We live in an instant age -- instant coffee, instant copying, instant communication. The pace at which modern culture at times rushes and races leaves us breathless! It often leaves us clinging not just to our hats but to our heads as well! There was a time when our own little village was the world. No one knew what went beyond the confines of his or her tiny village. Today, the whole wide world itself has fast become a little village. It is sadly strange, but tragically true, that even though technically our wide world is fast shrinking into a little village, given the instant telecasting and transmission of events via the mass media, jet travel and the marvels of computer communication, we are at the same time becoming self-centred and individualistic. We boast of having conquered outer space. But the inner space deep within us, remains to a large extent unexplored. We live like so many islands afloat in the ocean of life beaten and battered by wave after wave of trends of thought and conduct that have left us indifferent and immune to the suffering and struggles of others. Our togetherness at times is at best mere juxtaposed isolation! "Each one for himself and the devil takes the hindmost" seems to be the order of the day. It is such selfish and self-centred disvalues that are at times embedded in culture that have to be challenged, criticised, confronted and condemned.

b. Consumerism

There is next the menace of consumerism that has become part and parcel of modern culture. Like a raging forest fire, it devours all in its wake, and us as well, so that far from being the masters of what we possess, we are in turn reduced to being its slaves.

Instead of possessing, we are possessed by the things we own. The craving to have and want, even what we do not need, like a cancerous growth eats into us. While the affluent waste, the poor in want have to scrape and scrounge through waste bins at times looking for left over scraps of food. How can we ever lull our conscience to sleep every night, if we know for sure, that millions of our brothers and sisters go to bed hungry while millions of others die of starvation? Is it not unjust that 80% of the world's wealth and resources should be owned and hoarded by 20% of its population? The wealthy oppress the weak. If only we could learn a lesson from Nature. Look at a tree. The deep roots nourish the broad trunk which in turn breaks forth into branches that yield flowers and fruits. The strong and the sturdy form the base that support and bear the weight of the weak and the feeble. Alas the structure of our society seems so topsy-turvy. The weak and the feeble are pushed to the base and are expected to bear the burden of the strong and the sturdy! A structure that is so lop-sided is bound to collapse. No wonder there is so much unrest in society, so much revolt and rebellion as the weak and the feeble crushed beneath find the burden unbearable. A society that is so lopsidedly structured is bound to prove oppressive...Strength is given us not to exploit but to be expended in service. We have divided the world into classes and categories: some belong to the first, others to the second and still others to a third world. Possibly, there might be categories and grades lower than these! And what is the prime criterion for this discrimination and classification? Mere material affluence and well-being. Are human beings higher or lower in the social stratum mainly because they pertain to different economic levels? Is the stature of a person to be gauged by the size of his or her pocket? Are mere material affluence and wealth the principal criterion in our comprehension and appreciation of people and nations?

c. Secularism

A third disvalue that seems to take grip of modern culture is secularism. We have given such importance to the world as to have forgotten its Maker. We notice the cycle of seasons and the order in the universe and this cosmic harmony does not seem to inspire us to turn in wonder to the Creator. The challenge to faith today stems not so much from antagonism and opposition as from religious indifference. Indifference is far worse than opposition. When we oppose someone or something, we at least acknowledge the presence of the other whom we oppose. When we are indifferent, however, we just ignore and deny altogether the reality and existence of the other. The whole of creation sings of the glory of God. "Great is your name, Lord, its majesty fills the earth!" (*Psalms* 8, v. 1).

