



***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI  
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY  
OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR CULTURE***

*Clementine Hall  
Saturday, 8 March 2008*

*Your Eminences,  
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I am pleased to welcome you on the occasion of the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture. I congratulate you on your work and on the theme chosen for this Assembly: "*The Church and the challenge of secularization*". This is a fundamental issue for the future of humanity and of the Church. Secularization that often turns into secularism, abandoning the positive acceptance of secularity, harshly tries the Christian life of the faithful and Pastors alike, and during your Assembly you have additionally interpreted and transformed it into a providential challenge in order to propose convincing answers to the questions and hopes of man, our contemporary.

I thank Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi, who has been President of the Dicastery for only a few months, for his cordial words on your behalf illustrating the pattern of your work. I am also grateful to all of you for your commitment to ensuring that the Church enters into dialogue with the cultural movements of our age and that the Holy See's interest for the vast and varied world of culture may be increasingly known. Today more than ever, in fact, reciprocal intercultural openness is a privileged terrain for dialogue between men and women involved in the search for authentic humanism, over and above differences that separate them. Secularization, which presents itself in cultures by imposing a world and humanity without reference to Transcendence, is invading every aspect of daily life and developing a mentality in which God is effectively absent, wholly or partially, from human life and awareness. This secularization is not only an external threat to believers, but has been manifest for some time in the heart of the Church herself. It profoundly distorts the Christian faith from within, and consequently, the lifestyle and daily behaviour of believers. They live in the world and are often marked, if not conditioned, by the cultural imagery that impresses contradictory and impelling models regarding the practical denial of God: there is no longer any need for God, to think of him or to return to him. Furthermore, the prevalent hedonistic and consumeristic mindset fosters in the faithful and in Pastors a tendency to superficiality and selfishness that is harmful to ecclesial life.

The "death of God" proclaimed by many intellectuals in recent decades is giving way to a barren cult of the individual. In this cultural context there is a risk of drifting into spiritual atrophy and emptiness of heart, sometimes characterized by surrogate forms of religious affiliation and vague spiritualism. It is proving more urgent than ever to react to this tendency by means of an appeal to the lofty values of existence that give life meaning and can soothe the restlessness of the human heart in search of happiness: the dignity of the human person and his or her freedom, equality among all men

and women, the meaning of life and death and of what awaits us after the end of our earthly existence. In this perspective my Predecessor, the Servant of God John Paul II, aware of the radical and rapid changes in society, constantly recalled the urgent need to come to terms with human beings in the sphere of culture in order to pass on to them the Gospel Message. For this very reason he established the Pontifical Council for Culture in order to give a new impetus to the Church's action by introducing the Gospel to the plurality of cultures in the various parts of the world (cf. *Letter to Cardinal Agostino Casaroli*, 20 May 1982; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition [ORE], 28 June, pp. 7, 20). The intellectual sensitivity and pastoral charity of Pope John Paul II encouraged him to highlight the fact that the Industrial Revolution and scientific discoveries made it possible to answer questions that formerly were partially answered only by religion. The result was that contemporary man often had the impression that he no longer needs anyone in order to understand, explain and dominate the universe; he feels the centre of everything, the measure of everything.

More recently, through new information technologies, globalization has often also resulted in disseminating in all cultures many of the materialistic and individualistic elements of the West. The formula "*Etsi Deus non daretur*" is increasingly becoming a way of living that originates in a sort of "arrogance" of reason - a reality nonetheless created and loved by God - that deems itself self-sufficient and closes itself to contemplation and the quest for a superior Truth. The light of reason, exalted but in fact impoverished by the Enlightenment, has radically replaced the light of faith, the light of God (cf. Benedict XVI, *Address, La Sapienza University*, 17 January 2008). Thus, in this context the Church has great challenges with which to deal. The commitment of the Pontifical Council for Culture to a fruitful dialogue between science and faith is therefore especially important. This comparison has been long awaited by the Church but also by the scientific community, and I encourage you to persevere in it. Through it, faith implies reason and perfection, and reason, enlightened by faith, finds the strength to rise to the knowledge of God and spiritual realities. In this sense secularization does not foster the ultimate goal of science which is at the service of man, "*imago Dei*". May this dialogue continue in the distinction of the specific characteristics of science and faith. Indeed, each has its own methods, contexts and subjects of research, its own aims and limitations, and must respect and recognize the other's legitimate possibility of exercising autonomy in accordance with its own principles (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 36); both are called to serve man and humanity, encouraging the integral development and growth of each one and all.

I above all exhort Pastors of God's flock to a tireless and generous mission in order to confront with Gospel proclamation and witness, in the arena of dialogue and the encounter with cultures, the disturbing phenomenon of secularization that enfeebles the person and hinders him in his innate longing for the whole Truth. Thus, may Christ's disciples, thanks to the service carried out particularly by your Dicastery, continue to proclaim Christ in the heart of cultures, because he is the light that illumines reason, man and the world. We also set before us the warning addressed to the angel of the Church in Ephesus: "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance.... But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first" (Rv 2: 2, 4). Let us make our own the cry of the Spirit and of the Church: "Come!" (Rv 22: 17), and let our hearts be pervaded by the Lord's response: "Surely, I am coming soon" (Rv 22: 20). He is our hope, the light for our way, our strength to proclaim salvation with apostolic courage, reaching to the heart of all cultures. May God help you in carrying out your arduous but exalting mission!

As I entrust to Mary, Mother of the Church and Star of the New Evangelization, the future of the Pontifical Council for Culture and that of all its members, I wholeheartedly impart to you the Apostolic Blessing.

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