Text of Pope Paul's Encyclical on The Church in Modern World

3—Dialogue

This is the third of three installments of the full text of Pope Paul's encyclical 'Ecclesiam Suam.' The first two sections dealt with the need for Catholics to be more deeply aware of the Church's nature and the need to renew the Church by stripping away historical developments which no longer serve a purpose in the modern world. The final and longest section of the encyclical is about the need for 'dialogue' with men of different faith and no faith. The text of the encyclical is from NCWC News Service.

There is a third attitude which the Catholic Church should adopt at this period in the history of the world: an attitude characterized by study of the contacts which the Church ought to maintain with humanity. If the Church acquires an ever-growing awareness of itself, and if the Church tries to model itself on the ideal which Christ proposes to it, the result is that the Church becomes radically different from the human environment in which it, of course, lives or which it approaches.

The Gospel makes us recognize such a distinction when it speaks to us of "the world", i.e., of humanity opposed both to the light of faith and to the gift of grace, of humanity which exalts itself in a naive optimism which believes that its own energies suffice to give man complete, lasting, and beneficent self-expression. Or, finally, of humanity which plunges itself into a crude form of pessimism which declares its own vices, weaknesses and moral ailments to be fatal, incurable, and perhaps even desirable as manifestations of freedom and of authenticity.

The Gospel, which recognizes, denounces, pities and cures human misfortunes with penetrating and sometimes with heart-rending sincerity, does not yield to any illusions about the natural goodness of man (as if he were sufficient unto himself and as if he needed nothing else than to be left free to express himself according to his whims), nor to any despairing resignation to the incurable corruption of human nature.

The Gospel is light, it is newness, it is energy, it is rebirth, it is salvation. Hence it both creates and defines a type of new life, about which the New Testament teaches us a continuous and remarkable lesson which is expressed in the warning of St. Paul: "You must not fall in with the manners of this world; there must be an inward change, a remaking of your minds, so that you can satisfy yourselves what is God's will, the good thing, the desirable thing, the perfect thing" (Rom. 12, 2).

Christian Life

This distinction between the life of the Christian and the life of the worldling also derives from the reality and from the consequent recognition of the sanctification produced in us by our sharing in the Paschal mystery and, above all, in holy Baptism, which, as was said above, is and ought to be considered a true rebirth. Again St. Paul reminds us of this truth: "We who were taken up into Christ by Baptism have been taken up, all of us, into his death. In our Baptism, we have been buried with him, died like him, that is, just as Christ was raised up by his Father's power from the dead, we too might live and move in a new kind of existence" (Rom. 6, 3-4).

It will not be amiss if the Christian of today keeps always in view his original and wonderous form of life which should not only sustain him with the happiness that results from his dignity but also protect him from an environment which threatens him with the contagion of human wretchedness and with the seduction of human glory.

See how St. Paul himself formed the Christians of the primitive Church: "You must not consent to be yokefellows with unbelievers. What has innocence to do with lawlessness? What is there in common between light and darkness? How can a believer throw in his lot with an infidel?" (2 Cor. 6, 14-15). Christian education will always have to remind the student today of his privileged position and of his resultant duty to live in the world but not in the way of the world, according to the above-mentioned prayer of Jesus for His Disciples: "I am not asking that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them clear of what is evil. They do not belong to the world, as I, too, do not belong to the world" (Jn. 17, 15-16). And the Church adopts this prayer as its own.

Mercy to World

But this distinction is not a separation. Neither is it indifference or fear or contempt. When the Church distinguishes itself from human nature, it does not oppose itself to human nature, but rather unites itself to it. Just as the doctor who, realizing the danger inherent in a contagious disease, not only tries to protect himself and others from such infection, but also dedicates himself to curing those who have been stricken, so too the Church does not make an exclusive privilege of the mercy which the divine goodness has shown it, nor does it distort its own good fortune into a reason for disinterest in those who have not shared it. Rather in its own salvation it finds an argument for interest in and for love for anyone who is either close to it and can at least be approached through universal effort to share its blessings.