4. The Marriage Between Faith and Culture

A critique of modern culture does not mean its condemnation but rather its appreciation and correction as and where necessary. We must be wary lest we throw out the baby with the bath water! One has only to read the first chapters of the Book of

Genesis to listen to the leit-motif that repeatedly reminds us that God saw all that He had made and found it to be good. Both faith and culture need to dialogue and the goal of this dialogue must be the promotion of integral human and social development. In other words, the goal of this dialogue ought to be the promotion of values that will enrich both the individual as well as society itself. The marriage between faith and culture must be geared to and generate well being. Without knocking the wind off the sails of the speakers who are to follow, I would like to single out three areas of human and social life, particularly, though not exclusively, relevant to the Asian context, where the marriage of faith and culture can promote this integral human and social development that is the theme of this Colloquium. These areas express some of the concerns that emerged at the conclusion of the Sixth FABC General Assembly that was held here in January 1995. These three areas are: 1. The Promotion of Life and the Human Family; 2. The Promotion of Ecology and the Environment; 3. The Promotion of a Culture of Peace.

a. The Promotion of Human Life and Family

At the aforementioned FABC Assembly held here last January, the Asian Bishops with a serious measure of pastoral concern stated:

"The Asian Family is now under siege, anti-life and anti-family attitudes and values, policies and practices are being brought to bear, with tremendous pressure on the Asian family. Materialistic and consumeristic ways of living are destroying truly human values in the family. Euthanasia and abortion, sterilization and contraception, sex determination and genetic manipulation are being promoted. Together we must follow the divine law as taught by the Church to protect and promote the family as the sanctuary of life."

The virus of death has gradually begun to infect Asia, the birth place and the cradle of some of the world's greatest religions. No credo or tenet of any faith would even so much as hint at destroying life. Human life comes from God and to Him it must return. He is its sole origin and end. We are not the owners of life but merely its trustees. Life has been bequeathed to us by God. Over thirty years back, the Second Vatican Council in an exhortation that was as prophetic as it is relevant even today, devoting an entire chapter to culture in the second part of its Pastoral Constitution on The Church in the Modern World, had stated:

"Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or wilful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions where people are treated as mere

instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practise them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonour to the Creator" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 27.)

What a beautiful world will be ours when faith and culture join hands and promote this vision of respect and reverence for life. The promotion of life is indeed the promotion of the family since the family is the very sanctuary of life.

b. The Promotion of the Environment and Ecology

The second area where faith and culture need to harness their energies and pull in the same direction is the promotion of environment and ecology. The book of Genesis states that having created the earth He has entrusted it to man and woman. They were to till and subdue it. Creation must not be viewed as an act once and for all posited by God so that now God is enjoying an unending holiday. That view of creation is far too static. A dynamic view of creation sees creation as an on-going process through which God continues to sustain the universe fashioned by Him, a fact that is necessary because of the very contingency of all that is created, and He sustains it through you and me. It is in this sense that we are co-creators with God working together with Him to bring to fulfilment what He has begun.

"God, in effect, does not produce; He labours, and His creative act is love. It is the same for man: production debases him to the level of an object, while in labour he is the creating subject, free and responsible, knowing and in solidarity with others" (Paul Cardinal Poupard, *The Church and Culture*, Central Bureau, CCVA, 1994, 3835 Westminster Place, St. Louis, MO 63108, p. 37).

This is indeed an awesome responsibility! And collaborating with God in the on-going process of creation demands that we use creation and not abuse it; that we promote the environment and not pollute it; that we preserve ecology and not destroy it. "The earth must be seen and preserved as the essential life-base for all, not a merchandise for corporate business or conquest. The earth is our Mother" (S. Arokiaswamy, *Asia: The Struggle for Life in the Midst of Destruction*, FABC Papers No. 70, p. 26). Promoting environment and ecology, therefore, is promoting the earth and every form of life.

