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THE LOSS OF THE SENSE OF SIN  
AND THE ARROGANCE OF LIFE:  
CHALLENGES FOR TODAY'S EVANGELIZATION

**Abstract.** At the beginning of 2014, during his morning meditations, Pope Francis, when referring to a famous phrase by Pius XII, stated that losing the sense of sin is the evil of this civilisation, an evil that strengthens Christian mediocrity and is inversely proportional to directing attention towards – and constructing – the Kingdom of God among men. The categories of sense of sin and sense of guilt, at least in theory and without generalisations, become understandable in the context of the Christian experience and the ecclesial consciousness; yet, when the human horizon is extended, the two concepts do not find a right to citizenship because the question is not even raised. The children and creators of contemporary culture, the men and women of our time, although directed towards the Kingdom of God, are strongly influenced by the global and plural secularist mentality, and this has a negative impact on their attitudes, behaviour and expressions of their existence. The Church, both within herself and outside herself, poses to herself the question of how she can redirect the expressions of this unprecedented anthropology towards Gospel values. The problem is not so much how to bring to the surface the sense of guilt and sin but, rather, how to restore or generate faith in the hearts of men. Effective evangelisation has the task of bringing back the Gospel into men's hearts and educating in a sense of God so that contemporary man can have a higher paradigm (God) on which to base himself.

**Keywords:** Anti-culture; arrogance; sense of guilt; culture; evangelisation; globalisation; sense of sin; pluralism; secularisation; secularism; tenderness; witness; shame.

The words that St. John Paul II employed in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*<sup>1</sup> have the character of a prophetic proclama-

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* (28 June 2003), (hereafter *EE*), [www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_20030628\\_ecclesia-in-europa.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20030628_ecclesia-in-europa.html), accessed: 13 March 2023.

tion. In that document, when analysing the situation of the Church in Europe and wanting to offer some indications to promote a new proclaiming of the Gospel, he pointed to certain grave uncertainties at the cultural, anthropological, ethical and spiritual levels that are typical of European society and, by extension, of the entire so-termed Western world. Although it is true, on the one hand, that this document is pervaded by a strong dynamic towards Christian hope in which the Church is called to root herself increasingly effectively and to an ever greater extent and the peoples of the contemporary epoch are said to do well to pay attention to the Church, on the other hand, the little light and the great deal of shadow of contemporary reality leads the saint-Pope to identify above all else two guidelines (or aspects) that would inevitably redirect and re-understand the Church's evangelising mission: the loss of the Christian memory and heritage and the widespread fragmentation of existence. He highlights the first in the following way:

I would like to mention in a particular way *the loss of Europe's Christian memory and heritage*, accompanied by a kind of practical agnosticism and religious indifference whereby many Europeans give the impression of living without spiritual roots and somewhat like heirs who have squandered a patrimony entrusted to them by history. It is no real surprise, then, that there are efforts to create a vision of Europe which ignore its religious heritage, and in particular, its profound Christian soul, asserting the rights of the peoples who make up Europe without grafting those rights on to the trunk which is enlivened by the sap of Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

Concerning the second, he writes:

We find ourselves before a widespread *existential fragmentation*. A feeling of loneliness is prevalent; divisions and conflicts are on the rise. Among other symptoms of this state of affairs, Europe is presently witnessing the grave phenomenon of family crises and the weakening of the very concept of the family, the continuation or resurfacing of ethnic conflicts, the re-emergence of racism, interreligious tensions, a selfishness that closes individuals and groups in upon themselves, a growing overall lack of concern for ethics and an obsessive concern for personal interests and privileges. To many observers the current process of globalization, rather than leading towards the greater unity of the human race, risks being dominated by an approach that would marginalize the less powerful and increase the number of poor in the world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *EE*, no. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *EE*, no. 8.

Our gaze can but fall on the phrase “a growing overall lack of concern with ethics” that John Paul II sees as a spreading given fact and a negative ethical tendency to which remedies, in some way, must be applied. This negative tendency derives from – and is nourished by – contemporary culture that has elaborated an ethical vision of the world based upon a concept of secularity (which should be understood as a synonym for autonomy) whose leading criteria are rationality and individualism – themselves the outcome of the prevailing of an anthropology without God and without Christ. Thus, freedom of conscience, belief and knowledge constitute the conditions of a society that is independent of any other reference point. In essential terms, we find ourselves at the centre of a developing cultural climate that has to deal with spreading forms of degeneration and decadence as opposed to a programme for the humanisation of society. This scenario not only interprets life and a world without any reference to God, it also does not even consider the question of God, does not perceive His absence – here, essentially, we find ourselves facing some aspects of secularisation and, above all else, secularism.

