



MY DIALOGUE WITH UNBELIEVERS: ETHICS, AESTHETICS AND LEADERSHIP

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There is a magnificent passage in Pope John Paul's encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, where he speaks about man, humankind, as the primary and fundamental way for the Church. He says *Man, in the full truth of his existence, of his personal being, and also of his community and social being, in the sphere of his own family in the sphere of society and very diverse contexts, in the sphere of his own nation or people, and in the sphere of the whole of mankind, this man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission. He is the primary and fundamental way for the Church, the way traced out by Christ Himself.*

In my personal dealings with people who are non-believers, which I take to include people who do not openly profess any religious belief, I have found that the most natural and fruitful way to engage is in discussion of the things that interest and concern all of us, whatever our background or circumstances. I propose, in the next few minutes to talk about three aspects of human life which touch people whether they are believers or not. Let us see how they might illustrate indirectly the values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The three areas are: beauty, goodness and leadership, or as the title of my talk puts it: aesthetics, ethics and leadership. Within these three areas we find aspects of human life which touch everyone, and which in my experience open up, rather than close down, our dialogue with non-believers.

I begin with 'beauty'. Recently, I was invited to talk to a distinguished group of architects and designers, most of whom were unbelievers. I found that fact challenging. I had to discover the common ground on which we might engage. Reactions to my talk suggested that with a little imagination we had indeed found more common ground than might have been expected. I told them that when I was a young student in Rome I was taught that *being* is one, true, good and beautiful: *ens est unum, verum, bonum et pulchrum*. It was the *pulchrum*, the *beautiful*, that fired my imagination. There is beauty in the world and the best way to delight in that truth is to experience it. Plato said, *The power of the good has taken shape in the nature of the beautiful*. One of the Church Fathers, St. Maximus, said that *The created world had within itself a meaning, its own significance. So the world is orientated towards humanity, so even matter is orientated towards us or rather us and God.*

Architecture has its own particular and very important part to play in creating a space for meeting, a space for humanity, a space for the sacred. Buildings are never just functional; they always have something to say about the complexities of life in community, and the humanisation of space. Of course buildings from beautiful Cathedrals, like St. Peter's, bridges, galleries and business schools have to be designed and constructed so that they serve a practical purpose. But art and architecture also have something to do with *civiltà* or *civilization*, civility, and must never be enclosed within their own world. They should raise the human heart to the Creator of all things, namely God. Our artistic and aesthetic imaginations are a bridge to the transcendent and eternal. Art and architecture, music and literature are means to raise hearts and minds to God.

This implies, and my experience bears this out, that art, architecture and beauty, can also act as a bridge in our conversation with unbelievers. For many people aesthetics can act as a kind of pre-evangelisation that may lead them in time to a more profound engagement with eternal truths and the discovery of God. Pope John Paul, in his letter to artists says, *Beauty is a key to the mystery and call to transcendence. It is an invitation to savour life and to dream of the future. That is why the beauty in created things can never fully*

satisfy. It stirs that hidden nostalgia for God which a love of beauty, like St. Augustine could express in incomparable terms, "Late have I loved You, Beauty so old and so new, late have I loved You". So my first point is that the beauty, goodness and glory of creation offer real substance for our dialogue with unbelievers, dialogue which may lead some to the discovery of the truth of God.

A second area of common ground between Christians, and indeed people of the other main faiths, and those who do not profess any faith, is ethics. A concern with moral goodness is common to the whole human family, even if the principles which we apply in order to differentiate that which is good from that which is wrong vary considerably. There is a sense in which our Western culture, for example, is on its own ethical journey. This is most apparent in the younger generation. While so many have lost their bearings, as far as an explicitly Christian morality is concerned, nevertheless they are often conscientiously searching for goodness, for beauty and for truth. We are back to possibilities for pre-evangelisation.

I gave a talk two weeks ago to students at the University of Wales on the topic of Christianity, culture and human flourishing. Only three paragraphs of that talk referred to a troublesome aspect of our culture which is the apparent trivialisation of sex, particularly in the media. Perhaps unsurprisingly it was those paragraphs which attracted the attention of the national media the next day. I said that too often the sex which we see on our television screens, and which dominates so much modern advertising, is devoid of any real context. *Sex is presented as something which has no real significance. Love is hardly ever mentioned. Commitment is measured in attachments of weeks, not lifetimes. Sex divorced from love, from commitment, from fidelity and from the desire to have children is a trivialisation of something profound and extraordinarily important.* Apart from the mere mention of the word sex these sentiments received national media attention because I was touching on issues that are of profound concern to a great many in our society, most notably parents.

I believe very strongly that the cement which holds society together is family life. Stable families are made and sustained by loving, unselfish and mature relationships. Our attitude to that most important gift of God to humankind, namely the gift of sex, is fundamental therefore to the continued health and stability of our society, and our culture. Here is a subject where people of goodwill, be they believers or unbelievers, would find common cause with us.

The last area which I find acts as a bridge between the Church and non-believers is the issue of leadership. In increasingly plural and multicultural societies, and in institutions which find themselves the subject of increasingly intense scrutiny or suspicion, leaders are faced with a common challenge: how to motivate and inspire people to work together with a common sense of purpose, united by common values. Defining mission, values and purpose in an increasingly diverse world, has become more challenging. I have found that dialogue with leaders in society, whether in industry, politics or other walks of life # including of course religious leaders # can be mutually enriching.

In my own discussions I have found that many people in leadership positions are concerned about how they can enable a group to flourish under their leadership. The first point I often make is that of John Henry Newman who famously said that *the definition of a gentleman is someone who has his eye on all the company*. Leaders, ourselves included, must take a personal interest in all their colleagues. They must be sure that everyone within their organisation, team or command is inspired both by a personal loyalty, and by a common mission. This requires relational skills of a high order, and an attention to the detail both of the purpose and values of the organisation, and the lives and individual qualities of the people who make that organisation work.

This is the stuff of a rich dialogue between us and non-believers in responsible positions. One simple example # the model of community with the leader at the centre rather than at

the apex # is a model at the heart of the Church's tradition and experience which has a great deal to offer leaders in more secular situations. It is encouraging for instance that the Rule of St Benedict is being used successfully by monastic communities in England and elsewhere as the basis for new reflections on business ethics and leadership. The notions of communion and solidarity are other aspects of the Church's experience, tradition and teaching which offer great scope for further reflection and dialogue with non-believers.

Dialogue with non-believers requires in the first instance getting into conversation about matters that concern us all, and on which we can all expect to have a view. It is in exchanging views openly and respectfully that caricatures fall away, and new connections and interest can spark. Difficult though it is we should always try to resist the temptation to defensiveness. In my experience people remain open to dialogue so long as difference is respected, and affection and humour are part of the conversation. This is usually easier in private and friendly conversation than in the TV studio (!) # but we have to learn to accept both.

I have mentioned here three areas which seem to me naturally to allow for interesting and engaging dialogue, and even opportunities for pre-evangelization, namely ethics, aesthetics and leadership. There are of course many, many more, and they will vary from culture to culture. Suffice then to repeat, with Pope John Paul, that it is precisely the person, the man, in all the truth of his life, in his conscience, his continual inclination to sin and at the same time in his continual aspiration to truth, to what is good and what is beautiful, to justice and to love, that the Vatican Council had before its eyes, when it looked at the modern world, and declared so famously that our joys, hopes, grief and anguish and the joys, hopes, grief and anguish of every man are the same. Plenty of scope then for our continuing dialogue.

This man, this person, the Pope says, is the way for the Church.