c. The Promotion of a Culture of Peace

The promotion of a culture of peace is what must engage the attention of both faith and culture. To cite just one instance, one has only to watch television to see for oneself the relentless projection of crime, murder, rape, robbery, war and violence on the screen. Human life seems so dispensable as "trigger-happy heroes" fire indiscriminately. And these programmes are broadcast day after day for hours together, invading and

intruding into the privacy of the home and family, and threatening to hurl us down from the very brink of morality on which we are precariously perched. Who can deny or doubt the devastating impact particularly on youth of what they see on the television screen? It is so easy to translate what is seen on the screen to the street. And yet television can be such a powerful medium if used positively for the promotion of all that is good, true and beautiful; for forging bonds of understanding and love; for breaking down barriers that divide and keep us apart; for fostering values that will make our world a better and happier place to inhabit and help us live in peace and harmony with all? We need to conscientize viewers to watch these programmes with discernment and discretion and to lodge their protests with agencies that peddle trash or triviality. Addressing the Plenary Assembly of the then Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Non-Believers, on the search for happiness, Pope John Paul II observed:

"...Happiness is equated with individualism in the affluent societies marked by secularism and religious indifference...For many people, happiness is no longer connected with the fulfilment of a moral duty, nor with the search for a personal relationship with God...The living and true God, whom Jesus revealed to us, is not a solitary God. Among the divine Persons everything is made a gift, sharing, communication, in an eternal expression of love. All God's happiness and joy are the happiness and joy of mutual giving" (Quoted in Paul Cardinal Poupard, *What will give us Happiness?*, Veritas, Dublin, 1992, pp. 127-128).

It cannot be otherwise for the Christian. Sharing the faith must also be a sharing of joy, the joy of having found meaning and beauty in a personal relationship with God, the joy of giving and receiving, the joy that springs from sharing, the joy of living according to God's Law, which is Love. "I love and am beloved, and I am happy" remarked Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the English Romantic poet. Happiness, it has been said, is the art of making bouquets with the roses within one's reach. And God is surely among those roses for He is everywhere! Or if I may quote the Filipino playwright, Paul Dumol: "Tranquillity at home and peace with God are part of the Filipino's idea of happiness..."

5. Conclusion

During the course of this Colloquium, several topics and themes will be dealt with by a galaxy of experts. The speakers will dwell on the impact that various religions have on culture and the social implications of the link between faith and culture. Faith and culture need each other: the former to find a vehicle to express its content; the latter to find the substance for its very existence. It is my sincere hope and prayer that the painstaking efforts of so many who in different ways have contributed to this Colloquium may bear fruit in that the participants, and through them many others, through this happy marriage between faith and culture, may open themselves to the

fullness of life and love that is ultimately rooted in God Himself. I would like to end with what I stated in the Foreword of my book, *The Church and Culture*:

"Nobody can live without love. And love is like a magnet hidden in the heart of various cultures inviting them to go beyond their finiteness by opening themselves up to Him who is their source and end and who alone can give them the fullness they call for" (*loc. cit.*, p. xi.)

That is precisely the experience that Jesus came to share when He said: "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (*John 10:10*).

(Français)

Le **Cardinal Paul Poupard** appelle à une authentique écoute entre foi et culture, à un dialogue respectueux qui allie stimulation, critique voire confrontation. Si la Foi doit reconnaître et accepter les valeurs de chaque culture, elle doit aussi opérer un discernement constructif. L'individualisme, le consumérisme et le sécularisme requièrent une riposte sérieuse. La promotion de la vie et de la famille, de l'écologie et de l'environnement, de la culture de la paix, sont trois secteurs importants permettant une alliance entre la foi et la culture, qui ouvre des perspectives de vie et d'amour en Dieu.

(Español)

El **Cardenal Paul Poupard** apela a una escucha auténtica entre la fe y la cultura, en un diálogo que una la compasión y la crítica, y asuma con decisión los desafíos. La fe ha de reconocer y aceptar los valores de cada cultura, pero tiene también un papel crítico, ejercido de forma constructiva; en este sentido, tiene que hacer una crítica seria de los antivalores del individualismo, del consumismo y del secularismo. Es importante la promoción de la vida y de la familia; de la ecología y del medio ambiente; y de una cultura de la paz. En estas tres áreas se precisa una alianza entre la fe y la cultura, que abra nuevas perspectivas de vida y amor, enraizadas en el mismo Dios.

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