If, as we said before, the Church has a true realization of what the Lord wishes it to be, then within the Church there arises a unique sense of fullness and a need for outpouring, together with the clear awareness of a mission which transcends the Church, of a message to be spread. It is the duty of evangelization. It is the missionary mandate. It is the apostolic commission.

An attitude of preservation of the Faith is insufficient. Certainly we must preserve and also defend the treasure of truth and of grace which has come to us by way of inheritance from the Christian tradition. "Keep safe what has been entrusted to thee", warns St. Paul (I Tim. 6, 20). But neither the preservation nor the defense of the Faith exhausts the duty of the Church in regard to the gifts which it possesses.

The duty consonant with the patrimony received from Christ is that of spreading, offering, announcing it to others. Well do we know that "Going, therefore, make disciples of all nations" (Mt. 28, 19) is the last command of Christ to His Apostles. By the very term "apostles" these men define their inescapable mission. To this internal drive of charity which tends to become the external gift of charity we shall give the name of dialogue, which has in these days come into common usage.

Message to Deliver

The Church should enter into dialogue with the world in which it exists and labors. The Church has something to say; the Church has a message to deliver; the Church has a communication to offer.

It is no secret that this important facet of the contemporary life of the Church will be specially and fully studied by the ecumenical council, and we have no desire to undertake the concrete examination of the themes involved in such study, in order to leave to Fathers of the council full freedom in discussing them. We wish only to invite you, venerable brethren, to preface such study with certain considerations in order that we see more clearly the motives which impel the Church toward the dialogue, the methods to be followed, and the goals to be achieved. We wish to give, not full treatment to topics, but proper dispositions to hearts.

Nor can we do otherwise in our conviction that the dialogue ought to characterize our apostolic office, heirs as we are of such a pastoral approach and method as has been handed down to us by our predecessors of the past century, beginning with the great, wise Leo XIII. Almost as a personification of the Gospel character of the wise scribe, who, like the father of a family, "knows how to bring both new and old things out of his treasure-house" (Mt. 13, 52), in a stately manner he assumed his function as teacher of the world by making the object of his richest instruction the problems of our time considered in the light of the word of Christ.

Thus, also did his successors, as you well know. Did not our predecessors, especially Pope Pius XI and Pope Pius XII, leave us a magnificently rich patrimony of teaching which was conceived in the loving and enlightened attempt to join divine to human wisdom, not considered in the abstract, but rather expressed in the concrete language of modern man? And what is this apostolic endeavor if not a dialogue? And did not John XXIII, our immediate predecessor of venerable memory, place an even sharper emphasis on its teaching in the sense of approaching as close as possible to the experience and the understanding of the contemporary world? And was not the council itself assigned—and justly so—a pastoral function which would be completely focused on the injection of the Christian message into the stream of the thought, of the speech, of the culture, of the customs, of the strivings of man as he lives today and acts in this life? Even before converting the world, nay, in order to convert it, we must meet the world and talk to it.

Concerning our lowly self, although we are reluctant to speak of it and would prefer not to attract to it the attention of others, we cannot pass over in silence, in this deliberate communication to the episcopal hierarchy and to the Christian people our resolution to persevere, so far as our weak energies will permit and, above all, so far as the grace of God will grant us the necessary means, in the same direction and in the same effort to approach the world in which Providence has destined us to live, with all due reverence to be observed in this approach, and with all due solicitude and love, in order that we may understand it and offer it the gifts of truth and of grace of which Christ has made us custodians in order that we may communicate to the world our wonderful destiny of redemption and of hope. Deeply engraved on our heart are those words of Christ which we would humbly but resolutely make our own: "When God sent his Son into the world, it was not to reject the world, but so that the world might find salvation through him" (Jn. 3, 17).

See, then, venerable brethren, the transcendent origin of the dialogue. It is found in the very plan of God. Religion, of its very nature, is a relationship between God and man. Prayer expresses such a relationship in dialogue. Revelation, i.e., the supernatural relationship which God Himself, on His own initiative, has established with the human race, can be represented as a dialogue in which the Word of God is expressed in the Incarnation and therefore in the Gospel.

