

Afterword

Communicating Catholic Culture: Looking Ahead

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In a speech he gave in 2017, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin referenced his meeting with Pope Benedict in the context of the *ad limina* visit of the Irish Bishops in 2006.

When I was received by Pope Benedict on the occasion of my first *ad limina* visit ten years ago, I arrived well prepared with all my statistics and my analysis of the bright spots and the shadows of Catholicism in Dublin. I had statistics about priests, about institutions, about Mass attendance. After greeting me the Pope started the conversation immediately by asking me “where are the points of contact between the Church in Ireland and those areas where the future of Irish culture is being formed”. Instead of asking me about the number of parishes he quizzed me about the relationship between faith and universities, and media, and politics, in art and literature, as well as fundamental ethical issues on economy and society. Pope Benedict’s question is still today a vital one for the Church in Ireland to address and on which to reflect.ⁱ

I would suggest that the urgency of addressing the question concerning the relationship of the Church and culture in the broadest sense is not in any way confined to the Irish situation but has global relevance, albeit acknowledging that the nature of the relationship may be shaped by the specific socio-political dynamics and histories of different countries. I am convinced that this volume can be seen as part of the response to said question. I would like to congratulate the editors for their choice to interpret widely and comprehensively the scope of what we might call a Catholic vision of culture. I would also wish to express my appreciation to all the contributors for the competence and rigour they bring to their task of outlining a Catholic understanding of the different themes assigned to them.

In this reflection, I do not propose to enter into the details of the specific themes that have been addressed but to concentrate on the spirit with which the Church should seek to engage with men and women of culture, especially those who choose to identify as not being believers, and to focus on the means or instruments that can help to promote the interaction of faith and culture. The Pontifical Council for Culture, where I have worked for the last 4 years, has a particular mission to dialogue with people who do not identify with any religious tradition. The Council has a somewhat complicated history; it was founded by John Paul II in 1982 with a view to promoting dialogue between the Church and contemporary cultures, but in 1993 it was united to the Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Non-believers, which itself had been established in 1988 to continue the mandate of Secretariat for Non-believers which was instituted by Paul VI in 1965 to give expression to the Second Vatican Council’s appeal for the Church to engage with atheism as expressed in *Gaudium et spes*:

The Church sincerely professes that all men, believers and unbelievers alike, ought to work for the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live; such an ideal cannot be realized, however, apart from sincere and prudent dialogue.ⁱⁱ

The fusion of the Council for Culture and the Council for Dialogue with Non-believers was not merely an administrative reform but was rooted in an awareness that the arena of culture was a privileged forum within which to seek greater mutual understanding between believers and non-believers.

The ultimate institutional origins of the Pontifical Council for Culture in the Second Vatican Council continues to shape its understanding of all its activities. At the heart of this approach is a belief that, while the Church has much to bring to the world, we can also learn from our engagement with human society and that we should encourage ‘the mutual exchange and assistance’ which is, of necessity, ongoing between the Church and the world. The Church is concerned with the world and is not immune from the struggles of the world. We believe the Church has something to offer, we have a vision of a God who loves us, who saves us, whose love is unconditional, a God who grounds the value and the worth of every single human person. We have a vision of Jesus Christ, who shows us a way of living in service of the other, a way that is going to help the human flourishing of individual and of societies. But the Church also receives from the world, we learn much from the world, from developments and progress that have been made in many areas, from philosophies and from perspectives that are not directly coming from our tradition. Our dialogue with the world and with culture, at its best, leads to what might be called a ‘bi-directional learning’. As we are reminded in *Gaudium et spes*:

The Church herself knows how richly she has profited by the history and development of humanity.... She receives a variety of helps from men of every rank and condition, for whoever promotes the human community at the family level, culturally, in its economic, social and political dimensions, both nationally and internationally, such a one, according to God's design, is contributing greatly to the Church as well, to the extent that she depends on things outside herself. Indeed, the Church admits that she has greatly profited and still profits from the antagonism of those who oppose or who persecute her.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is important in such dialogue that we respect each other's differences. Respectful dialogue does not mean that we will always reach agreement. It does require that we will never cease to seek to understand the other's position. We debate not to score points against each other, but in order to grow in mutual insight. In 2010, Pope Benedict, in the context of his meeting with representatives of the world of culture in Lisbon, reminded us that:

The Church, in her adherence to the eternal character of truth, is in the process of learning how to live with respect for other ‘truths’ and for the truth of others. Through this respect, open to dialogue, new doors can be opened to the transmission of truth.^{iv}

It was in this same spirit that Pope Benedict had launched the Courtyard of the Gentiles initiative the previous year. In his address to the Curia, he spoke of his visit to the Czech Republic earlier that year and his surprise at the warmth of the welcome afforded to him, and the attention his words had received, in a country he had been told had a majority of atheists and agnostics. He declared his determination that believers should have such people at heart:

I think that today too the Church should open a sort of ‘Court of the Gentiles’ in which people might in some way latch on to God, without knowing him and before gaining access to his mystery, at whose service the inner life of the Church stands. Today, in addition to interreligious dialogue, there should be a dialogue with those to whom religion is something foreign, to whom God is unknown and who nevertheless do not want to be left merely Godless, but rather to draw near to him, albeit as the Unknown.^v

This Courtyard was to be place of dialogue where believers and non-believers could grow in reciprocal understanding and address together shared concerns with the wisdom of their traditions. He was clear that although believers would never cease to witness to their faith that the Courtyard

would serve primarily as a place of exchange and encounter. If there were to be an overtly proselytising focus, the Courtyard would not be credible as an authentic centre of dialogue:

When we speak of a new evangelization these people are perhaps taken aback. They do not want to see themselves as an object of mission or to give up their freedom of thought and will. Yet the question of God remains present even for them, even if they cannot believe in the concrete nature of his concern for us.^{vi}

The Pontifical Council for Culture under the direction of its President, Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, has promoted the Courtyard of the Gentiles and given it a certain institutional structure. The Courtyard can focus on very different issues (science, ecology, economics, music etc.) and may take a variety of formats (discussions, performances, exhibitions, events etc.) but it is always characterised by a commitment to bring together those who identify as believers and those who do not with a view to exploring profoundly some shared concern or preoccupation. The focus is never on debating the relative merits of belief and unbelief but on seeking to understand the different, and often complementary, viewpoints faith and more secular standpoints can offer on the subject being discussed. Originally many of the particular events were conceived and sponsored by the Council which sought to identify suitable interlocutors. Increasingly, however, as the profile of the Courtyard has grown, and as its value and worth has been vindicated, the Council is receiving invitations from secular institutions anxious to sponsor such dialogues.

The Courtyard has also proved itself to be a very powerful point of continuity between the thought of Pope Benedict and Pope Francis' desire to promote a 'culture of encounter'. The culture of encounter is one of the key themes articulated by Pope Francis and at its core is a desire to promote dialogue and understanding between people, a coming together that is real and honest. In his address to the ecclesial movements for the Vigil of Pentecost 2013, he reminded believers that

.. it is important to be ready for encounter. For me this word is very important. Encounter with others. Why? Because faith is an encounter with Jesus, and we must do what Jesus does: encounter others.... with our faith we must create a "culture of encounter", a culture of friendship, a culture in which we find brothers and sisters, in which we can also speak with those who think differently, as well as those who hold other beliefs, who do not have the same faith.^{vii}

For Pope Francis, the importance of encounter is not confined to its instrumental value as something that can promote harmony but is rooted in what means to be human: 'Our openness to others, each of whom is a "thou" capable of knowing, loving and entering into dialogue, remains the source of our nobility as human persons.'^{viii}

My own understanding of how Pope Francis might wish us to conceive the encounter between faith and culture is shaped by thoughts he offered to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications in 2013. Although his focus was on the issue of digital technologies and communications, his address went more to the roots of the Church's mission:

In every situation, beyond technological considerations, I believe that the goal is to understand how to enter into dialogue with the men and women of today, to know how to engage this dialogue in order to appreciate their desires, their doubts and their hopes. ... It is therefore important to know how to dialogue ... in such a way as to reveal a presence that listens, converses and encourages.^{ix}

He went on to speak of a pilgrim Church that learns to walk with everyone. I think the threefold mandate to listen, to converse and to encourage has much to contribute to a fruitful encounter of the Church and the world of culture.

