

## **Sacramentality and Culture. God's Response to his People's Cry**

A Paper for the Faith and Culture Symposium organised by the Catholic Agency to Support Evangelisation. 5<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

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### **Introduction**

As well as 'sacramentality' and 'culture', a key word in this talk will be 'threshold'. The conjunction of 'sacramentality' and 'culture' in my title may suggest a clash between the two. It could sound as though the realities signalled by these two words were at odds with each other. 'Sacramentality' is a theological word. It picks out the sacredness bestowed by Jesus on certain elements of the natural world that allow those realities to impart his life to us and to function as meeting places or gateways to the kingdom of God. On the other hand, 'culture', particularly if coupled with 'modern' or 'contemporary' may suggest 'secular', with overtones of the absence of holiness or even atheism.

A moment ago, I spoke of the 'natural' world. I could have easily spoken of the 'created' world. Those two concepts might also sound as though they do not match. To call physical reality 'created' is to link it explicitly to God in a way that 'natural' does not. Of course, for a Catholic, whether we use the term 'natural', 'physical' or 'created', we understand and believe that God created the universe and all it contains.

The word 'threshold' suggests a meeting place and a gateway. It might also suggest an invitation and a place where one has access to two realities: the world outside a building and the building's interior. In this talk, I shall develop the idea that one who evangelises in part stands on the threshold of contemporary culture and the realm of God and introduces the one to the other, so that what resonates between them may become more visible, and so that the realm of God may respond to, correct and fulfil the human needs expressed by the culture.

### ***Fides et Ratio***

Pope John Paul II is known for his repeated call for a new evangelisation and for his concrete suggestions as to how it should be carried out. His message was that the gospel of Christ responded to humanity's deepest aspirations, whether these were individual, social, political, economical, artistic or cultural. In a way, he was bolder still and maintained that no human endeavour would be successful unless it was open to God, motivated towards the good of humanity and inspired by the gospel. He had a vision of evangelisation whose fruits would be a world that came progressively to resemble the realm of God, not simply in the way an image might, but by taking on the reality of God's kingdom itself.

While being optimistic, Pope John Paul was a realist. He lived through an era that had shown all too clearly what men and women were capable of for evil and for

good. He knew from his own philosophical and theological studies the deficiencies of contemporary thought and the dangers that arise from partial responses to humanity's profoundest questions. *Fides et Ratio* (*FetR*) lists a number of them: eclecticism (*FetR* 86); historicism (*FetR* 87); scientism (*FetR* 88); pragmatism (*FetR* 89) and nihilism (*FetR* 90). This list of woes has led one commentator to see *Fides et Ratio* as a lament. Its treatment of nihilism suggested to another that Pope John Paul II should be called the 'post-modern' pope.

These positions are intellectual standpoints and John Paul II regretted them because of their betrayal of reason. He also opposed them because they, individually and together, present a dismal vision of the reality of being human. Part of the pope's project in this encyclical was to offer a positive view of human beings as urged on by the question as to the meaning of life to embark on a search for truth, goodness and beauty that would lead to an encounter with the persons of the Trinity. He commended modern philosophy for putting the person at its centre because this allows us to see that the human quest is the search of persons for a person:

'From all I have said to this point it emerges that men and women are on a journey of discovery which is humanly unstoppable – a search for the truth and a search for a person to whom they might entrust themselves. Christian faith comes to meet them, offering the concrete possibility of reaching the goal they seek.' (*FetR* 33)

It would be appropriate, in the light of this to see human culture in its many forms as a product of this search and, to some extent, as prompted by the Spirit to express the image of God in humanity restored by baptism but also marred by sin. In a way, human culture is one of the ways in which humanity cries to God. It is a spontaneous and constructed display of human achievements and failures, goodness and sin. God's response comes through the gospel in which Jesus discloses the truth, goodness and beauty of the being of God and invites men and women to make their home within them. The one who evangelises may be a spokesperson for culture and a humble critic for it as well as the voice of the gatekeeper of the sheepfold where the sheep go freely in and out.

### **The one who evangelises as 'guide'**

By recalling the words of Pope John Paul II in *Fides et Ratio* I have shed a positive light on human culture while being aware of the darkness that mars it. I have thought of human culture as one of the ways in which human beings cry to God. In this way, men and women make themselves known to God, and after reflection, to themselves. I have also suggested that it may be fruitful to think of one who evangelises as standing on the threshold of that culture as well as being a gatekeeper of God's kingdom, equipped to facilitate access to the kingdom for those who freely seek it. I shall now develop these ideas by addressing the metaphor of the one who evangelises as guide.

