

Being Church in a modern world

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The Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes*, 'The Church in the Modern World, spoke of, 'a living exchange between the Church and the diverse cultures of people'. Jesuit philosopher Gerard J. Hughes reflects on the Church's dialogue with social and scientific culture. How can we best talk to our contemporaries about the truth of the Gospel?

Learning to be a teaching Church

Pope Francis' first few months in the Vatican have borne witness to what many people have taken as a fresh and most welcome approach to the exercise of his office. He has in no sense 'stood on his dignity'; on the contrary, he has been informal, and has gone out of his way to talk to ordinary people. When he was Archbishop in Buenos Aires, he espoused the causes of the poor; and in particular he has stated that the Church has to listen to the poor and learn from them:

... we must have structures which enable us to go to where the people are, moving towards those who, though longing, are going to have nothing to do with outmoded structures and ways of proceeding which respond neither to their expectations nor to their feelings. We must, with great creativity, see how we are to make ourselves present in different social environments, by ensuring that our parishes and institutions really get through to them.... We need to adapt the internal life of the Church so as to reach out to God's faithful people. This pastoral conversion calls us to move from a Church which 'controls people's faith' to one which 'hands on and fosters that faith.'¹

This is perhaps an echo from the powerful passage in *Gaudium et Spes*:

...from the beginning... [the Church's] purpose has been to adapt the Gospel to the grasp of all as



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well as to the needs of the learned, insofar as such was appropriate. Indeed this accommodated preaching of the revealed word ought to remain the law of all evangelization. For thus the ability to express Christ's message in its own way is developed in each nation, and at the same time there is fostered a living exchange between the Church and the diverse cultures of people. To promote such exchange, especially in our days, the Church requires the special help of those who live in the

world, are versed in different institutions and specialties, and grasp their innermost significance in the eyes of both believers and unbelievers.²

The point is a quite general one. In order to be a 'light for the nations' and to have anything to teach the nations to which they will be willing to listen, the Church must first learn from the variety of human cultures, popular and learned, social and scientific.

The challenges of learning something new

We should not expect this process of learning always to be a comfortable one.

In ethics, for instance, attention will need to be paid in detail to the effects of various policies which previously seemed clearly established. When he was Archbishop in Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio criticised and put an end to the practice of refusing baptism to the children of unmarried mothers. One might, on similar lines, at any rate think about the

practice of refusing communion to a couple who are trying to make the best of a second, canonically invalid, marriage. We need to ask, how can we best make the gospel and a truly Christian life available to such families? Similarly, there are enormous problems affecting whole continents, readily seen, for example, in the provision of food and healthcare, the status of women and the shortage of effective people to carry out the ministries of the Church. To do true justice in those circumstances, and to attract people to the Gospel, it seems that we need to re-examine some of the moral and pastoral guidelines which are currently taken as unbreachable.

Similar considerations apply to other aspects of contemporary human culture. The sciences open up many issues which neither the Church nor the human race as a whole has previously had to face. Some of these are moral issues, some of them in the field of medical ethics. Our increasing scientific knowledge sometimes challenges us to look carefully at such issues as when it is that an embryo should be regarded as a human person; or, at the other end of the life cycle, exactly when it is that we should say that a person has died, and how this should influence the conduct of terminal care. The issues are in part biological, in part philosophical, and to some extent at least unresolved. More broadly, the increasing possibilities of genetic manipulation raise serious issues about the influence of such activities on the environment and their impact on human welfare, now and into the future. Can, for instance, the fertility of crops be improved and this improvement be fairly shared without doing longer-term harm to the environment? Are we wrongly trying to improve on God's designs, or are we using our God-given minds to make the most of God's creation? Again, our growing understanding of human developmental psychology both increases the choice of ways in which people with psychological problems can best be helped, as well as throwing much new light on the moral issues connected with sexual orientation.

None of these issues is simple, and many of them are very contentious; but all of them need to be discussed with other people who, in their own ways, are trying to wrestle with the complexities. If we fail to take these developments seriously when they are the subjects of lively debate and increasing knowledge, and hence if we fail to engage with those who are

exploring such issues with the best scientific and philosophical tools available to us, we shall simply not be heard, whether we are right or whether we are mistaken. The right to have our views taken seriously, even if they are not necessarily accepted, depends upon our openness to the work done in the relevant sciences and our constant interaction with the people who have responsibilities in those fields. That is a demand of our culture, and surely one to which we must respond, if the remarks of Pope Francis and of *Gaudium et Spes* are to be put into practice.

