



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF THE
PONTIFICAL COUNCIL OF CULTURE**

Friday, 14 March 1997

*Your Eminences,
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Friends,*

1. I welcome you with joy this morning at the end of your plenary session. I thank your President, Cardinal Paul Poupard, for recalling the spirit in which your work has been conducted. You reflected on the question of how to help the Church ensure a stronger presence of the Gospel in the heart of cultures, at the approach of the new millennium.

This meeting gives me an opportunity to say again to you: "The synthesis between culture and faith is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith" (*Letter Establishing the Pontifical Council for Culture*, 20 May 1982; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 28 June 1982, p. 7). This is what Christians faithful to the Gospel in the most varied cultural situations have achieved in the course of two millenniums. The Church has most often been involved in the culture of the peoples among whom she has taken root, to form them according to Gospel principles.

Faith in Christ who became incarnate in history does not only transform individuals inwardly, but also regenerates peoples and their cultures. Thus at the end of antiquity, Christians, who lived in a culture to which they were greatly indebted, transformed it from within and instilled a new spirit in it. When this culture was threatened, the Church with Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory the Great and many others, passed on the heritage of Jerusalem, Athens and Rome to give birth to an authentic Christian civilization. Despite the imperfections inherent in all human work, this was the occasion for a successful synthesis between faith and culture.

2. In our day, this synthesis is often lacking and the rupture between the Gospel and culture is

“without a doubt the drama of our time” (Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 20). This is a tragedy for the faith, because in a society where Christianity seems absent from social life and the faith relegated to the private sphere, access to religious values becomes more difficult, especially for the poor and the young, that is to say, for the vast majority of people who are unconsciously becoming secularized under pressure from the models of thought and action spread by the prevailing culture. The absence of a culture to support them prevents the young from having contact with the faith and from living it to the full.

This situation is also a tragedy for culture, which is undergoing a deep crisis because of the rupture with the faith. The symptom of this crisis is primarily the feeling of anguish which comes from the awareness of finitude in a world without God, where one makes the ego an absolute, and earthly affairs the only values of life. In a culture without transcendence, man succumbs to the lure of money and power, pleasure and success. He also encounters the dissatisfaction caused by materialism, the loss of the meaning of moral values and restlessness about the future.

3. But at the heart of this disillusionment there remains a thirst for the absolute, a desire for goodness, a hunger for truth, the need for personal fulfilment. This shows the breadth of the Pontifical Council for Culture’s task: to help the Church achieve a new synthesis of faith and culture for the greatest benefit of all. At the end of this century, it is essential to reaffirm the fruitfulness of faith for the development of a culture. Only a faith that is the source of radical spiritual decisions can have an effect on an era's culture. Thus the attitude of St Benedict, the Roman patrician who left an ageing society and withdrew in solitude, asceticism and prayer, was decisive for the growth of Christian civilization.

4. In its approach to cultures, Christianity presents the message of salvation received by the Apostles and the first disciples, reflected on and deepened by the Fathers of the Church and the theologians, lived by Christian people, especially the saints, and expressed by its great theological, philosophical, literary and artistic geniuses. We must proclaim this message to our contemporaries in all its richness and beauty.

To do this, each particular Church must have a cultural plan, as is already the case in some countries. During this plenary assembly, you devoted considerable time to examining not only the challenges but also the demands of authentic pastoral work in the area of culture, which is decisive for the new evangelization. Coming from various cultural backgrounds, you inform the Holy See of the expectations of the local Churches and the reports of your Christian communities.

Among the tasks incumbent on you I stress certain points that require the greatest attention from your Council, such as the foundation of Catholic cultural centres or a presence in the world of the media and science, in order to transmit Christianity’s cultural heritage. In all these efforts be particularly close to young people and artists.

5. Faith in Christ gives cultures a new dimension, that of hope in God's kingdom. It is the vocation of Christians to instil in the heart of cultures this hope for a new earth and a new heaven. For when hope fades, cultures die. Far from threatening or impoverishing them, the Gospel increases their joy and beauty, freedom and meaning, truth and goodness.

We are all called to pass on this message by speech which proclaims it, a life which witnesses to it, a culture which radiates it. For the Gospel brings culture to its perfection, and authentic culture is open to the Gospel. We will constantly have to return to this work of bringing them together. I established the Pontifical Council for Culture to help the Church be involved in the saving exchange in which inculturation of the Gospel goes hand in hand with the evangelization of cultures. May God help you accomplish your exciting mission!

As I commend the future of the Pontifical Council for Culture and that of all its members to Mary, Mother of the Church and Christ's first teacher, I cordially grant you my Apostolic Blessing.

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