Although I have said that the gospel is God's response to the human cry articulated in human culture, the primary truth is that God and his kingdom existed before human culture and that from the beginning God disclosed himself

to the men and women he created. Divine Revelation has many facets but it is essentially all the ways in which God communicates with his creatures. Sacramentality fits into the framework of Revelation, and I shall come to sacramentality later. The point I want to make now is that the one who brings the gospel is a guide to God's Kingdom as well as a critical spokesperson for human culture.

The sort of guide I am thinking of is a person employed, say by the National Trust, to conduct people round historic houses. That person may be well informed about the building she shows people around, familiar with the lay out, the furnishings, the history of the building, perhaps acquainted with some of the family anecdotes and the more prominent among the people who lived in the house. Another guide could be, as sometimes happens, the owners of the house themselves. They are likely to know the house better, to speak with more understanding of the family traditions, to be more at ease with their surroundings and have the sort of lightly worn authority that goes with naturally acquired familiarity. However impressed visitors may be with a guide of the first sort, they are likely to feel that they have received better value and a more authentic view of things if they have been shown round by the second kind of guide.

One way of thinking of Jesus would be to see him as guide of this sort. He is the one totally at home in his Father's house who invited his contemporaries to admire God's surroundings and make their home within them. In terms of the comparison between the two sorts of guide, it might be thought that the one who evangelises might more resemble the person employed by the National Trust, and while that might be so, in fact the one who crosses the threshold of God's kingdom with men and women eager to discover it needs to aspire to be the same sort of guide as Jesus himself. Jesus, the Word made flesh, understands both human beings and God. The evangeliser is called to merge knowledge of God and humanity in a similar way. One might say that one of the characteristics of the one who evangelises is wisdom. Such a person needs to visualise who God is and what his purpose is as well as to appreciate sympathetically what being human involves and how the two realities may be brought together.

### **Responsibilities of those who evangelise**

So I have introduced the images of the threshold and the guide and brought them together in the person who has been called to preach the gospel and acquire the wisdom that draws the two realms together. This prepares the way for an outline of some of the evangelisers' responsibilities. Perhaps the first of these is a desire for and respect for truth. Those who seek God's kingdom are asked to face and make decisions about some difficult demands. Jesus's teaching on marriage is perceived to be the foremost of these. What deterred many was his teaching on the Eucharist, his attitude to wealth, power and ambition. At the same time, Jesus did not always receive people in the same way. He loved them all, of course, but not everyone was called to be a companion, and at least one seems to have received authority over unclean spirits that had not come from a public encounter with Jesus, since John and the other disciples were suspicious when they saw it. Those who evangelise may not always be able to predict what God

has in store for the people they introduce to Jesus and his domain. It is clear from *Fides et Ratio* that Pope John Paul II believed that objective truth, rooted in the reality of things, is one of the gifts that accompanies the preaching of the gospel.

A second responsibility is sympathy. Different people and different groups have different charisms when it comes to evangelisation. It is these charisms that will put them in touch with the audience they are trying to attract to God. These are the groups they have sympathy for. They recognise in the members of these groups something of themselves and perhaps something of God as well. Such sympathy will not remain a vague interest but will be a spur to putting themselves on equal terms with the people they converse with, dialogue with, teach, hold discussions with, debate with, argue with, confront. So, people who are concerned with people who are poor make themselves poor; people interested in the dialogue between faith and science acquire a depth of knowledge about science; teachers extend their own concerns to embrace the interests of their students; people who support families may have some sociological skill. The different charisms and interests people have testify to the variety of human culture and to the many gateways and meeting points on whose thresholds with God's kingdom people who evangelise stand.

### **Sacramentality**

Implicit in what I have been saying is the belief that human beings have been created in a way that makes it possible for them to encounter God and to find in God's kingdom what satisfies their purest and deepest desires. When it comes to evangelisation Cardinal Newman's motto is a good one: 'Heart speaks to heart.' The psalmist says 'Deep calls to deep.' There is an affinity between God and humanity that makes communication between them possible. The Word became flesh so that people might become divine. The encounter between God and humanity transforms humanity.

