



Searching for a Meaningful Dialogue

by Angelo Lazzarotto

For the past twenty years now, a special structure dealing with the study of and dialogue with atheism has been in existence at the Vatican as well as in many local churches. It was on April 9, 1965 that L'Osservatore Romano, the official Vatican newspaper, carried a formal announcement that Pope Paul VI had decided to set up a new Secretariat for Non-believers, with Austrian Cardinal Franz König as president. This was a follow-up measure to insure the continuation of the work done in this area at the Second Vatican Council. A secretariat for promoting unity among Christians, and another for the promotion of dialogue with non-Christian religions had already been established a few months earlier. These three new structures were considered by some observers to be among the most important fruits of Vatican II, and that they would exert a great influence in shaping the course of the life of the Church in the future.

With Cardinal König's retirement in 1980, Pope John Paul II appointed Bishop Paul Poupard, a Frenchman and, at the time, Rector of the Catholic University and Auxiliary Bishop of Paris. He has since been raised to the rank of Cardinal and now resides in Rome. At present, the Secretariat for Non-believers is made up of nine other cardinals and seventeen bishops from different parts of the world. The Secretariat also has an additional forty or so consultants and advisors. This group represents a variety of experience and expertise in many related disciplines, and they contribute

research papers and advice on the many complex topics that fall within the realm of the Secretariat's particular interest and concern. During the past two decades, there have been a total of six Plenary Assemblies. Among the themes studied have been: the development of atheism in the Western world, Christian faith and the different forms of Marxism, faith and youth, science and non-belief, secular ethics and non-belief. Among the many printed publications of the Secretariat is an interesting research study on the trial of Galileo Galilei, which has been translated into three languages. Among other works, the Secretariat has also sponsored many international meetings and seminars, where believers and non-believers can enter into a free exchange of ideas. A good number of these have been held in German-speaking areas of Europe. One of the main difficulties in promoting such a dialogue, however, has been the lack of a clear definition of partners for the proposed dialogue. The dialogue, however, will continue for the Secretariat is a response to Vatican II's clear call for dialogue, a dialogue that should exclude no one: "We include those who cultivate beautiful qualities of the human spirit, but do not yet acknowledge the Source of these qualities... We also include those who oppress the Church and harass her in manifold ways" (Gaudium et Spes, No. 92).

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Secretariat, Cardinal König was asked to share his experience and express some comment on its work. Among other things, he pointed out that all three new secretariats have been a response by the Church to the challenge of the signs of the times. Taken together, they are a permanent witness to the openness of the Church to today's world and its many problems. In particular, the Secretariat for Non-believers is an abiding sign of the willingness of the Church to enter into dialogue, in the broadest sense of that word, with all men of good-will, with the whole world, and with special attention to atheists.

Cardinal König sees atheism in all its forms, including the one which is "more interested in the affirmation of man than in the denial of God", a challenge to all religions and particularly to Christianity. Today atheism is not merely a philosophical problem but also a social one. Militant atheism, especially, sees religion as an obstacle to human

progress, something that must be done away with, even, if necessary, through the use of violence. For this reason dialogue with non-believers has to reckon with a basic tension, an opposition between religion and unbelief rooted in the very nature of things.

As a conclusion Cardinal König stressed the following points, which we quote here.

Atheism as a denial of God is nothing new in the history of mankind. Already the Fathers of the Church spoke of Christians who by their life and example had won the esteem and the admiration even of those who did not believe in God, i.e. the 'atheoi' of that time. What is new is the militant type of atheism which is embodied in Marxist states and Marxist ideology. For this reason the phenomenon of atheism should be considered also as a political one - one of world-wide dimensions. The Conference of Helsinki and its proceedings for the first time considered the striving after religious freedom as a political task.

The existence of the Secretariat for Non-believers underlines the individual and social nature of man with his desire for peace and justice. This common ground for believers and non-believers can make us more aware of the worldwide unity of mankind, beyond all differences of race, language and culture. Collaboration with all men in the service of peace could therefore be a rallying cry of the Secretariat.

The three Secretariates cannot count on the same interest and readiness in the dialogue-partners. The Secretariat for Christian Unity and the Secretariat for Non-Christians can start from a common interest and a shared readiness to take up any kind of dialogue, while the third Secretariat has, as I said before, to deal with a tension, an opposition from the side of the non-believers. For this reason it is particularly

important to prepare the climate in which a meeting or dialogue with them is had.

Finally, atheism is an impoverishment of man as it confines him within the limits of the transient. This occasions a frustration provoked by the restlessness of the human heart and by its search for the meaning of life: no answer is given to the ultimate questions of human life. The restlessness of the heart of man of which St. Augustine speaks goes beyond all that is temporal and transitory and seeks a link with the Transcendent, with the personal Creator and Source of all things. God is deeply engraved in man's spirit ("let us make man in our image, after our likeness"- we read in Genesis 1:26) - and this is a pointer to the mystery of human existence. Does not this impoverishment appear in the fields of popular religious culture, of art, of literature, of music and drama?

This impoverishment of man is seen also in everyday life and experience. Therefore, although the Secretariat will have to take up a number of projects, its main focus must be on the future of man and on all that shows us the way out of this impoverishment.

Vatican Council II stated:

"We can justly consider that the future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping". (Gaudium et Spes, no.36) It is in this confidence that Christianity can continue to provide such reasons that we find our commitment to open dialogue with others.

