

Dialogue of Knowledge

Gospel and cultures: a dialogue for building the Kingdom.

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Today more than ever we are confronted with the reality of the encounter between cultures. As evangelizers, we are increasingly aware of the importance of our culture that colors the way we understand our faith and, simultaneously, the cultural reality in which the Gospel message is embodied and transformed. The multicultural reality in which we live calls us to experience dialogue as the necessary means for the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is in the encounter with others that the process of evangelization takes place, which is fundamentally based on the constant dialogue of the encounter between the Other *par excellence* and the human being in his or her personal and cultural identity.

The theme of dialogue between the Gospel and cultures had already been addressed in Pope Paul VI' encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, in which it is stated that Evangelization is a task that is not only about the conversion of the individual but also includes the individual in his or her community dimension. Paul VI thus states, «*To evangelize, for the Church, is to bring the Good News into all strata of humanity; it is, by its influence, to transform from within, to make humanity itself new [...] the Church evangelizes when, by virtue of the divine power alone of the Message which she proclaims, she seeks to convert the personal and at the same time the collective consciousness of men, the activity in which they are engaged, the life and the concrete environment proper to them*»¹.

Therefore, it is not only a matter of «*preaching the Gospel in ever larger geographical areas or to ever larger populations, but also of reaching out to and almost upsetting through the power of the Gospel the criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, inspirational sources and patterns of life of humanity, which are contrary to the Word of God and the plan of salvation*».²

It is, therefore, an evangelization that enters «*deeply and down to the roots - the culture and cultures of man,[...] always starting from the person and always returning to the relationships of people among themselves and with God*»³.

The consequence of this is that while not identifying with any culture, «*the Kingdom, which the Gospel proclaims, is experienced by men who are deeply connected to a culture, and the building of the Kingdom cannot but make use of the elements of human culture and cultures. Independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them, but capable of impregnating all of them, without enslaving itself to any*»⁴.

The following will attempt to present some basic concepts to help us understand what we mean by culture and what it means in today's world to place ourselves in a dialogue with

¹ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, no. 18.

² *ibidem* n. 19.

³ *Ibidem* n. 20.

⁴ *Ibidem* n. 20.

the variety of cultures⁵.

The meaning of culture

There are numerous definitions of culture, worked out by various schools of thought and scholars; there is no single definition that encompasses all the meanings attached to it. There seems to be a consensus based on the fact that culture would be the most unique characteristic of homo sapiens, the one that distinguishes them from animals. Among the definitions of culture, we suggest some that show us the different understandings of it:

- 1) culture can be seen as the complex set of knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom, and any other skills and habits acquired by human beings as members of a society.
- 2) culture is also seen as the way people live, It includes conventional patterns (to a given society) of thought and behavior such as values, beliefs, norms of conduct, political organization, economic activities, and the like, which are handed down from one generation to the next through learning;
- 3) culture is all that is socially transmitted, including artistic, social, ideological, and religious patterns of behavior as well as technology for mastering the environment.

All human beings have a culture.

All human beings are cultural beings. This fact is integral to a person's identity.

Culture harmonizes many elements to create a unique way of life for a human group. A person's culture is socially acquired, learned and shared, rather than biologically inherited: in this sense it is not an individual phenomenon, but a product of society, and is transmitted from one generation to the next. Today the general tendency among people is to affirm cultural diversity, to appreciate their various distinctive characteristics and to preserve and value all that is true, good and noble in each of them, learning from them.

Human beings are producers of culture.

Culture exists only through human beings and for human beings. Culture is the product of human creativity and experience, of shared interpretations of an experience communicated within specific groups: the whole of human activity is culture: intelligence and emotions, the human search for meaning in life, customs, and ethics. It is natural for human nature to be revealed only through it. It is not the product of individual human beings, but of a society, and in this sense, it is social and shared. Culture is cumulative, adding new features to existing ones, borrowing elements from others and absorbing them.

The plurality of cultures

There is a plurality of cultures in the world because cultures vary from society to society; each culture is unique and specific to a human group. Different lifestyles and different scales of values result from different ways of using things, expressing oneself, practicing religion, forming customs, making laws, and creating legal institutions, developing sciences, arts and cultivating the beautiful. Increased interaction among peoples and nations, mass media and social communication as well as increasing mobility have led to a recognition of the richness that such diversity brings.

Culture is stable and dynamic.

⁵ This presentation is based on the article by Kuruvachira, J., «Significato e caratteristiche della cultura», Salesianum 78 (2016), 499-537.

Cultures are inseparable from people and their history; they share the changing conditions of the world. Today's cultural dynamism is moving in two directions: on the one hand, there is a trend toward greater cultural uniformity; on the other hand, the uniqueness and specific nature of cultures are exalted. Thus, in our globalized reality characterized by human mobility and ease of communication, cultural belonging is no longer simply linked to that of the geographical or social reality to which it belongs, but is a multiple, complex reality in constant development and change. At the same time, the multiplicity of cultures creates a sense of insecurity, which consequently leads to a tendency to emphasize the distinction between groups to the point of producing reactions of fundamentalism and self-referential closure. Thus pluralism and the variety of traditions, customs and languages, which in themselves constitute a reason for mutual enrichment and development, can lead to an exacerbation of the identity datum and result in clashes and conflicts.

The common horizon

Cultural diversity does not prevent us from embracing the broader horizon of the unity of humankind, in the light of which it is possible to grasp the deeper meaning of diversity itself, and to avoid the radicalization of cultural identities that oppose any beneficial external influence.

Human beings necessarily exist in a particular culture, but humans are not exhausted in it: the very progress of cultures shows that there is something in human beings that transcends cultures. This 'something' is the nature of man: each culture, with its inner strength, gives expression to this unique human nature. The latter is the measure of culture and ensures that a human being does not become a prisoner of any of the cultures but affirms his personal dignity in living in accordance with the deep truth of his being. Each culture, with its specific capacity to give and receive, gives expression to the one human nature: the individual is never expressed through his own culture, because he transcends it in the constant search for something beyond it, something that can only be built together: the Kingdom of God.