#### 1. SECULARISATION AND SECULARISM AS THE CULTURAL HORIZON

Secularisation and secularism are two sides of the same coin, but they are not the same reality. At various levels, however, they include both believers and non-believers. The sometimes positive meaning of secularisation cannot escape our notice – this is a historical-cultural process that is typically Western but by now has imposed itself at a *global* level and is in a certain sense based upon the Judeo-Christian tradition. On the other hand, secularism is essentially an ideology, a unilateral way of seeing and conceiving the world and life, including the Christian experience itself. A positive evaluation of the world and thus of created realities has always been present in the Judeo-Christian tradition to such an extent that God, when creating the world, “saw that it was good” because, if He had not willed and loved it, He would not have created it (cf. Wis 11:26). With the experience of Christianity, and in particular with the arrival of the incarnation of the Word of God, God Himself entered the spatial-temporal coordinates that He had created; He became creation – *saeculum*. Beyond the soteriological and eschatological meanings of God’s entrance into the world, which I will not dwell upon here, what I

would like to stress is that the Christian experience has meant the utmost valuing of the world, of the body and created things – certainly a unique and original experience in the panorama of the religious experiences of humanity.

Secularisation understood in these terms, namely in its positive meaning of secularity so dear to Benedict XVI,<sup>4</sup> finds an echo and suitable expression in the approaches of the Second Vatican Council, especially in no. 22 of the Constitution *Gaudium et spes*:

For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin... By suffering for us He not only provided us with an example for our imitation, He blazed a trail, and if we follow it, life and death are made holy and take on a new meaning.

It is evident that this text has directed the Magisterium of recent Popes who, with different nuances and sensibilities, have used the ‘healthy’ meaning of secularisation in order to achieve a more authentic self-understanding of the Christian vision of man, of the creation and of relationships – in a word, of history.

With the beginning of the modern age, and in particular with the Enlightenment, a shift took place that in reality was a fracture: secularisation, understood in a Christian sense, gave way to another phenomenon – secularism. In this outlook, it is paradoxical that the world so loved and willed by God is interpreted and seen as incompatible with God Himself. In other words, that God who created the world, and with the Incarnation of His Son redeemed it, no longer finds a place in it because He has been dramatically and inconsistently exiled from it.<sup>5</sup> The secular was gradually transformed into secularism, accentuating the distance and the emancipation of man from God, with all the consequences of this process. This distance, which is so extremely accentuated above all today, has not been created only in the world deemed ‘far from God’ – it has also been created amongst Christians themselves, including those who define themselves as ‘practising’ as well. Faced with such a scenario that in a capillary fashion displays features of a spiritual

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, “Address to the Participants of the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture,” (8 March 2008), [www.vatican.va/content/benedictxvi/it/speeches/2008/march/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080308\\_pc-cultura.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedictxvi/it/speeches/2008/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080308_pc-cultura.html), accessed: 1 April 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Claudio Sartea, “Secolarizzazione, non secolarismo. Il diritto nel nuovo rapporto tra pubblico e privato,” *Persona y derecho* vol. 70, no. 2 (2017): 43.

atrophy and emptiness of the heart with visible and incontrovertible expressions of surrogate forms of religious membership, there is an urgent need, at least for the community of the Church, to achieve a remedy.

In both cases, there are inevitable ethical consequences. Secularisation that

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.<sup>6</sup>

Does distorting Christian faith and the lifestyle that flows from it from within and at a deep level not mean running the risk of living – more than professing – a secularised faith or worse a ‘faith imbued with secularism’? This is already a contradiction in terms and yet it is what we have been witnessing for decades, above all in relation to sensitive subjects such as the quality of life and morality.

It is right and incumbent, therefore, to engage in an affirmation of the high values of existence and moral choices, such as a conscience upheld or illuminated by healthy rationality, in order to respond to the troubles of a human heart that breathlessly searches for happiness. However, if this as regards the Church seems to be an inevitable choice to make, at the same time the Church herself must know how to engage in salvific dialogue with the current *globalised* and *plural* cultural context.

This reading of things is necessary because it poses challenges. Yet, at the same time, it opens up to the possibility of evangelisation and witness:

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.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI, “Address to the Participants of the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture.”