Pope John Paul II saw that quest as culminating in an encounter with a human being. God has also chosen other means of communication. Sacramentality has its place there. What is physical may prepare the way for an encounter with God and may even be or become a way in which God discloses the truth about himself. One sustained exposition of humanity's sense of this can be found in Peter Ackroyd's *Thames. Sacred River*. Here is a flavour

'But in a more general sense water is spiritually pure. It is the renovator and protector of the world. It redeems ugliness. It is the source of health and strength. It palliates the human senses, refreshing to the touch, calming to the eye, melodious to the ear.' (p.114)

This is not a theological work but it evokes the religious feeling that leads some people to make their homes by the river and seems to have led many religious communities to set up monasteries there. That passage may seem overblown to some ears, but it is because water is all that, that Jesus raised it to the level it receives in the sacrament of baptism, where it not only points to but also brings about in the person baptised the life that Jesus bestows on those who put their trust in him. Physical rivers evoke the river that flows eastward from the temple

watering innumerable trees of life whose fruit is good to eat and whose leaves are medicinal.

Similarly, the water in the font, which must flow, when it is used, recalls thirst, perhaps the raging thirst of the Israelites in the desert. It also evokes that deeper thirst, which the Psalmist unites in the deer, running streams and our thirst for God. All the circumstances of baptism make its waters life giving, so that a created element as well as a person may be the threshold of God's kingdom. A further point, drawn from Ackroyd, is that the one who evangelises needs to be skilled in language and imagery and capable of expressing the sacred that they are attuned to, wherever it may be met.

Something similar may be said about marriage. The book of Genesis employs a restrained eloquence to evoke the human desire for the company and companionship of other human beings. This might cast light for us on the contemporary desire for a united humanity, or social cohesion. On God's behalf the Church offers marriage, a natural bond raised to the dignity of a sacrament, to show that God desires the reconciliation of the human race for which humanity also pines, and that he has bestowed on men and women something of his own fruitfulness and capacity to bring new life. It is from marriage that St Paul derived his image of the Church as the bride of Christ, going further than the prophets who saw Jerusalem as the mother who suckled her children. That example shows that the sacred writers of the period before Jesus's coming also knew that the sacred could be expressed, evoked and shared in the physical reality of building blocks. Sacramentality is something like the capacity of one sort of reality to convey the presence of another reality and provide the means, when designated to do so by Jesus, by which one may touch, see, pass from the first reality from the second.

### ***Ecclesia de Eucharistia***

The Second Vatican Council used the expression 'source and summit' when speaking of the Eucharist. Pope John Paul II used it again in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (*EdE* 22), asserting that the Eucharist is the source and summit of evangelisation. The goal of the Eucharist is communion between the people who celebrate and receive it and the Trinity. The unity that is generated in eating is raised by the sacrament of the Eucharist to the unity of men and women with God. The Pope also calls the Eucharist 'a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth.' He continues, 'It is a glorious ray of the heavenly Jerusalem which pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey.' (*EdE* 19)

As well as lifting physical reality to God, the Eucharist brings God into the midst of humanity. It is as though the two realities are porous. It is possible to inhabit both to some degree without leaving the reality one actually inhabits. The apostles proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus with the assertion that they had eaten and drunk with him after he had risen from the dead. People who celebrate the Eucharist are drawn into that experience. Their own faith is strengthened by the food they eat – the bread and wine that has become the body and blood of Christ – and, in the eating they enter the presence of God, who has made his Son present on earth.

## **Culture and sacramentality**

It is time to draw things together. Our concern has been the evangelisation of culture. This has raised the possibility that human cultures lack something that the kingdom of God supplies and that the preaching of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments brings to culture the reality that they lack. This is true; just as it is true that the gospel itself may show up what it is that humanity still needs to acquire. It need not follow, though it sometimes does, that culture is hostile to the kingdom of God. Culture may also be sacramental. It expresses the aspirations of humanity and furnishes the reality through which God may make himself known. Culture may also show the people who bring it into being the imperfections that need to be corrected if those people are to find the goal they seek, openly or implicitly.

The one who evangelises is aware of the complexity of culture and sympathetic to the power and frailty of the people who belong to it. Culture provides a threshold on which the guide to the kingdom of heaven may stand, indicating the meeting points, alerting the unconscious to the glimpses of glory and the sacred to which they need to open their eyes. An evangeliser is a sort of matchmaker, one who brings together two people looking for love, and telling one (culture) the whole truth about the other (God), while showing the first that even with all their faults God is the one who is making himself known to them, enhancing their beauty, burnishing their goodness and drawing them to the truth. The one who evangelises may then fade away, like John the Baptist, having achieved their task of leading men and women from the threshold, by way of created reality, into the kingdom of God.