The fatherly and the holy conversion between God and man, interrupted by original sin, has been marvelously resumed in the course of history. The history of salvation narrates exactly this long and changing dialogue which begins with God and brings to man a many-splendored conversation. It is in this conversation of Christ among men (cf. Bar. 3, 38) that God allows us to understand something of Himself, the mystery of His life, unique in its essence, trinitarian in its Persons; and He tells us finally how He wishes to be known; He is Love; and how He wishes to be honored and served by us: love is our supreme commandment. The dialogue thus takes on full meaning and offers grounds for confidence. The child is invited to it; the mystic finds a full outlet in it.

We need to keep ever present this ineffable, yet real relationship of the dialogue, which God the Father, through Christ in the Holy Spirit, has offered to us and established with us, if we are to understand the relationship which we, i.e., the Church, should strive to establish and to foster with the human race.

God's Initiative

The dialogue of salvation was opened spontaneously on the initiative of God: "He (God) loved us first" (I Jn. 4,10); it will be up to us to take the initiative in extending to men this same dialogue, without waiting to be summoned to it.

The dialogue of salvation began with charity, with the divine goodness: "God so loved the world as to give His only-begotten Son" (Jn. 3, 16); nothing but fervent and unselfish love should motivate our dialogue.

The dialogue of salvation was not proportioned to the merits of those toward whom it was directed, nor to the results which it would achieve or fail to achieve: "Those who are healthy need no physician" (Lk. 5, 31); so also our own dialogue ought to be without limits or ulterior motives.

The dialogue of salvation did not physically force anyone to accept it; it was a tremendous appeal of love which, although placing a vast responsibility on those toward whom it was directed (cf. Mt. 11, 21), nevertheless left them free to respond to it or to reject it. Even the number of miracles (cf. Mt. 12, 38 ff.) and their demonstrative power (cf. Mt. 13, 13 ff.) were adapted to the spiritual needs and dispositions of the recipients, in order that their free consent to the divine revelation might be facilitated, without, however, their losing the merit involved in such a consent. So, too, although our own mission is the announcement of the truth which is both indisputable and necessary for salvation, that mission will not be introduced in the armor of external force, but simply through the legitimate means of human education, of interior persuasion, of ordinary conversation, and it will offer its gift of salvation with full respect for personal and civic freedom.

The dialogue of salvation was made accessible to all; it was destined for all without distinction (cf. Col. 3, 11); in like manner our own dialogue should be potentially universal, i.e. all-embracing and capable of including all, excepting only one who would either absolutely reject it or insincerely pretend to accept it.

The dialogue of salvation normally experienced a gradual development, successive advances, humble beginnings before complete success (cf. Mt. 13, 31.) Ours, too, will take cognizance of the slowness of psychological and historical maturation and of the need to wait for the hour when God may make our dialogue effective. Not for this reason will our dialogue postpone till tomorrow what it can accomplish today; it ought to be eager for the opportune moment; it ought to sense the preciousness of time (cf Eph. 4, 16). Today, i.e. every day, our dialogue should begin again; we, rather than those toward whom it is directed, should take the initiative.

As is clear, the relationships between the Church and the world can assume many mutually different aspects. Theoretically speaking; the Church could set its mind on reducing such relationships to a minimum, endeavoring to isolate itself from dealings with secular society; just as it could set itself the task of pointing out the evils that can be found in secular society, condemning them and declaring crusades against them, so also it could approach so close to secular society as to strive to exert a preponderant influence on it or even to exercise a theocratic power over it, and so on.