It is often in culture that people and communities are best able to express their deepest hopes and fears, their aspirations and delusions, their joys and their worries. It follows that an attentive 'listening' to culture – to writers, poets, musicians and artists – can help us to take the pulse of a society. In his post-synodal Exhortation, *Christus vivit*, Pope Francis recognised the demand of young people

...for a Church that listens more, that does more than simply condemn the world. ... To be credible to young people, there are times when she needs to regain her humility and simply listen, recognizing that what others have to say can provide some light to help her better understand the Gospel. A Church always on the defensive, which loses her humility and stops listening to others, which leaves no room for questions, loses her youth and turns into a museum.^x

This must embrace a willingness to listen to what contemporary culture has to say about the Church itself. This will not always be an easy exercise – especially if one is attentive to recent representations of the Church in cinema – but an honest confrontation of these hard truths is necessary if we are to engage meaningfully. Peter Connolly, an Irish priest who was a Professor of English Literature, pointed to writers as reliable barometers of public sentiments. He suggested in 1958 that 'the serious writer is often ahead of his generation in that he brings to expression feelings and thoughts lying dormant and unformulated all around him'.^{xi} By 1980, his engagement with culture had led him to the then improbable, but ultimately prophetic, prediction that 'religion will go in Ireland in the next generation: and when it goes it will go so fast that nobody will even know it is happening... Look at the speed with which our people got rid of their own language when it no longer seemed of practical use to them'.^{xii} This listening ought not to be confined to high culture. It is a sad truth that many of those who visit Saint Peter's basilica have an understanding of faith and Catholicism that owes more to Dan Brown than to the writings of theologians or historians.

On a more positive note, I believe that our 'listening' to artists can alert us to a desire in many of our contemporaries to explore questions of meaning and value and to confront the area of mystery. This perception was articulated by Pope John Paul II in his *Letter to Artists*:

You know, however, that the Church has not ceased to nurture great appreciation for the value of art as such. Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience. In so far as it seeks the beautiful, fruit of an imagination which rises above the everyday, art is by its nature a kind of appeal to the mystery. Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.^{xiii}

The capacity of art to shake people out of their complacency and to invite them to look again and more deeply at our world can prepare the ground for a more purposeful consideration of questions of faith and belief: 'Art is able to manifest and make visible the human need to surpass the visible, it expresses the thirst and the quest for the infinite.'^{xiv} Speaking of one of his favourite contemporary artists, Alejandro Marmo, Pope Francis states that 'Marmo demonstrates that what is not visible, which for some is an illusion, instead is a hope in which we can believe. ... This is the greatness of Alejandro; this is the role of the poet, the artist.'^{xv} It is appropriate to leave the final word on the revelatory aspect of art to a great poet. Seamus Heaney in a wonderful work called *Seeing Things* (a delightfully ambiguous title) speaks of a visit to a Cathedral where the façade featured the baptism of Christ carved in stone. In a section of the poem introduced by the notion of *claritas* (the dry eyed Latin word), he describes the exquisite details of the carving but insists: 'And yet in that utter visibility The stone's alive with what's invisible.'^{xvi}

The importance of conversation between people of faith and those who do not profess any religious adherence is, as we have seen, at the heart of the Courtyard of the Gentiles initiative. These conversations are only possible where there is a commitment to allowing each the freedom to express his or her views and a willingness to engage his or her questions. If people are not encouraged to attend to different views, the risk is that they will become closed in by their own pre-established world view and that they will be confirmed in their own opinions and prejudices rather than helped to search for truth and understanding. In recent years the increased polarisations that have marked political, economic and civic discourse have rendered public conversations ever more shrill and less capable of generating consensus or even respectful disagreement. People become trapped in the so-called ‘echo chambers’ or ‘cocoon’, hearing only the voices of those who agree with them. It is sad that many still speak of ‘culture wars’. If the Church can help to establish fora which facilitate the meeting of minds and well-tempered dialogue, it will make a substantive contribution to the good of society and also secure a presence for its own voice. When people listen to the ‘other’ and allow his or her voice to breach their defensiveness, they open themselves to growth in understanding. The more people grow in knowledge of others, the more they grow also in self-knowledge.