It is not only in the physical and medical sciences that we as Church need to engage with others. Ever since the end of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church, along with almost all the other Christian Churches, has had to face the enormous strides made in archaeology and the knowledge of ancient cultures generally. These wide-ranging results perhaps presented the most serious of all the challenges which Christians had to face, for they threw light upon the cultures and texts of both the Old and the New Testaments which clearly showed that the assumptions upon which Christians based their interpretation of those texts was in many instances inadequate. Yet if such secular knowledge were to be accepted as definitive, could we still speak of the biblical texts as 'inspired'? Can the secular sciences have anything to tell the Churches about what their sacred texts mean? Far from being a trivial issue, that debate was crucial and inescapable. Fundamentalism, relying on the most literal and traditional understanding of both the biblical texts and the texts of early Christian tradition, was, and for some still is, a tempting way of simply dismissing these problems. But such a return to the dugout could not be taken seriously by any authorities in the fields of archaeology, history or the literatures of those early times.

Some unsympathetic caricatures of what Christians believe are often wholly-justified responses to such a nervous literalism. In fact, we do not believe that a star literally moved from the East to Bethlehem, any more than that God created the universe in six days. But we certainly have not always explained what we do believe and why, in such a way that our contemporaries can see exactly why such caricatures are without foundation. In an interview given in Rome in 2007, Cardinal Bergoglio said,

Staying, remaining faithful implies an outgoing. Precisely if one remains in the Lord one goes out of oneself. Paradoxically precisely because one remains, precisely if one is faithful one changes. One does not remain faithful, like the traditionalists or the fundamentalists, to the letter. Fidelity is always a change, a blossoming, a growth.³

How to become an authority

In 1983, the Bishops of the United States produced their pastoral letter, *War and Peace*. The warmth with which it was received by a wide spectrum of people in the United States and further abroad is a vindication of the policy of taking contemporary problems seriously in their context, exposing to public view the best conclusions that we can reach, and listening to both the praise and the criticisms of what we have said. There are lessons to be learned from our successes, too.

To have authority, it is not at all sufficient to claim that one is an authority. To be recognised as an authority is a status which has to be earned by the hard work of testing sources, learning to interpret evidence, and listening to our fellow men and women. Of course, the ways in which such respect is earned will vary according to the subject being assessed; holiness, for instance, is not a quality which someone can acquire simply by academic research. And even here there are tests to help us recognise genuine holiness without being credulous. We, as Church, need to make good our claim to be authorities in any of these ways – moral, scientific and religious.

In general, we have to put into practice the aforementioned exhortations given by Pope Francis when he was Bishop in Buenos Aires, along with the insistence of *Gaudium et Spes* that we must take contemporary science seriously. Thus, as the Council document says, we must ‘accommodate’ our preaching of the revealed word to the peoples to whom it is to be offered. They point the way not only to our winning a hearing in our world, but also to helping us in our own understanding of the infinite Truth who is God. As it is put in *Lumen Gentium*,

... by the very circumstance of their having been created, all things are endowed with their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order... Therefore if methodical investigation within every branch of learning is carried out in a

genuinely scientific manner and in accord with moral norms, it never truly conflicts with faith, for earthly matters and the concerns of faith derive from the same God... *we cannot but deplore certain habits of mind, sometimes found also among Christians, which do not sufficiently respect the rightful independence of science and which, from the arguments and controversies they spark, lead many minds to conclude that faith and science are mutually opposed.*[emphasis added]⁴

Whether in civil or ecclesiastical societies, the attempt to claim authority without being subject to these requirements degenerates into a mere authoritarianism. To issue statements as definitive, authoritative truths is a very tempting course to take, for in the complexities of our modern societies and our scientific endeavours, we are led inevitably to recognise that our beliefs are in many cases no more than provisional, open to review and, if need be, to abandonment. But, it might then be said, how can our belief in revelation and in the tradition of the Church possibly be seen as in varying degrees provisional?