But it seems to us that the relationship of the Church to the world, without precluding other legitimate forms of expression, can be represented better in a dialogue, not, of course, a dialogue in a univocal sense, but rather a dialogue adapted to the nature of the interlocutor and to factual circumstances (the dialogue with a child differs from that with an adult; that with a believer from that with an unbeliever). This has been suggested by the custom, which has by now become widespread, of conceiving the relationships between the sacred and the secular in terms of the transforming dynamism of modern society, in terms of the pluralism of its manifestations, likewise in terms of the maturity of man, be he religious or not, enabled through secular education to think, to speak and to act through the dignity of dialogue.

Courtesy to All

This type of relationship indicates a proposal of courteous esteem, of understanding and of goodness on the part of the one who inaugurates the dialogue; it excludes the a priori condemnation, the offensive and time-worn polemic and emptiness of useless conversation. If this approach does not aim at effecting the immediate conversion of the interlocutor, inasmuch as it respects both his dignity and his freedom, nevertheless it does aim at helping him, and tries to dispose him for a fuller sharing of sentiments and convictions.

Hence, the dialogue supposes that we possess a state of mind which we intend to communicate to others and to foster in all our neighbors: It is a state of mind of one who feels within himself the burden of the apostolic mandate, of one who realizes that he can no longer separate his own salvation from the endeavor to save others, of one who strives constantly to put the message of which he is custodian into the mainstream of human discourse.

The dialogue is, then, a method of accomplishing the apostolic mission. It is an example of the art of spiritual communication. Its characteristics are the following:

1. Clearness above all; the dialogue supposes and demands comprehensibility. It is an outpouring of thought; it is an invitation to the exercise of the highest powers which man possesses. This very claim would be enough to classify the dialogue among the most manifestations of human activity and culture. This fundamental requirement is enough to enlist our apostolic care to review every angle of our language to guarantee that it be understandable, acceptable, and well-chosen.

2. A second characteristic of the dialogue is its meekness, the virtue which Christ sets before us to be learned from Him: "Learn of Me, because I am meek and humble of heart" (Mt. 11, 29). The dialogue is not proud, it is not bitter, it is not offensive. Its authority is intrinsic to the truth it explains, to the charity it communicates, to the example it proposes: it is not a command, it is not an imposition. It is peaceful; it avoids violent methods; it is patient; it is generous.

3. Trust, not only in the power of one's words, but also in an attitude of welcoming the trust of the interlocutor. Trust promotes confidence and friendship. It binds hearts in mutual adherence to the good which excludes all self-seeking.

4. Finally, pedagogical prudence, which esteems highly the psychological and moral circumstances of the listener (cf. Mt. 7,6), whether he be a child, uneducated, unprepared, diffident, hostile. Prudence strives to learn the sensitivities of the hearer and requires that we adapt ourselves and the manner of our presentation in a reasonable way lest we be displeasing and incomprehensible to him.

In the dialogue, conducted in this manner, the union of truth and charity, of understanding and love is achieved.

Different Paths

In the dialogue one discovers how different are the ways which lead to the light of Faith, and how it is possible to make them converge on the same goal. Even if these ways are divergent, they can become complementary by forcing our reasoning process out of the worn paths and by obliging it to deepen its research, to find fresh expressions.

The dialectic of this exercise of thought and of patience will make us discover elements of truth also in the opinions of others, it will force us to express our teaching with great fairness, and it will reward us for the work of having explained it in accordance with the objections of another or despite his slow assimilation of our teaching. The dialogue will make us wise; it will make us teachers.

And how is the dialogue to be carried on?

Many, indeed, are the forms that the dialogue of salvation can take. It adapts itself to the needs of a concrete situation, it chooses the appropriate means, it does not bind itself to ineffectual theories and does not cling to hard and fast forms when these have lost their power to speak to men and move them. The question is of great importance, for it concerns the relation of the Church's mission to the lives of men in a given time and place, in a given culture and social setting.

To what extent should the Church adapt itself to the historic and local circumstances in which its mission is exercised? How should it guard against the danger of a relativism which would falsify its moral and dogmatic truth? And yet, at the same time, how can it fit itself to approach all men so as to save all, according to the example of the Apostle: "I became all things to all men that I might save all" (I Cor. 9, 22)?

