

## THE CURRENT CULTURE

The dominant culture today can be summarized in two levels: that of knowledge and that of action:

- 1) At the level of the ability to know the truth, we have moved from the naive optimism of the light of reason (Enlightenment) to the current weakness of thought (which goes as far as nihilism). Among the consequences of this disillusionment in the capacity of the human mind to know an objective truth is undoubtedly the attempt to exclude the faith from the field of scientific research, relegating it to the role of feeling and myth. Thus, we came to what St. John Paul II called the "disastrous separation" between faith and reason causing mutual damage on both sides: *"Deprived of what Revelation offers, reason has taken side-tracks which expose it to the danger of losing sight of its final goal. Deprived of reason, faith has stressed feeling and experience, and so run the risk of no longer being a universal proposition."*<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI in his speech at the University of Regensburg (12 September 2006) had stressed (without being well understood) the need to reconstruct the dialogue between faith and reason by denouncing the risk of today's culture: a self-destruction of rational capacity in name of a concept of science reduced to what is verifiable by an empirical experiment, neglecting as subjective all that goes beyond the empirically measurable world: *"In the Western world it is widely held that only positivistic reason and the forms of philosophy based on it are universally valid. Yet the world's profoundly religious cultures see this exclusion of the divine from the universality of reason as an attack on their most profound convictions. A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures"*.<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, *"if science as a whole is this and this alone, then it is man himself who ends up being reduced, for the specifically human questions about our origin and destiny, the questions raised by religion and ethics, then have no place within the purview of collective reason as defined by «science», so understood, and must thus be relegated to the realm of the subjective"*.<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict's invitation was to reconstruct the dialogue between faith and reason, in which theology also becomes true science, in order to give reason its strong space and faith its congruent share (rationabile obsequium): it is *"a profound encounter of*

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*, n. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, *Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections* (Lecture during the Meeting with the Representatives of Science), Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg, 12 September 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, *Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections* (Lecture during the Meeting with the Representatives of Science), Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg, 12 September 2006.

*faith and reason is taking place here, an encounter between genuine enlightenment and religion”.*<sup>4</sup>

- 2) With regard to the field of action, that is, [the field] of moral reflection: the dominant culture, while proclaiming some universal values in the abstract, has nevertheless eliminated any reference to a transcendent Authority, in order to leave the subject full of freedom to interpret and to actualize these values. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger addressed this issue in his speech in Subiaco, on April 1, 2005, shortly before being elected Pope. While appreciating Kant's effort to construct a morality based on practical reason (since in Kant's opinion, God is not known by pure reason), Cardinal Ratzinger notes the failure of this attempt which excludes God: *"the extreme attempt to fashion the things of man without any reference to God leads us ever closer to the edge of the abyss, to the total abolition of man."*<sup>5</sup> It has so fallen into a subjective and relativistic morality that exalts individual freedom as the absolute value to which, ultimately, every ethical instance must be traced. Thus, it is at the most, a subjectivist and relativistic morality without an objective distinction between good or evil, which are defined according to the advantages or disadvantages that they can bring to the individual, who has rights but without objective duties.

This weak thought reduced to empirical knowledge, and this individualistic and utilitarian morality mainly affect young people and their integral growth. In fact, this exaggerated individualism, while on one hand increases potential freedom of individuals, on the other hand, it leaves people without reference points, feeling more insecure and disoriented, even before their own cultural roots. While the increased influence of social media allows the sharing of current events in the globalized world, it also massively invades even private space, impoverishing direct and immediate relationships, even in the family. The emotional manipulation, on which the new strategies of shaping public opinion is based (under the power of those who control the means of social communication) opens the risk to populist tendencies that influence especially the new generations deprived of objective and of transcendent ethical references. Even religion, in this context, while still arousing interest, is subjected to this wave of subjectivism and relativism: believing becomes part of a subjective processing and is constructed through an assemblage of elements taken from somebody outside the traditional and institutional spheres. In short, as some sociologists warn, the process of liberating the individual from social oppression has led to a *"hypertrophy of the Self"*, which opens up immense space of freedom, but with a high price to pay: sense of fragmentation, abandonment of evaluation criteria that are not internal to the action, absence of a sense of cultural belonging, disenchantment and temporariness of

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, *Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflections* (Lecture during the Meeting with the Representatives of Science), Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg, 12 September 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Europe in the Crisis of Cultures*, Subiaco, 1 April 2005.

living. If the past social order risked imprisoning the individual within a sort of moral protection, the global ego risks losing the individual's personal interiority and, therefore, reducing himself to a mere fragment of the whole, dominated by the global environment in which he lives.<sup>6</sup> This cultural context obviously influences and conditions every educational action, especially that offered by Catholic institutions, placing us all in front of new challenges that come to question the Catholic identity of our institutions and, consequently, their very *raison d'être*.

Faced with these challenges, the attitude of the Church and of those who work in its name must avoid two opposite risks. As Cardinal Carlo M. Martini emphasized since 2000, we must avoid both the attitude of resignation of those who say that we are going towards the moral catastrophe, and so, all that remains is to confine ourselves in defense waiting for the storm to pass; we must avoid as well the attitude of those who think they still have time to "overturn the course of things" by returning to the past and by simply reaffirming abstract principles and traditional attitudes. The Cardinal indicated instead a third way that does not deny what is good in the two previous attitudes, but that asks questions about the opportunities that modern culture also offers for the Gospel message: *"It is a question of asking ourselves, in spirit of faith, about the possibilities that we are given today in order to live and proclaim the Christian message starting from the context described above"*. In other words, we must go back with courage to the spirit of the initial stages of Christianity preserved in the best moments of our history, that is, of knowing how to incarnate the novelty of the Gospel in every circumstance, even the most adverse, certain that it is precisely in the darkest moments of history that the light of Truth, who is Christ himself, can shine with even greater clarity.

