



## The Prince of this World and the Evangelization of Culture

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Life as a bishop - or at least the life of *this* bishop - does not leave much time to spend on poetry. But a few years ago a friend loaned me a volume of Rainer Maria Rilke, and of course, Rilke's work can be quite beautiful. In it, I found some lines of his verse that might help us begin our discussion today:

*Slowly now the evening changes his garments  
held for him by a rim of ancient trees;  
you gaze: and the landscape divides and leaves you  
one sinking and one rising toward the stars.*

*And you are left, to none belonging wholly,  
not so dark as a silent house, nor quite  
so surely pledged unto eternity  
as that which grows to star and climbs the night.*

*To you is left (unspeakably confused)  
your life, gigantic, ripening, full of fears,  
so that it, now hemmed in, now grasping all,  
is changed in you by turns to stone and stars.*

Philosophers and psychologists have offered a lot of different theories about the nature of the human person. But few have captured the human condition better than Rilke does in those 12 lines. We are creatures made for heaven; but we are born of this earth. We love the beauty of this world; but we sense there is something more behind that beauty. Our longing for that "something" pulls us outside of ourselves.

Striving for "something more" is part of the greatness of the human spirit, even when it involves failure and suffering. In the words of Venerable John Paul II, something in the artist, and by extension in all human beings, "mirrors the image of God as Creator." We have an instinct to create beauty and new life that comes from our own Creator. Yet we live in a time when, despite all of our achievements, the brutality and indifference of the world have never been greater. The truth is that cruelty is *also* the work of human hands. So if we are troubled by the spirit of our age, if we *really* want to change the current course of our culture and challenge its guiding ideas - and this is the theme of our session here today -- then we need to start with the author of that culture. That means examining man himself.

Culture exists because man exists. Men and women think, imagine, believe and act. The mark they leave on the world is what we call culture. In a sense, that includes everything from work habits and cuisine to social manners and politics. But I want to focus in a special way on those elements of culture that we consciously choose to create; things like art, literature, technology, music and architecture. These things are what most people think of when they first hear the word "culture." And that makes sense, because all of them have to do with communicating knowledge that is both useful and beautiful. The task of an architect, for example, is to translate abstract engineering problems into visible, pleasing form; in other words, to turn disorder into order, and mathematical complexity into a public expression of strength and elegance. We are *social* animals. Culture is the framework within which we locate ourselves in relationship to other people, find meaning in the world and then trans-

mit meaning to others.

In his 1999 *Letter to Artists*, John Paul II wrote that "beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty." There is "an ethic, even a 'spirituality' of artistic service which contributes [to] the life and renewal of a people," because "every genuine art form, in its own way, is a path to the inmost reality of man and of the world."

He went on to say that "true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience . . . Art by its nature is a kind of appeal to the mystery. Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice [to] the universal desire for redemption."

Christianity is an *incarnational* religion. We believe that God became man. This has huge implications for how we live, and how we think about culture. God creates the world in Genesis. He judges it as "very good" (Gen 1:31). Later he enters the world to redeem it in the flesh and blood of his son (Jn 1:14). In effect, God licenses us to know, love and ennoble the world through the work of human genius. Our creativity as creatures is an echo of God's own creative glory. When God tells our first parents, "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28), he invites us to take part, in a small but powerful way, in the life of God himself.

The results of that fertility surround us. We see it in the great Christian heritage that still underpins the modern world. Anyone with an honest heart will grant that the Christian faith has inspired much of the greatest painting, music, architecture and scholarship in human experience. For Christians, art is a holy vocation with the power to elevate the human spirit and lead men and women toward God.

Having said all this, we still face a problem. And here it is: God has never been more absent from the Western mind than he is today. Additionally, we live in an age when almost every scientific advance seems to be matched by some increase of cruelty in our entertainment, cynicism in our politics, ignorance of the past, consumer greed, little genocides posing as "rights" like the cult of abortion, and a basic confusion about what - if anything at all - it means to be "human."

Science and technology give us power. Philosophers like Feuerbach and Nietzsche give us the language to deny God. The result, in the words of Henri De Lubac, is not atheism, but an *anti-theism* built on resentment. In destroying God, man sees himself as "overthrowing an obstacle in order to gain his freedom." The Christian understanding of human dignity claims that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Thomas Aquinas - whose feast we celebrate tomorrow - said that "In this [likeness to God] is man's greatness, in this is man's worth, in this he excels every creature." But this grounding in God is *exactly* what the modern spirit rejects.