The world cannot be saved from the outside. As the Word of God became man, so must a man to a certain degree identify himself with the forms of life of those to whom he wishes to bring the message of Christ. Without invoking privileges which would but widen the separation, without employing unintelligible terminology, he must share the common way of life—provided that it is human and honorable—especially of the most humble, if he wishes to be listened to and understood.

Need to Listen

And before speaking, it is necessary to listen, not only to a man's voice, but to his heart. A man must first be understood; and where he merits it, agreed with. In the very act of trying to make ourselves pastors, fathers and teachers of men, we must make ourselves their brothers. The spirit of dialogue is friendship and, even more, is service. All this we must remember and strive to put into practice according to the example and commandment that Christ left to us (cf. Jn. 13, 14-17).

But the danger remains. The apostle's art is a risky one. The desire to come together as brothers must not lead to a watering-down or subtracting from the truth. Our dialogue must not weaken our attachment to our Faith. In our apostolate we cannot make vague compromises about the principles of faith and action on which our profession of Christianity is based.

'An immoderate desire to make peace and sink differences at all costs is, fundamentally, a kind of skepticism about the power and content of the Word of God which we desire to preach. Only the man who is completely faithful to the teaching of Christ can be an apostle. And only he who lives his Christian life to the full can remain uncontaminated by the errors with which he comes into contact.

We believe that the council, when it comes to deal with questions on the Church's activity in the modern world, will indicate a number of theoretical and practical norms for the guidance of our dialogue with men of the present-day. We believe, too, that in matters concerning the apostolic mission of the Church, on the one hand, and on the other, the diverse and changing circumstances in which that mission is exercized, it will be for the wise, attentive government of the Church to determine, from time to time, the limits and forms and paths to be followed in maintaining and furthering a living and fruitful dialogue.

Accordingly, let us leave this aspect of the subject and confine ourselves to stressing once again the supreme importance which Christian preaching maintains, an importance which grows greater daily, for the Catholic apostolate and specifically for the dialogue. No other form of communication can take its place; not even the enormously powerful technical means of press, radio and television. In a sense, the apostolate and preaching are the same.

Preaching is the primary apostolate. Our apostolate, venerable brothers, is above all the ministry of the Word. We know this very well, but it seems good to remind ourselves of it now, so as to direct our pastoral activities aright. We must go back to the study, not of human eloquence or empty rhetoric, but of the genuine art of the sacred Word.

We must search for the laws of its simplicity and clarity, for its power and authority, so as to overcome our natural lack of skill in the use of the great and mysterious spiritual instrument of speech and to enable us worthily to compete with those who today expect so much influence through their words by having access to the organs of public opinion.

We must beg the Lord for the great and uplifting gift of speech (cf. Jer. 1, 6), to be able to confer on faith its practical and efficacious principle (cf. Rom. 10, 17), and to enable our words to reach out to the ends of the earth (cf. Ps. 18, 5 and Rom. 10, 18).

Zeal for Liturgy

May we carry out the prescriptions of the council's Constitution on Sacred Liturgy with zeal and ability. And may the catechetical teaching of the Faith to the Christian people, and to as many others as possible, be marked by the aptness of its language, the wisdom of its method, the zeal of its exercise supported by the evidence of real virtues, and may it strive ardently to lead its hearers to the security of the Faith, to a realization of the intimate connection between the divine Word and life, and to the illumination of the living God.

We must, finally, refer to those to whom our dialogue is directed. But, even on this point, we do not intend to forestall the council, which, please God, will soon make its voice heard.

Speaking in general on the role of partner in dialogue, a role which the Catholic Church must take up renewed fervor today, we should like merely to observe that the Church must be ever ready to carry on the dialogue with all men of good will, within and without its own sphere. There is no one who is a stranger to its heart, no one in whom its ministry has no interest. It has no enemies, except those who wish to be such. Its name of catholic is not an idle title. Not in vain has it received the commission to foster in the world unity, love and peace.