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

What Benedict XVI stated once again locates the Church's analysis and activity within the plural and globalised climate of contemporary society, within which we should read the signs of the times in order to set in motion and value suitable processes of evangelisation.<sup>8</sup> Our history, as we have seen, has by now taken the direction of an increasingly globalised and pluralist society, something that has also been caused by the potential of the instruments of new planetary communications. Both constitute the cultural horizon of our days, in which values that have been established over time become reinterpreted, as have ethical principles previously held to be universally valid and shared. This is very observable in the fact that pluralism and globalisation "have brought about a transformation of that framework of values that has guaranteed over time a certain credibility as regards the role and the truth of the religious experience in the field of existence."<sup>9</sup>

## 2. THE SENSE OF SIN IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

In the previous section, I referred to the current cultural horizon that is marked by secularisation and secularism, globalisation and pluralism, because the question of the perception of the sense of sin and guilt, although a subject of faith and theological explanation, cannot at all be separated from the contemporary cultural climate. The perception of sin is possible only within the horizon of awareness of the merciful love of God as welcoming and forgiving love that returns man the sinner to the reality of divine charity that gives abundance of grace and life. However, sin, like every other fact of faith and theological subject, is also a cultural question. To understand its sense and the breadth of its personal and social gravity, like trying to rediscover its sense, is only possible when we seriously consider a process of analysis of the current cultural parameters. It is precisely these last that help us to delineate the fall of the dynamic of ethics in the sphere of the personal with its inevitable social consequences, as well as to know in a better way how to identify sin and restore meaning to experiencing it in terms that are comprehensible to contemporary man. We are aware that cultures should be

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Synod of Bishops, *XIII Assemblea generale Ordinaria. La Nuova Evangelizzazione per la trasmissione della fede cristiana. Lineamenta* (4 marzo 2011), no. 6; [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20110202\\_lineamenta-xiii-ass\\_embly\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20110202_lineamenta-xiii-ass_embly_en.html), accessed: 13 March 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Carmelo Dotolo and Luciano Meddi, *Evangelizzare la vita cristiana. Teologia e pratiche di Nuova Evangelizzazione* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 2012), 52.

neither exaggeratedly valued nor denied. In a particular way Christians, because of their experience of faith, are called to ‘take on’ culture because in and from it one can interpret and decode the signs and the languages that confer meaning on their actions and make possible the move from sin to its understanding, as long, that is, as it is perceived as a reality that concerns them.

Yet, the core of the problem is to be found specifically here: what does contemporary man understand by ‘sin’? What name and definition does he give it? Does he deny it, or does he not perceive it as a dramatic reality of his existence? To try to answer these questions means moving gradually towards an awareness of the dimensions of sin and its disaggregating potential and, at the same time, understanding our experience of it anew in light of faith in order to define it better and, as a consequence, to set in motion processes of conversion and authentic pathways of faith.

St. John Paul II in the Exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* observes:

To acknowledge one’s sin, indeed – penetrating still more deeply into the consideration of one’s own personhood – to recognize oneself as being a sinner, capable of sin and inclined to commit sin, is the essential first step in returning to God. For example, this is the experience of David, who “having done what is evil in the eyes of the Lord” and having been rebuked by the prophet Nathan, exclaims: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Ps 51:5s).<sup>10</sup>

To acknowledge one’s sin and acknowledge that one is a sinner can appear to the young people and adults of our time as incomprehensible categories that are mentally not practicable and, consequently, rejected. It is not only a question of good or bad will. It is, rather, an evident difficulty that we perceive when we address the subject of sin with these categories of people. In many cases, when we present the meaning of the reality of sin and use specific codes of communication, we realise that it is not present in their horizon of interpretation and, as a consequence, it is perceived as a reality that does not belong to their personal experience. In other words, as is commonly said, we communicate above their heads. This is something that one can well affirm because it forms a part of our responsibilities as believers in relation to the mission to evangelise and thus the possibility of putting on

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<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, Post-Synodal Exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* (2 December 1984), no. 13, [www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_02121984\\_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html), accessed: 13 March 2023.

the table of personal histories the overcoming of a conception of the sense of sin that is legalistic, formal and individualistic. It is thus clear that over recent decades a culture of “I am not doing anything wrong” has been created as an undeniable expression of the lack of a sense of guilt as regards responsibility for one’s actions.