Of course, most people have never read Nietzsche. Nor will they. Few have even heard of Feuerbach. But they do experience the *benefits* of science and technology every day. And they do live inside a cocoon of marketing that constantly strokes their appetites, makes death seem remote, and pushes questions about meaning and morality down into matters of private opinion. The result is this. While many people in the developed world still claim to be religious, their faith - in the words of the Pontifical Council for Culture - is "often more a question of religious feeling than a demanding commitment to God." Religion becomes a kind of insurance policy for eternity. Too often, it is little more than a convenient moral language for daily life. And what is worse is that many people no longer have the skills, or even the desire, to understand their circumstances, or to think their way out of the cocoon.

Part of what blocks a serious awareness and rethinking of our current culture is the "knowledge economy" we have created. In its 1999 statement *Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, the Pontifical Council for Culture saw that the constant flow of "information provided by [today's] mass media . . . affects the way things are perceived: What people come to know is not reality as such, but what they are shown. [The] constant repetition of selected items of information involves a decline in critical awareness, and this is a crucial factor in forming what is considered public opinion." It also causes "a loss of intrinsic value [in the specific] items of information, an undifferentiated uniformity in messages which are reduced to pure information, a lack of responsible feedback, and a . . . discouragement of interpersonal relationships." This is all true. Much of modern technology isolates people as often as it brings them together. It attacks community as easily as it builds it up. It also forms the human mind in habits of thought and expression that are very different from traditional culture based on the printed word. And that has implications both for the Word of God and for the Church.

There is one other important point here that even strong religious believers often find hard to talk about. Let me explain it this way.

Referring to artists, John Paul II said that, "In shaping a masterpiece, the artist not only summons his work into being, but also . . . reveals his own personality by means of it." In other words, "works of art speak of their authors; they enable us to know their inner life." This is quite normal. But it also poses a danger. A key temptation of our age is the will to power. It is most obvious in our politics and science; in the constant erosion of our respect for the weak, the infirm, the unborn and the disabled. But the impulse to pride -- that hunger to smash taboos and inflate the self - appeals most naturally to artists and other creators of high culture. Genius breeds vanity. And vanity breeds conflict and suffering. The vanity of creative genius has a pedigree that leads back a very long way; all the way back to the very first *non serviam* from Satan himself.

It is very odd that in the wake of the bloodiest century in history - a century when tens of millions of human beings were shot, starved, gassed and incinerated with superhuman ingenuity - even many religious leaders are embarrassed to talk about the devil. In fact, it is more than odd. It is *revealing*. Mass murder and exquisitely organized cruelty are not just really big "mental health" problems. They are sins that cry out to heaven for justice, and they carry the fingerprints of an Intelligence who is personal, gifted, calculating and powerful. The devil is only unbelievable if we imagine him as the black monster of medieval paintings, or think *The Inferno* is intended as a literal road map to hell. Satan was very real for Jesus. He was very real for Paul and the other great saints throughout history. And he is profoundly formidable. If we want a sense of the grandeur of the Fallen Angel before he fell, the violated genius of who Satan really is, we can take a hint from the Rilke poem *The Angels*:

. . . when they spread their wings  
they waken a great wind through the land:  
as though with his broad sculptor-hands  
God was turning  
the leaves of the dark book of the Beginning.

*This* is the kind of Being - once glorious, but then consumed by his own pride -- who is now the Enemy of humanity. *This* is the Pure Spirit who betrayed his own greatness. *This* is the Intellect who hates the Incarnation because through it, God invites creatures of clay like you and me to take part in God's own divinity. There is nothing sympathetic about Satan; only tragedy and loss and enduring, brilliant anger.

In 1929, as the great totalitarian murder-regimes began to rise up in Europe, the philosopher Raissa Maritain wrote a forgotten little essay called *The Prince of This World*. It is worth reading. We need to remember her words today and into the future. With no trace of irony or metaphor, Maritain argued:

"Lucifer has cast the strong though invisible net of illusion upon us. He makes one love the passing moment above eternity, uncertainty above truth. He persuades us that we can only love creatures by making Gods of them. He lulls us to sleep (and he interprets our dreams); he makes us work. Then does the spirit of man brood over stagnant waters. Not the least of the devil's victories is to have convinced artists and poets that he is their necessary, inevitable collaborator and the guardian of their greatness. Grant him that, and soon you will grant him that Christianity is *unpracticable*. Thus does he reign in this world."

If we do not believe in the devil, sooner or later we will not believe in God. We cannot cut Lucifer out of the ecology of salvation. Satan is not God's equal. He is a created being subject to God and already, by the measure of eternity, defeated. Nonetheless, he is the first author of pride and rebellion, and the great seducer of man. Without him the Incarnation and Redemption do not make sense, and the cross is meaningless. Satan is real. There is no way around this simple truth.

