

JOHN PAUL II:



Dialogue with Atheism

Pope John Paul II, in a general audience on June 12 , appealed to believers and unbelievers to enter into a "dialogue that is sincere and honest" in order to "help to establish right order in this world where we all live together." His appeal was made to an audience of over 6,000 people, who had gathered in St. Peter's Square for his weekly general audience. The Pope noted that "the Church is particularly sensitive to the attitude of those who cannot reconcile the existence of God with the multiple experience of evil and of suffering. At the same time, the Church is aware that what she proclaims — the Gospel and the Christian faith -- is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart, since it champions the dignity of man's calling, giving hope once more to those who already despair of their higher destiny" (GS 21).

The Pope's address was part of a series devoted to the topic of faith in the modern world. His catechesis was

based on the text from St. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5, verse 16: "Your light must shine in the sight of men, so that, seeing your good works, they may give praise to your Father in heaven." In his call to Christians to enter into a dialogue with non-believers and atheists, he pointed out that "to believe in the Christian sense, means to accept the invitation of a conversation with God by abandoning oneself to one's Creator", and that "such a conscious faith predisposes us also to that 'dialogue of salvation' which the Church must carry on with all people in the world today."

Much of what the Pope had to say was based on the Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes, one of the key documents of Vatican Council II where the contemporary problem of unbelief and atheism is treated at some length. He made reference not only to the constitution but also to his predecessor, Paul VI, in underlining that the faith that Christians are frequently called upon to bear witness to in the modern world must be "mature and aware", and "so well formed that it can see difficulties clearly and overcome them" (GS 21) "This," said the Pope, "is the essential condition for the 'dialogue of salvation.'"

The Pope listed several reasons which he said prompt individuals to espouse atheism. "Some have an exaggerated idea of man, which excludes the existence of God. Others find the existence of evil in the world as an argument against belief in God. Still others adopt a systematic atheism which looks upon religion as an obstacle to man's economic and social liberation." He pointed out that while the varieties and multiplicities of 'atheism' very often arise from a pragmatic attitude resulting from lack of concern or lack of interest in religious matters, this attitude finds its roots in a world-wide mentality, especially in that form of scientism that accepts as the one and only source of cognitive certainty the experience of the senses and excludes all access to that reality which transcends the senses. While the Church's attitude in regard to atheism itself is a "clear and firm" rejection, the Church, at the same time, sincerely "tries to seek out the secret motives which lead the atheistic mind to deny God. Knowing full well how important are the problems raised by atheism, and urged by her love for all men, she considers that these motives deserve an earnest and more thorough scrutiny. In particular,

she is concerned to make progress in ceaselessly renewing and purifying herself, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in order to remove from her life whatever might unjustly hurt those who do not believe."

In his conclusion, the Pope turned to Christians who must respond to the questions "what is faith?" and "what does it mean to believe?" against a background of unbelief and atheism, which, at times, assumes the form of a programmed struggle against religion, especially Christianity. He said: "Precisely because of such hostility, our faith should become more particularly aware, penetrating, and mature, and characterized by a deep sense of responsibility and of love in regard to all men. The awareness of the difficulties, of the objections, and of the persecutions, should awaken a still further readiness to bear witness "to the hope that is in us" (1 Peter 3:15).