Our global and plural culture, which is secularist and individualistic in character, is animated by a man who from distant historical roots appears with the features of ‘adulthood,’ that in the best of hypotheses means the adoption of a sense of responsibility, a rejection of the feeling of dependency and delegation, a perception of a sense of limits and realism.<sup>11</sup> Although this is to be hoped for in concrete terms, the traditional conception of sin constitutes a challenge, and its new vision is a point of no return in the contemporary conscience. As a consequence, irresponsibility as regards one’s actions (before God, oneself, other people and the whole of history); a rejection of depending on Someone or something (unthinkable in inter-personal relationships); and non-acceptance of the sense of one’s own limits (understood as the limits of being a creature: as one sees, the constitutive features of the sin of Adam), constitute the new grammar that could allow an effective awareness of the sense of sin not only with a view to ‘revisiting’ an experience but also as a pre-condition for the possibility of a request for forgiveness to God to achieve an authentic journey of human and Christian renewal. The new nomenclature, therefore, that defines sin is not circumscribed only to the mere ‘transgression’ of a law (even a divine law), unless this is located as an architrave in a more complex definition that identifies sin as a deterioration of human dignity, of inter-personal relationships, and, first and foremost, of the unique and personal relationship with the God of Jesus Christ.

Our young and adult contemporaries, therefore, feel the sense of sin to the extent to which crucial life experiences, such as the problem of evil and suffering, violence and infidelity in relationships, personal safety and work, the sense of life and its transcendent dimensions, are not addressed in a shallow way or as questions of secondary importance compared to the ‘salvation of souls’ but treated in a serious and credible way. If sin is presented in Christian preaching not only as a transgression of a rule but also, and above all, as a dramatic personal reality that destroys the dimensions that structure the bases of the human experience and impedes the full achievement of the

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Carmine Di Sante, “La ‘nuova’ cultura e il senso del peccato,” *Note di Pastorale Giovanile* vol. 36 (1980): 9.

human and Christian identity of an individual and his noblest aspirations, such as liberty and freedom, then the young people and adults of our time will be able to have greater and meaningful elements of reference by which to consider and comprehend anew their choices and their actions in the light of healthy rationality and an experience of the Gospel. To this end, it would be interesting to retrieve in our work of evangelisation certain categories of Biblical experience that foster such awareness in terms of illumination and effective opportunities for communication.

### 3. FROM A SENSE OF SIN TO A SENSE OF GUILT

*Etsi Deus non daretur* – this seems to be the key principle that ‘moves’ contemporary society and it has on many occasions and in various ways been condemned by the approach of the Magisterium, theological-spiritual and ethical-moral thought, and ethical-philosophical analysis, above all in recent decades. Secularism, which has decreed a divorce between *societas* and *christianitas*, and whose values seem to be no longer interchangeable or even reconcilable,<sup>12</sup> as I have already pointed out has the character of an elaborate and complex phenomenon that causes, above all in terms of the pastoral activity of proclaiming the faith, a deep fracture in the transmission-communication of the faith. We can thus assert that the shift that has taken place is that identified as being from atheism (whether practical or theoretical) to indifferentism. In other words, *a certain god exists but I manage my life according to the feelings that arise in my heart and help me to assert myself as a free individual*. How often are phrases such as these heard! Secularism, understood in these terms, has also modified the perception and the very notion of sin. Phrases such as “there is nothing wrong in what I do because I am not doing wrong to anyone” (one then has to see if this is really the case!) has nothing to do with the notion of sin either as a transgression of a rule or as ruinous interruption of a personal relationship with the Transcendent – the problem simply does not arise.

However, we know that the notion of sin has an evident theological character; it refers to the category of being before God, feeling that one is in His presence, as a result of which sin is not only the transgression of a rule but also through it is expressed the gradual dissolution of a personal relationship

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Flavio Placida, *La catechesi missionaria e la nuova evangelizzazione nell’Europa post-cristiana* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 2013), 63.

with God that has already begun, going on until it reaches its dramatic fracture.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Western cultural tradition, which has witnessed the move from a culture that is generally Christian to a global and plural culture with connotations of secularism, has also witnessed the theological-philosophical shift of the notion of sin from the Biblical horizon that frames sin as a unilateral fracture of the covenant of life and love with God to an (often moralistic) form of violation of one of His commandments. The two things are not in absolute opposition. However, if the sin of the women and men of our time is felt as only the transgression of some law or other, then after all, this is not really very serious... in some way it can be remedied. Nonetheless, whether one is dealing with transgression or with the fracture of a personal relationship, the conscience of very many of our contemporaries does not see a problem.

