



Some Guidelines for our Dialogue

by Angelo Lazzarotto

The inspiration and guidelines for the work of the Secretariat for Non-Believers came from Vatican Council II. Pope Paul VI and the present Pope John Paul II gave further encouragement and guidance.

Paul VI wrote in his first Encyclical (Aug. 6, 1964): "We are aware that... there are many... who profess no religion: and we are aware that there are many who profess themselves, in various ways, to be atheists. We know that some of these proclaim their godlessness openly and uphold it as a programme of human education and political conduct, in the ingenuous but fatal belief that they are setting man free from false and outworn notions about life and the world".

One of the most comprehensive and important documents approved at the final session of the Vatican Council (7 Dec. 1965) dealt with the Church in the Modern World and devoted several pages to Atheism (Gaudium et Spes, Nos.19-21). While stressing the Church's "loyal devotion to God and men",

and therefore "repudiating sorrowfully but as firmly as possible" atheistic doctrine and actions, the document continues: "Still, the Church strives to detect in the atheistic mind the hidden causes for the denial of God. Conscious of how weighty are the questions which atheism raises, and motivated by love for all men, she believes these questions ought to be examined seriously and more profoundly".

Addressing the members of the Secretariat in 1971, Pope Paul VI stressed again:

You are more particularly charged in the Church with promoting the dialogue with all men who live in an ideological or practical atheism, and in the first place with studying objectively the multiple forms, the causes and the consequences of this atheism. This is, it is true, an immense, complex and difficult task, but the carrying out of which is urgent and necessary.

And dealing with the phenomenon of secularization in relation with atheism, Paul VI remarked:

A double question forcefully claims our attention. Is it possible to found an authentic humanism starting out from practically atheistic perspectives, that is, a desacralized and secularized world, without reference to God, while leaving the possibility, for those who can or will, to recognize a transcendent and personal God? And is it desirable to carry the process of secularization so far, in order to purify and reevaluate, as is sometimes said, the faith of believers?

The answer to the first question is not, perhaps, very easy on the practical plane, and we must certainly beware of a sweeping apologetics, illustrating the thesis according to which, as has been said in lapidary terms, "a people becomes dehumanized to the extent that it becomes dechristianized" (Francois Mauriac at the Week of Catholic intellectuals in November 1954, quoted in Le Chretien Mauriac, Recherches et Débats 70, Paris, Desclee de Brouwer, 1971, p.65) and,

without God, everything is cut adrift on the human plane, truth, good, respect for persons, their happiness, their hope. And yet, after having witnessed for more than a century the moving efforts of the different atheistic humanisms, do we realize that it is now the meaning of man that seems uncertain, to the extent that some people no longer dare speak of humanism? In any case, for us believers, there can be no doubt: a humanism closed within itself, excluding God, will turn out sooner or later to be inhuman (cfr. Populorum Progressio, n.42). Why? Because God remains the source and the term of the supreme values without which man cannot live. Because the realities of sin and of death and the questions they raise, for each man as well as for history, do not receive a radical and definitive solution outside faith (cfr. Gaudium et Spes, n.21, par. 3).

Pope John Paul II spoke to the members of the Secretariat in 1981 on the topic of their assembly: Science and Unbelief. He said in part:

All of you realize, I am certain, that the study in question is not meant to be of an academic kind but rather a work of pastoral reflection, although this does not exclude either strict methodology or thorough research. Admittedly, there are no satisfactory international groups with which you can carry on a dialogue, as the other two secretariats can. Your work is carried on, rather, through relations with episcopal conferences in a wide variety of sociocultural situations.

From the viewpoint of sociocultural diversity, the theme you are studying is a very rich one indeed, if we consider that science - both the natural sciences and the human sciences - is a cultural phenomenon which has important repercussions on mentalities.

The desire to understand the whole of reality is a legitimate ambition that does credit to the human person. It is a desire which believers share. Any opposition comes not at this level but at the level of mentalities, when the latter are dominated by a scientific attitude that identifies the realm of the true with what can be experimentally known and verified.

This kind of positivist outlook has left a profound mark on modern culture, derived as this latter is from the philosophy of the Enlightenment. That philosophy is opposed to faith on ideological grounds but this is not to be said of science as such.

On the contrary, the passionate search for the "how" calls for an answer to the "why".

Touching specifically on the dialogue proposed, the Pope added:

Besides, what is needed is not an abstract confrontation between scientific unbelief and Christian faith but a dialogue between human beings, in which the dynamics of rational thinking are by no means opposed to the specific transcendence of faith but, in a sense, call for it. The experience of life reveals the need of moving beyond the interior emptiness created by the collapse of meaning that occurs when all human activities are forced to exist in a closed universe and are no longer seen in a broader and deeper perspective; that is, when they are no longer integrated into a superrational dimension that, far from being nonrational or subrational, is the foundation and goal of all rationality.

Again on 22 March, 1985, Pope John Paul II encouraged the members of the Secretariat for Non-Believers, who had gathered for their plenary Assembly, to continue in their difficult task, knowing that they are working for the cause of peace:

Your mission has in fact a pastoral purpose. You are not content to work out theoretical studies on nonbelief—which also have their importance—you meet with people, believers and nonbelievers. Despite all that separates them, you aim at uniting them, not only by means of shaky footbridges, but by means of solid bridges so as to construct that civilization of love which the world is calling for with all its heart. Beyond all political boundaries, ideological divisions, strategic confrontations, cultural differences, you summon them to discover that they are brothers, together responsible for the future of man, motivated by justice and brotherhood, by solidarity and love.

CALLING ALL AUTHORS!

If you would like to contribute a manuscript to TRIPOD, the following guidelines may be of use:

1. TRIPOD'S focus is Christianity and China. Articles relating to this field are most welcome. Our more specific emphasis is on religion and morality, Church history - events and personalities, philosophical and theological approaches to the East - West dialogue, and the exchange of research materials among China study groups.

2. We encourage a wide variety of literary forms: dissertations, China travel reports, critical reviews of books and the arts, pictorial essays and personal comment.

3. The ideal length of an article is about two to three thousand words. If in English, please type and double space. If in Chinese, please use Chinese manuscript paper.

4. Submitted manuscripts will be returned at the request of the author.

5. Also upon the authors request, the final English and Chinese versions will be returned for comment and correction before publication.

6. The authors of published material will receive, in addition to five complimentary copies of the issue in which the work appears, a one year free subscription to TRIPOD.

7. Please submit all manuscripts to: The Editor, TRIPOD, Holy Spirit Study Centre, 6, Welfare Road, Aberdeen, HONG KONG.