



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE**

Saturday, 16 March 2002

*Your Eminences,
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Friends,*

I am glad to welcome you at the end of your Dicastery's Plenary Assembly, during which you chose to make a fresh start on the basis of the Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, in order to make your contribution to the mission of the Church in the Third Millennium (cf. No. 40). Your meeting coincides with the Pontifical Council for Culture's 20th anniversary. As I give thanks for the work achieved by the members and collaborators of the Pontifical Council over the past 20 years, I greet Cardinal Poupard, and thank him for the kind words he addressed to me on behalf of you all.

I thank all of you for working together so generously at the service of the universal mission of the Successor of Saint Peter, and encourage you to be ever more zealous in pursuing your relations with cultures, building bridges between people, witnessing to Christ and helping our brothers and sisters to be open to the Gospel (cf. the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, Nos. 166-168). What will actually make that happen is an open dialogue with all men and women of good will. While our backgrounds and traditions differ and we may be believers or unbelievers, we are united by our common humanity and called to share in the life of Christ, the Redeemer of man.

2. The Pontifical Council for Culture was created with the aim of "giving the whole Church a common impulse in the continuously renewed encounter between the salvific message of the Gospel and the multiplicity of cultures, in the diversity of cultures to which she must carry her fruits of grace" (*Letter to Cardinal Casaroli, establishing the new Pontifical Council for Culture*, 20 May 1982 – cf. *Osservatore Romano*, weekly edition in English, 28 June 1982, p. 7), in line with the

reflection and decisions of the Second Vatican Council. In fact, the Fathers strongly emphasised the centrality of culture in human life and its importance if Gospel values are to be absorbed and the message of the Bible is to spread in the realm of morals, science and the arts. In this same spirit, the goal of merging the Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Non-Believers and the Pontifical Council for Culture into one Pontifical Council, on 25 March 1993, was to promote “the study of the problem of unbelief and religious indifference found in various forms in different cultural milieus ... in order to offer adequate support to the Church's pastoral activity in evangelizing cultures and inculturating the Gospel” (Motu Proprio *Inde a Pontificatus*).

Handing on the Gospel message in today's world is particularly arduous, mainly because our contemporaries are immersed in cultural contexts that are often alien to an inner spiritual dimension, in situations in which a materialist outlook prevails. One cannot escape the fact that, more than in any other historical period, there is a breakdown in the process of handing on moral and religious values between generations. This leads to a kind of incongruity between the Church and the contemporary world. Seen from this point of view, the Council's role as an observatory is particularly important. On the one hand, it can identify developments in different cultures and the anthropological questions to which they give rise. On the other, it can envisage possible relations between the cultures and Christian faith, in order to suggest new ways of evangelising that live up to the expectations of our contemporaries. In fact, we have to reach out to people where they are, with their worries and questions, to help them find the moral and spiritual landmarks they need to live lives worthy of our specific vocation, and to find in Christ's call the hope that does not disappoint (cf. *Rom 5,5*), as we follow the method used by the Apostle Paul at the Areopagus in Athens (*Acts 17,22-34*). Clearly, nothing takes us further in dealing with people than taking their culture seriously. There is no better way to communicate and evangelise.

3. Among the great stumbling-blocks of our day are the difficulties families and teachers face as they strive to pass on to younger generations the human, moral and spiritual values that will enable them to be men and women who will want an active role in society and to live a life worthy of their dignity as persons. In the same vein, handing on the Christian message and its values, which help people to be coherent in the decisions they make and in the way they live, is a challenge that all ecclesial communities are called to take up, especially in the field of catechesis and in the formation of catechumens. In other ages – in Saint Augustine's time, for example, or, more recently, throughout the 20th century, when one could use the contributions of so many Christian philosophers – we learned to base what we said and the way we approached evangelisation on sound anthropology and sound philosophy. In fact, it is only when philosophy opens up to Christ that the Gospel really will start to spread to all nations. Everyone involved in running educational systems now urgently needs to make a serious study of anthropology in order to understand who the human person is and what he or she lives by. Families really need to be backed up by educators who will respect their values and help them to reflect on the fundamental questions young people are asking, even if this seems to go against what contemporary society proposes. In every age there have been men and women with the prophetic courage to make the

truth shine forth. This same attitude is still needed today.

The phenomenon of globalisation, which is a cultural fact of life today, is at once a difficulty and an opportunity. While it has a tendency to obliterate the specific identities of different communities and to reduce them to folklore memories of ancient traditions bereft of their original meaning and cultural and religious value, globalisation also helps to break down barriers between cultures and gives people the chance to meet and to get to know each other. At the same time, it obliges national leaders and people of good will to do their utmost to ensure that what is proper to individuals and cultures is respected, to guarantee the good of persons and nations, and to practise brotherhood and solidarity. Society as a whole is facing formidable questions about man and his future, especially in areas like bioethics, the use of the earth's resources, and decisions on economic and political issues, so that the full dignity of human beings may be recognised and they may continue to play an active part in society and be the ultimate criterion for society's decisions. The Church in no way seeks to take the place of those who are responsible for public affairs. She does hope to have a place in these debates, to keep people's minds open to the light of the full meaning of what it is to be human, something that is etched into a person's very nature.

4. The Pontifical Council for Culture must continue its work and offer its help to bishops, to Catholic communities and to all the institutions that desire it, so that Christians will have the means to witness to their faith and their hope in a consistent and responsible fashion, and so that all people of good will may be involved in building a society that fosters the integrity of every person. The future of the human person and of cultures, the proclamation of the Gospel and the life of the Church depend on it.

May you contribute to a new awareness of the place of culture in the future of the human person and society, and in evangelisation, so that men and women may be freer and use their freedom in a responsible way! As you end your meeting, I entrust your mission to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and I gladly impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you, to everyone who works with you and to your loved ones.