In addition, although it remains the case that the crisis of the celebration of the sacraments, and in particular the sacrament of reconciliation, is due to a crisis or eclipse of faith as a horizon in which the sacraments receive meaning, this crisis is also due to this way of assessing sin in a legalistic, formal and impersonal fashion. It is thus incumbent upon us, and important, to call on the sensibility of the men and women of our time, speaking to them about fundamental subjects such as true freedom and responsibility, a sense of duty and life as a gift, the consequences of compromise with evil and infidelity to our dignity as humans. When the personal conscience is faced with these subjects, it can realise that what it wants to achieve and live often do not match what it really achieves and lives in daily life. To perceive this limit (which is no small matter) can mark the beginning of a personal pathway of awareness that, in terms that St. Paul employed, is expressed as *not doing the good that one wants but the bad that one does not want*, as well as acknowledging that the idea of a good life that had been imagined and planned in many of its components has not been achieved or has been achieved in a way not in line with one's personal expectations. This discrepancy or frustration that contemporary man experiences can open up to that sense of guilt – the outcome of disappointment and awareness of his incapacity to reach one's expectations only through one's forces – which directs her or him to recognise their limits derived from being a creature and the nature of one's existence, and to comprehend one's existence anew in terms of one's transcendence.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Finitudine e colpa* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1970), 301.

Certainly, the move from “I did not manage to succeed, it was not for me” to “I am limited: I need Someone who helps me” is not automatic – it is gradual, conscious and above all the outcome of that grace that in a mysterious way acts in the hearts of men and women, of our time as well. This dynamism can certainly open up space to know how to intercept that nostalgia for God that, as a first step, becomes shouldering a sense of responsibility and repudiation of that arrogance that makes us feel clumsily “on a level with God” and then leads on to a sense of existential emptiness and a possible mysterious “request for forgiveness.” After all, to recognise one’s sense of guilt, both in a negative and in a positive sense, finds its reason for existence in the fact that, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* observes:

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment.... For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God.... His conscience is man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, contemporary man can live that totally special experience of a being who by grace and in a mysterious way is, after a certain fashion, already located in a *prospect* of good but whose beginning of a good life lies in proceeding from feeling crushed by a sense of guilt to wanting to give himself another opportunity. In other words, from recognising his existential failings to a readiness to give himself another chance by directing his gaze towards He who forgives, welcomes and enables him *to return to his path* in a new way.

#### 4. FROM THE SENSE OF GUILT TO SHAME: A PROBABLE PATHWAY?

A famous popular proverb says: “he who has no conscience, has no shame or learning.” This means that not being able to act morally and honestly impedes a person from having feelings of shame and, above all else, diminishes any knowledge that he possesses. In a society that is liberal, narcissistic and hedonistic, the child of cultural assumptions to which I have al-

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<sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1776; cf. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes* (7 December 1965), no. 16, [www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html), accessed: 13 March 2023.

ready made ample reference, the sense of guilt and above all the sense of shame seem to be eclipsed behind a scenario made up of social conditionings caused by a mentality that by now appears to be superseded. A sense of guilt and a sense of shame – two feelings of the man of second modernity who is strongly influenced by the new media, by social consensus, and by a popular psychological culture that by now have banned such feelings because they are held to be ‘guilty’ of impeding the development of a healthy, autonomous and modern mentality. This idea has something paradoxical about it. Some decades ago, an individual felt shame when an action wounded the dignity of another person or the common sense of decency because the personal conscience and the social conscience stigmatised such forms of behaviour to the point of inducing an individual to engage in self-control and the limitation of one’s freedom in the face of the decency and the freedom of another person. Today, on a large scale, the exact opposite takes place. A person who does not impose himself on others, does not take advantage of the goodness of others for their personal ends, feels shame. Unfortunately, our society in a certain sense anaesthetises personal sensibilities, as a result of which the sense of sin and above all the sense of shame as feelings that, as regards the individual, limit personal autonomy and freedom, are not considered, that is, they are not weakened. Every day we witness through the new media and talk-shows the triumph of non-shame about actions, forms of behaviour and words that at other epochs would have made the common sense of decency pale. Indeed, it appears that shame is specifically the engine of narcissistic individualism and the ideology of force which attack privacy and the noblest feelings of the human spirit. Often such “new ethics” induce a feeling of inadequacy and at times healthy shame in those who are meek, humble and animated by feelings of tenderness. We have arrived at a complete paradox.