The Church is not unaware of the formidable dimensions of such a mission; it knows the disproportion in numbers between those who are its members and those who are not; it knows the limitations of its power. It knows, likewise, its own human weaknesses and failings. It recognizes, too, that the acceptance of the Gospel depends, ultimately, not upon any apostolic efforts of its own nor upon any favorable temporal conditions, for faith is a gift of God and God alone defines in the world the times and limits of salvation.

But the Church knows that it is the seed, the leaven, the salt and light of the world. It sees clearly enough the astounding newness of modern times, but with frank confidence it stands upon the path of history and says to men: "I have that for which you search, that which you lack."

It does not thereby promise earthly felicity, but it does offer something—its light and its grace—which makes the attainment as easy as possible; and then it speaks to men of their transcendent destiny. In doing, this it speaks to them of truth, justice, freedom, progress, concord, peace and civilization.

These are words whose secret is known to the Church, for Christ has entrusted the secret to its keeping. And so the Church has a message for every category of humanity: for children, for youth, for men of science and learning, for the world of labor and for every social class, for artists, for statesmen and for rulers. Most of all, the Church has words for the poor, the outcasts, the suffering and the dying; for all men.

Three Circles

In speaking in this way, we may seem to be allowing ourselves to be carried away in the contemplation of our mission and to be out of touch with reality as regards the actual relations of mankind with the Catholic Church. But that is not so. We see the concrete situation quite clearly. To give a brief idea of it, we think it can be described as consisting of a series of concentric circles around the central point in which God has placed us.

The first of these circles is immense. Its limits stretch beyond our sight and merge with the horizon. It is that of mankind as such, the world. We gauge the distance that lies between us and the world; yet we do not consider the world a stranger. All things human are our concern.

We share with the whole of mankind a common nature; human life with all its gifts and problems. In this primary universal reality we are ready to play our part, to acknowledge the deep-seated claims of its fundamental needs, to applaud the new, and sometimes sublime, expressions of its genius.

We possess, too, vital moral truths to be brought to men's notice and to be corroborated by their conscience, to the benefit of all. Wherever men are trying to understand themselves and the world, we can communicate with them. Wherever the councils of nations come together to establish the rights and duties of man, we are honored when they allow us to take our seat among them. If there exists in men "a soul which is naturally Christian," we desire to show it our respect and to enter into conversation with it. Our attitude in this, as we remind ourselves and everyone else, is, on the one hand, entirely disinterested. We have no temporal or political aim whatever. On the other hand, its purpose is to raise up and elevate to a supernatural and Christian level every good human value in the world. We are not civilization, but we promote it.

Atheists

We realize, however, that in this limitless circle there are many—very many, unfortunately—who profess no religion. We are aware also that there are many who profess themselves, in various ways, to be atheists. We know that some of these proclaim their godlessness openly and uphold it as a program of human education and political conduct, in the ingenuous but fatal belief that they are setting men free from false and outworn notions about life and the world and are, they claim, putting in their place a scientific conception that is in conformity with the needs of modern progress.

This is the most serious problem of our time. We are firmly convinced that the theory on which the denial of God is based is utterly erroneous.

This theory is not in keeping with the basic, undeniable requirements of thought. It deprives the reasonable order of the world of its genuine foundation. This theory does not provide human life with a liberating formula but with a blind dogma which degrades and saddens it. This theory destroys, at the root, any social system which attempts to base itself upon it. It does not bring freedom. It is a sham, attempting to quench the light on the living God.

We shall, therefore, resist with all our strength the assaults of this denial. This we do in the supreme cause of truth and in virtue of our sacred duty to profess Christ and His Gospel, moved by deep, unshakable love for men and in the invincible hope that modern man will come again to discover, in the religious ideals that Catholicism sets before him, his vocation to the civilization that does not die, but ever tends to the natural and supernatural perfection of the human spirit, and in which the grace of God enables man to possess his temporal goods in peace and honor, and to live in hope of attaining enternal goods.

These are the reasons which compel us, as they compelled our predecessors and, with

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