Let me underline that even more strongly. Leszek Kolakowski, the former Marxist philosopher who died just last year, was one of the great minds of the last century. He was never a religious person in the traditional sense. But Kolakowski had few doubts about the reality of the devil. In his essay *Short Transcript of a Metaphysical Press Conference Given by the Demon in Warsaw, on 20th December 1963*, Kolakowski's devil indicts all of us who call ourselves "modern" Christians with the following words:

"Where is there a place [in your thinking] for the fallen angel? . . . Is Satan only a rhetorical figure? . . . Or else, gentlemen, is he a reality, undeniable, recognized by tradition, revealed in the Scriptures, commented upon by the Church for two millennia, tangible and acute? Why do you avoid me, gentlemen? Are you afraid that the skeptics will mock you, that you will be laughed at in satirical late night reviews? Since when is the faith affected by the jeers of heathens and heretics? What road are you taking? If you forsake the foundations of the faith for fear of mockery, where will you end? If the devil falls victim to your fear [of embarrassment] today, God's turn must inevitably come tomorrow. Gentlemen, you have been ensnared by the idol of modernity, which fears ultimate matters and hides from you their importance. I don't mention it for my own benefit - it is nothing to me - I am talking about you and for you, forgetting for a moment my own vocation, and even my duty to propagate error."

We live in an age that imagines itself as post-modern and post-Christian. It is a time defined by noise, urgency, action, utility and a hunger for practical results. But there is nothing really new about any of this. I think St. Paul would find our age rather familiar. For all of the rhetoric about "hope and change" in our politics, our urgencies hide a deep unease about the future; a kind of well-manicured selfishness and despair. The world around us has a hole in its heart, and the emptiness hurts. Only God can fill it. In our baptism, God called each of us in this room today to be his agents in that work. Like St. Paul, we need to be "doers of the word, and not hearers only" (Jas 1:22). We prove what we really believe by our willingness, or our refusal, to act on what we claim to believe.

But when we talk about a theme like today's topic - "Priests and laity together, changing and challenging the culture" - we need to remember that *what we do*, proceeds from *who we are*. Nothing is more dead than faith without works (Jas 2:17); except maybe one thing: works without faith. I do not think Paul had management issues in his head when he preached at the Areopagus. Management and resources are important - but the really essential questions, the questions that determine everything else in our life as Christians, are these: Do I really know God? Do I really love him? Do I seek him out? Do I study his word? Do I listen for his voice? Do I give my heart to him? Do I *really believe he's there*?

For more than 30 years, first as a bishop and now as the successor to St. Peter, Benedict XVI has spoken often and very forcefully about the "culture of relativism" that guides today's developed world, breaks down human community and intimacy, and drains the meaning out of human activity. That culture flows out of the "new Areopagus" John Paul II described in *Redemptoris Missio* - a culture formed by radically new technologies and methods of communication; a culture with a power that reshapes how we think, what we think about, and how we organize our personal and social lives.

We have an obligation as Catholics to study and understand the world around us. We have a duty not just to penetrate and engage it, but to convert it to Jesus Christ. That work belongs to all of us equally: clergy, laity and religious. We are missionaries. That is our primary vocation; it is hard-wired into our identity as Christians. God calls each of us to different forms of service in his Church. But we are *all equal in baptism*. And we *all* share the same mission of bringing the Gospel to the world, and bringing the world to the Gospel.

And yet, Kolakowski's devil was right. The fundamental crisis of our time, and the special crisis of today's Christians, has nothing to do with technology, or numbers, or organization, or resources. It is a crisis of faith. Do we believe in God or not? Are we on fire with a love for Jesus Christ, or not? Because if we are not, nothing else matters. If we are, then everything we need in order to do God's work will follow, because he never abandons his people.

I began this talk today with the words of a poet, so I will end with the words of another poet. You may not have heard of him here in Italy. His name was Dante Alighieri, and he wrote an interesting little work called *The Divine Comedy*. He ends the *Paradiso* and the entire *Comedy* with these words: "The Love which moves the sun and the other stars."

*The Love which moves the sun and the other stars*. That is the nature of the God we preach. A God so great in glory, heat, light and majesty that he can populate the heavens and call life out of dead space; yet so intimate that he became one of us; so humble that he entered our world on dirt and straw to redeem us. I think we can be forgiven for sometimes running away from that kind of love, like a child who runs away from a parent, because we simply cannot understand or compete with that ocean of unselfishness. It is only when we give ourselves to God that we understand, finally, that we

were made to do exactly that. Our hearts are restless until they rest in him. We should not be afraid to believe and to love; it took even a great saint like Augustine half a lifetime to be able to admit, that "late have I loved thee, Beauty so old and so new; late have I loved thee."

God calls us to leave here today and make disciples of all nations. But he calls us first to love him. If we do that, and do it zealously, with all our hearts - the rest will follow.