We know of sociological analyses that argue that the feeling of shame is shaped by the values that are recognised and practised by a society. However, this levelling is not accepted by everyone. Dominant thought, which leads people without shame to exploit their loved ones and their friendships and to exploit social contrasts and transform them into opportunities for personal gain or to use the communication tools of the new media in a spasmodic search for support and popularity, in a society that condemns people to anonymity and the mass, is countered by another feeling that we can define as being opposed but that does not have the same resonance. Men and women of outstanding empathetic and moral sensitivity exist who feel malaise and

suffering in the face of situations and forms of behaviour that wound their sensibilities and values. The phrase “I feel no shame because I have nothing to be ashamed about”, which so many people use when riding the wave of contemporary culture, is countered in various ways by the stance of the few (compared to the many) who see in very many forms of behaviour that have a universal reverberation a clear violation of respect for the individuality, human dignity and freedom of other people. Those who do not share “the arrogance of the immorality of public actions and words or the unscrupulousness of behaviour or the brazenness of justifying what is held to be unjustifiable”<sup>15</sup> make clear their dissent either with feelings or expressions of anger or, in the best of hypotheses, by defending and professing in their daily lives those values of a good life that healthy rationality and Christian faith have in various ways supported and encouraged.

This comparison of the loss of the feeling of shame, and the anger of those who live internal conflicts when faced with unacceptable realities that attack their sensibilities, with living according to gospel values by those who know that only the path of faith can *resurrect* the sense of guilt and shame with a view to a greater conversion, is more than highlighted by the strong and symbolic statements of Pope Francis made in the context of prayer during the celebration of the *Via Crucis* on March 30, 2018. The Holy Father attributed to the feeling of shame a higher meaning, almost a vocation, which becomes space open to repentance, forgiveness and salvation. Shame at having betrayed or left the Lord alone during his passion, shame because very many men, above all of the Church, allow themselves to be won over by spiritual worldliness, the shame of not being able to prepare a better world for the new generations, even shame at having lost shame, became an act of faith and prayer when the Pope asked the Lord for the grace to feel again that holy shame which with humility places us in the pathway of the merciful love of God and respect for the dignity of our brothers and sisters.<sup>16</sup>

From this series of provocations that do not cease to animate and call upon the Christian conscience takes concrete shape the ancient and always topical question of how to communicate the Gospel to the men and women of our time, how to propose faith to them, so as to ensure that it appears meaningful, looking forward in this process to a gradual initiation into the

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<sup>15</sup> Gianfranco Ravasi, *Avvenire.it* (2 December 2004), [www.avvenire.it/rubriche/pagine/vergognarsi\\_20041202](http://www.avvenire.it/rubriche/pagine/vergognarsi_20041202), accessed: 13 June, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Francis, “Prayer of the Holy Father Francis at the *Via Crucis* in the Colosseum (30 March 2018),” [www.vatican.va/news\\_services/liturgy/2018/documents/ns\\_lit\\_doc\\_20180330\\_via-crucis-meditazioni\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/2018/documents/ns_lit_doc_20180330_via-crucis-meditazioni_en.html), accessed: 13 June, 2023.

Christian experience in order to achieve a cultural renewal that starts from a regeneration of hearts.

#### 5. GOING BACK TO EVANGELISING...

The plural and complex context of contemporary society, the diversification of languages and forms of behaviour, individualism, relativism and syncretism in relation to ethics and truth (which are the children of secularism), all require that the Church pay especial attention to her evangelising mission in all the spheres of daily life. One often has the impression that one is beginning from a starting point (and perhaps in many cases such is the reality). However, the smoking wick of the question of sense and of the irremovable need to believe in someone (or something) that is beyond us and separate from us constitutes a valid reason for reorganising our pastoral resources and understanding anew our commitment to evangelisation in an unprecedented, and from certain points of view, innovative way. We observe the fact that “after losing his relationship with the transcendent and rejecting all spiritual contemplation, [contemporary man] has fallen into a sort of pragmatic empiricism that leads him to appreciate facts and not ideas – facts, however, that find their basic principle in a false concept of autonomy and a strong jealousy of his own independence.”<sup>17</sup>

From here begins and gains force the disorientated universe of the contemporary world, whose outcome is the marginalisation of God and His Word with a consequent loss of the meaning, or the shallowness, of personal relationships and our relationships with ourselves. In addition, we know that the contemporary paradigm has imposed a radical change in ways of thinking about and understanding God and His relationship to modern society. Furthermore, scientific knowledge that is increasingly perceived and developed in new domains, digital tools that have in fact caused profound and complex changes at many levels with cultural, social and psychological consequences that are not completely clear, and the abandonment of philosophical reasoning can be pointed to as three roots that, although they may not question the existence itself of God (creating a new atheism), certainly marginalise His presence in life to the point of total indifferentism, as, indeed, we have seen take place. If this is the basic scenario, the need becomes ever

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<sup>17</sup> Rino Fisichella, *Nuova evangelizzazione. Una sfida per uscire dall'indifferenza* (Milan: Mondadori, 2011), 30.

more impelling to go back to evangelising life and Christian life as well. After all, the deep wounds that can be seen on the bodies of the men and women of our time constitute those slits through which the Gospel light can shine, despite the bulk of the armour built by the new culture that always and in various forms professes as its new creed: *Etsi Deus non daretur*.