This is especially true with regard to the youth who, though deceived by the idols of individualistic and utilitarian secularism, still retain a living desire for high and meaningful values that can change an increasingly materialistic and unjust world. It is precisely for this reason that in face of current challenges (which arise in the educational field and, in particular, in our university institutions), an authentic capacity for dialogue with everyone is a necessary method in order to accompany the young people toward the knowledge of the true and the good, without ideological impositions, but also without giving up proposing a vision of man and of the world, drawing from Revelation. Pope Francis in the Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, invites [us] to this wide-ranging dialogue, *"not as a mere tactical approach, but as an intrinsic requirement for experiencing in community the joy of the Truth and appreciating more*

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. C. Giaccardi e M. Magatti, *L'io globale, dinamiche della società contemporanea*, Laterza, 2003.

*fully its meaning and practical implications*".<sup>7</sup> As Benedict XVI underlined, "*truth, in fact, is **lógos** which creates **diá-logos**, and hence communication and communion*".<sup>8</sup>

I would like to cite, as an example of this attitude of dialogue, the recent document of our Congregation for Catholic Education which has, as its subject, the theme on gender ideology: "*Male and female he created them: Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education*" (2 February 2019). Beyond the theme, which is also important, I would like to focus on the method, with which one can address this issue in dialogue with those who support varying ideas and who seek to bring about an anthropological revolution in schools, as scientific progress. The method of dialogue is articulated in the document in three steps: listening, reasoning and proposing.

I think that this methodology can be extended to any topic, especially the most sensitive and conflicting ones [in] modern culture.

- 1.) Listening is the first step in a serious dialogue. Leaving aside the presumption of knowing already what others think, it is necessary that we prepare ourselves to welcome people who think differently, with a positive spirit and without prejudice (even if we already know some of their ideas). What is important, in fact, more than ideas are the people who must be welcomed with an evangelical attitude of those who love and who seek to enter into communion with their neighbor. This acceptance of people must be unconditional and must be given witness, even if the same benevolent attitude is lacking on the other side. Moreover, listening chooses to deepen the knowledge of what others think and to be able to distinguish different levels of thought. In the above-mentioned document, various positions supporting such theories are mentioned. Some of which may not only be in agreement with the Christian view, but may also lead to true self-criticism of previous positions, which were not without partial deficiencies: these are converging points, also in the general vision of human nature and scientific progress.
- 2.) Reasoning is the next step in which all (we and others) are called to render account of our ideas by overcoming the simple proposition of ideas [advanced] through unverified slogans or abstractions. It is evident that on the part of the believer and of the Catholic institution, reasoning means knowing how to use reason enlightened by faith. But, it cannot be expected that those who do not believe would accept the arguments of faith. Here lies the wise art deriving from dialogue between faith and reason, which is the patrimony of our history: giving reason to faith means knowing how to translate the revealed datum into intelligible arguments, so that even those who do not yet have faith can face the Truth. And, as pointed out, here lies

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis gaudium*, n.b.

<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate*, n. 4.

also the historic opportunity for the Church: as current culture is losing faith in rationality, paradoxically, the Church is precisely the institution that urges us the most to fully recover the potential of the human mind. Therefore, on our part it is necessary to know how to argue in the light of rational evidence, accepting real scientific progress, but it is also appropriate to push others to render account for their ideas by placing them in a non-contradictory and non-partial context that allows reaching out to the truth in its entirety.

3.) Proposing is the third step to be taken. Whatever the outcome of the rational confrontation (positive or negative), it is the right and duty of the Church and of our university institutions to propose their own vision of man and of the world, with due respect to those who think differently. To propose, therefore, but not to impose. And here is a principle that belongs, thanks to God, to modern democratic culture, which must be clarified without hesitation: the principle of the pluralism in education programmes as a condition for true democracy, in contrast to the vision of a totalitarian state that would like to impose a single [system of] thought. It is in fact an undeniable that our Catholic universities enrich educational programmes and, despite their Catholic identity, do not impose anything on anyone. Those who enroll in our universities are not forced at all to know the anthropological and pedagogical vision that inspires them, but they are encouraged to do so freely. On the contrary, it would be taxing and anti-democratic to force our institutions to adopt a way of thinking that is different from their faith, in the name of a scientific or political authority. This is not acceptable. We must overcome the fear of being accused of some phobia because of dissenting from the dominant thought or else we lose our identity through the wrong purpose of accepting the approval of the dominant thought. If our Catholic universities lose their identity and conform to the world, one could wonder what is the purpose of their existence, and how could they justify the sacrifices and expenses of many who work there. It is needless to mention the words of Jesus in reference to salt when he said: *“if the salt has lost its flavor, with what will it be salted? It is then good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men”*.<sup>9</sup> In the same way, this surrender to the world would be the end of the Church's educational commitment.

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew 5:13.