An essential requirement of dialogue is that we can go deeper in our conversations and get beyond the initial, and often superficial, points of difference in an attempt to **explore the more profound roots of our convictions and certainties**. The real danger is that we get trapped in forms of *literalism*, where we cannot get beyond the surface arguments and where meaningful encounter becomes impossible. As Pope Francis reminds us:

We have to be able to dialogue with the men and women of today We are challenged to be people of depth, attentive to what is happening around us and spiritually alert. To dialogue means to believe that the ‘other’ has something worthwhile to say, and to entertain his or her point of view and perspective.^{xvii}

In our engagement with the contemporary arts, we are obliged at times to suspend some of our immediate or instinctively negative judgement of certain forms of expression and presentation that are deliberately provocative and seemingly offensive. We need to discern between forms of expression that notwithstanding their ostensible aggressiveness represent an honest and authentic expression of the artist’s viewpoint and those that are rooted in a craving for attention or notoriety. We should be alert to the fact that artists may find it difficult to be seen to engage explicitly with questions of faith and they also may be suspicious of our intentions. This process involves a type of disarming of a hermeneutic of mutual suspicion where each of the partners to the dialogue further risks being misunderstood by their own community of belonging. The artist may be accused of selling-out or reneging on his or her own artistic integrity while the believer’s attitude of openness can be characterised as acquiescence or attributed to a lack of moral courage. Where these initial suspicions are overcome and trust grows between the partners, the possibility often emerges of the conversation becoming more direct and of the participants being open to challenging and being challenged by the other.

The hallmark of the Church’s meeting with the world of culture should be that of encouragement. In his famous meeting with artists in the Sistine Chapel in 1964, Pope Paul VI made a passionate plea for the renewal of friendship between the Church and artists. It is clear that a similar renewal of amity between the Church and world of culture more broadly is called for in these days. This renewal could profitably begin with a restatement of the sentiments of *Gaudium et spes* and a gracious acknowledgement of the extraordinary contributions of science and technology, politics and economics, art and creativity to the betterment of our world. Such a declaration would be consonant with the sentiments of Pope Francis in *Laudato si’* where he recognised that:

technology has remedied countless evils which used to harm and limit human beings. How can we not feel gratitude and appreciation for this progress, especially in the fields of medicine, engineering and communications? How could we not acknowledge the work of many scientists and engineers who have provided alternatives to make development sustainable.^{xviii}

Such statements need to be reiterated and, at least initially, less qualified if we are to escape the widespread cultural assumption that the Church is somehow in competition with science and more secular understanding of progress.

As our relationships with those we encounter in the dialogue with the world of culture become more profoundly human, it will become more appropriate and truthful and genuinely encouraging for us to share the deepest source of our hope and joy. In the context of a truly human encounter with other people, we would be lacking in authenticity if we were to exclude the possibility of speaking of the Good News that has set us free. We share it, however, as a gift with full respect for the freedom of the other and the mystery that will be at the heart of any encounter with God. Pope Francis, in his 2013 address to the Council for Social Communications has cautioned us that: ‘Within this encounter, there is the person and there is Christ. There is no room for the spiritual engineer who wishes to manipulate.’^{xxix} Our very willingness to dialogue, however, may be a sufficient statement of our faith in God and in his love for all people. As Pope Benedict said in *Deus Caritas Est*:

A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak. He knows that God is love and that God's presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love.^{xxx}

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- ⁱ D. Martin, Address, 2017. Ahttps://www.dublindiocese.ie/the-challenge-for-the-church-in-the-21st-century/
ⁱⁱ Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 21
ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 44
^{iv} Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to Representatives of the World of Culture* (12 May 2010).
^v Pope Benedict XVI, *Christmas Greetings to the Members of the Roman Curia* (21 December 2009).
^{vi} *Ibid.*
^{vii} Pope Francis, *Address to Ecclesial Movement on the Vigil of Pentecost 2013* (18 May 2013).
^{viii} Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 119.
- ^{ix} Pope Francis, *Address to Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications* (21 September 2013).
^x Pope Francis, *Christus vivit*, 41
^{xi} P. Connolly (edited by J. Murphy), *No Bland Facility: Selected Writings on Literature, Religion and Censorship* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1991), p. 119
^{xii} D. Kiberd, 'The Irish Writer and the World' in *The Furrow* Volume 56 (2005), p. 247
^{xiii} Pope St John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, 10.
^{xiv} Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience* (31 August 2011).
^{xv} T. Lipi, *Papa Francesco, La Mia Idea di Arte* (Mondadori/Musei Vaticani, 2015).
^{xvi} S. Heaney, *Seeing Things* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1993).
^{xvii} Pope Francis, *World Communications Day Message*, 2014.
^{xviii} Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 102
^{xix} Pope Francis, *Address to Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical council for Social Communications* (21 September 2013).
^{xx} Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 31c