## 6. ...TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL!

Evangelisation arises from faith and is directed towards generating and maturing in faith, and although globalisation and pluralism make up the cultural climate of our time, it is equally true that one can only think of an evangelisation capable of interpreting the values and the limits of our culture in order to evangelise them and place them deeply within its dynamics. The three great choices that Paul VI pointed to in his *Evangelii nuntiandi* (EN)<sup>18</sup> are still evident and of contemporary relevance: to rely, as a pathway for effective evangelisation, on a narration of the experience of Jesus of Nazareth, to support the promotion of human advancement, and to lay emphasis on the relationship with culture. It seems that the evangelising practice of the Church of creating a communications bridge between the Christian message and contemporary culture, which was begun in the 1950s, not only has not diminished but also needs further motivation. One thus understands that the question is not about how to act at a pastoral level in order to reduce or weaken certain attitudes or forms of behaviour of the contemporary world, even though they injure the dignity of the person or compromise healthy personal relationships, but about “how to read and interpret the new situations in human history which, in recent decades, have become the places to proclaim and witness to the Gospel.”<sup>19</sup>

In essential terms, the problem is not only that of generating the feeling of guilt or feeling of shame, or of rejecting the variegated expressions of arrogant behaviour that disturb relationships between men who are brothers, but also of setting in motion credible processes of evangelisation in which contemporary man finds the message of Jesus Christ still appealing, persuasive and fundamental for his life.

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<sup>18</sup> Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), [www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html), accessed: 13 March, 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Synod of Bishops, *XIII Ordinary General assembly. The New Evangelisation for the Trans-mission of the Christian Faith. Lineamenta* (4 March 2011), no. 6, accessed: 13 March, 2023.

It is important to know how to read specific cultural dynamisms in order to be able to interact with the questions that come from them because it is specifically by them, and in them, that many behavioural expressions are concealed that at an ethical level are very contestable or unacceptable. This reading offers to the Church the opportunity to redraw the features of an *evangelisation in conversion*, by which I mean assessing anew her nature and her constitutive and primal originality. To this end, it seems to me to be opportune to observe what the Italian bishops observed in their pastoral guidelines for the first decade of the new century. After a careful socio-pastoral assessment of the situation in Italy, the document declared:

Although communicating the Gospel is and remains the primary task of the Church, when looking forward to the next decade in the light of the socio-cultural context some of whose features we have presented we see some basic decisions that are able to define our ecclesial journey. In particular: giving the whole of the daily life of the Church, through changes in pastoral care as well, a clear missionary connotation; basing this choice on a strong commitment as regards the quality of formation in a spiritual, theological, cultural and human sense; and fostering, definitively, a more suitable and effective communication to men, amongst whom we live, of the mystery of the living and true God, the source of joy and hope for the whole of humanity.<sup>20</sup>

Paul VI's phrase in *EN*, no. 20, is always valid: the fracture between the Gospel and culture is without doubt the drama of our epoch. Specifically for this reason, it is equally incumbent upon us to consider anew our presence and our witness to the Christian life in daily life, renewing our commitment to evangelisation in the culture of the men and women of our time. This commitment requires going back to certain categories of evangelising activity in order to give a high quality to the experience of faith and to revitalise Christian existence. In essential terms, evangelisation has to enter a process of conversion that has as its archetype the lifestyle of Jesus of Nazareth as the Gospel of the Church offers it.