The fear is at the very least exaggerated. To begin with, it is obviously true that even the most respected authorities in their various disciplines can sometimes be mistaken; that is to be expected in subjects which often touch the very limits of our research capabilities. But it is also characteristic of great authorities to be willing candidly to acknowledge their errors, and to improve upon their evidence or their methods in the hope of eventually making progress. In such circumstances, the admission of one’s mistakes can increase rather than undermine the respect on which an authority is held. Catholics, rather late in the day, admitted that they had been wrong to condemn Galileo. But that admission, however belated, earned us at least some respect. We do not need to be clearly right on every issue in order to have our views respected; but we do need to be open to criticism, as is any other authority. Genuine authority is respected; authoritarianism is rightly condemned.

We humans all have much to learn

It is worth pointing out that when we humans try to talk of things beyond our immediate experience, we have often to speak metaphorically and provisionally. In astrophysics we speak of ‘black holes’ and ‘strings vibrating in ten dimensions’ and ‘dark matter’. In

theology, we speak of God as ‘creator’, father’, ‘lover’ and ‘a mighty fortress’; so why not ‘mother’? Depth does not always require literal precision – indeed the deepest things in our universe and in our personal experience defy precise description. So when we speak of God, we might well try to find ways of replacing our technical terms which were taken from an old Aristotelian tradition, such as ‘substance’, ‘person’ and ‘nature’, in favour of others which in some contexts might be less misleading; we might change the metaphors we find helpful in talking of God, or in speaking of Jesus as our ‘redeemer’ or as offering himself as a ‘sacrifice’ to God. These terms have in fact undergone subtle changes in their use down through Christian tradition, where we no longer think the habit of paying ransoms is altogether commendable, and when sacrifices in the literal sense, though an everyday act of piety in the Jerusalem which Jesus knew, are no longer how we might think of asking pardon for our sins before God. Such sane developments in our beliefs are not always at all evident to outsiders who otherwise might be very willing to explore the possibility of a Christian faith.

To talk to people of our generation, it is *their* languages and images which we must learn to use in order to express traditional truths in an accessible and attractive way. Religious discourse and liturgical practice has sometimes been adapted in this way to different cultures, down the ages and across continents without being in essence changed, of course. Even in what we might think of as the real core of our Catholic beliefs we need, in the light of further scholarship, to recognise how those beliefs took time to develop, and how they have been expressed in various ways by Christian Churches. It took almost three centuries after the death of Jesus for a Council to insist that to regard Jesus as truly God is not to be regarded as any kind of abandonment of monotheism; and more than another 100 years to try to find ways of saying that Jesus was at once a fully human being like us in all things but sin, and yet also identical to the one God we worship. The Council of Chalcedon clearly did not consider that the Council of Nicaea had said the last word. Between some of the Orthodox Churches and the Roman Church there is still more to be said about the position of the Holy Spirit.

We always have much to learn, some of it about our own past, some of it about the rapidly expanding thought of the world we now inhabit. If we are unwilling to learn, we risk losing both our effectiveness to offer the Gospel to people, and our authoritativeness in matters of religion. The Church is, and always has been, a multitude of people, not primarily an institution. It is the people of God, trying in their contemporary ways to understand and to offer their faith to others. We will appeal to our fellow pilgrims on this earth, be they poor, oppressed, learned or privileged, if they can recognise that we have inherited a tradition in which we try to think critically and to express our beliefs in ways which can carry conviction with the women and men of our own time.

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¹ Translated from *El Jesuita. Conversaciones con el cardenal Jorge Bergoglio, SJ.*, Sergio Rubín y Francesca Ambrogetti, Vergara editor, p. 77-78) ‘No podemos permanecer en un estilo ‘clientelar’ que, pasivamente, espera que venga ‘el cliente’, el feligrés, sino que tenemos que tener estructuras para ir hacia donde nos necesitan, hacia donde está la gente, hacia quienes deseándolo no van a acercarse a estructuras y formas caducas que no responden a sus expectativas ni a su sensibilidad. Tenemos que ver, con gran creatividad, cómo nos hacemos presentes en los ambientes de la sociedad haciendo que las parroquias e instituciones sean instancias que lancen a esos ambientes. Revisar la vida interna de la Iglesia para salir hacia el pueblo fiel de Dios. La conversión pastoral nos llama a pasar de una Iglesia ‘reguladora de la fe’ a una Iglesia ‘transmisora y facilitadora de la fe.’

² *Gaudium et Spes*, ‘The Church in the Modern World’, §44.

³ Published in *Church*, 11, 2007

⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, § 36.