In this sense, the process of evangelisation or New Evangelisation must necessarily be translated into a commitment that understands the communi-

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<sup>20</sup> Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, *Comunicare il Vangelo in un mondo che cambia. Orientamenti pastorali dell'Episcopato italiano per il primo decennio del Duemila* (29 June 2001), no. 44, [www.chiesacattolica.it/documenti-segreteria/comunicare-il-vangelo-in-un-mondo-che-cambia-orientamenti-pastorali-dellepiscopato-italiano-per-il-primo-decennio-del-2000-29-giugno-2001/](http://www.chiesacattolica.it/documenti-segreteria/comunicare-il-vangelo-in-un-mondo-che-cambia-orientamenti-pastorali-dellepiscopato-italiano-per-il-primo-decennio-del-2000-29-giugno-2001/), accessed: 13 March, 2023.

cation of the experience of faith as a project and a service of Christian humanism. It is the human that should be evangelised; it is a new humanism that should be understood anew and offered in light of the Gospel. Pope Francis hits the mark when he invites the Church to proclaim with joy the Gospel of life, because no man, in whatever condition he may find himself, is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord. This joy, of which the Church is the bearer, arises from awareness that the human heart, despite its limits and imperfections, discovers that it is the recipient of the divine gift of *familiarity*, forgiveness and salvation.

For this reason, the Church is called to proclaim and bear witness to the Gospel of God, to announce that God Himself is already present and at work with His Spirit wherever man is. In essential terms, the horizon indicated in particular in *Evangelii gaudium*<sup>21</sup> requires a new style of evangelisation, a style that we could specify as a movement towards the human in its totality. To this end, it is necessary to achieve a conversion of pastoral care that expresses greater nearness to the existence of contemporary man and is translated into evangelising activity that is meaningful for the men and women of our epoch. It should also be capable of expressing itself forcefully in current anthropological dynamics, supported by a model of communication that from the point of view of knowledge and relationships makes it understandable and wished for.

#### 7. EVANGELISING THE HUMAN: FROM ARROGANCE TO THE REVOLUTION OF TENDERNESS

Pope Francis made the point very clearly: one has to return to a proclaiming that is truly at the service of the Christian and human growth of the person, and this means being fully located on the terrain of deepest dialogue with this culture, a dialogue that is marked by the centrality of the individual, his needs and his life projects. The centrality of the individual and one's forms of expression find a vast echo in a particular way in talk-shows and the social networks that are defined by the communications sciences and the Magisterium of the Church as the new areopaguses of our time. On these new stages it seems that the ascesis of arrogance and the vulgarity of expres-

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<sup>21</sup> Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (24 November 2013), [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html), accessed: 13 March, 2023.

sions and images go hand in hand with the twilight of the sense of guilt and the feeling of shame. These imbalances and contradictions certainly reflect some contemporary cultural aspects to the point that one can speak about an almost total irrationality that underlies the profession of a pseudo-liberty that is greatly vaunted and displayed. Yet, such dysfunctions and inconsistencies among very many men and women appear in a certain sense also as “requests for help” or an “unconscious wish for a better life” that invokes the attention of the evangelising activity of the Church and knowing how to read the concrete situations of people and their dignity that can never be repressed. This need for a different personal world presents two opportunities to the mission of the Church: the concealed but irrepressible demand of contemporary man for spirituality and the experience of a God who is welcoming and tender, to whom, for various reasons, the category of people who vaunt the non-sense of shame have not had access.

It appears clear that the demand for spirituality, whether vague or precise, can be translated into a need for an authentic humanisation, the interpreter of that thirst for the absolute or nostalgia for God that is essentially always present in the heart of man and also emanates from the need to rediscover oneself and locate oneself well in man’s fabric. Attention is increasingly paid to universally valid and recognised values, such as the desire for peace, harmony, concern about ecological questions, the value of and need to give space to silence and meditation, but also the rediscovery of the emotion of popular religiosity and the inclination to wish to narrate oneself in an attempt to want to rewrite one’s biography. In essential terms, present in contemporary man is an interiority that needs to somehow transcend itself, both at a personal and a social level. This scenario also opens up to the possibility of drawing up one’s religion and endowing it with subjective meanings and values.

The evangelising mission must know how to locate itself in this panorama, towards which it must have feelings of empathy, in the awareness that it contributes to the long process of personal growth. It can constitute in time the beginning of an elaborate pathway that should be purified and educated. In this sense, evangelisation more than being concerned with saying or transmitting a more or less indefinite number of truths, aims gradually to make visible the salvific presence of God in Christ and the Spirit in personal and socio-cultural events. Jesus’ style that the ecclesial community is able to offer will become a model that does not leave people indifferent because it attracts and envelops; it helps people to overcome very many pre-understandings of the Church and her message, thereby facilitating the move from

diffidence to the credibility of a proposal of prophetic faith that contrasts the inhumanity and vulgarisation of existence with the gospel values of true freedom, respect and solidarity.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus' style, which is the old and always new and contemporary way that must animate every process of evangelisation, leads the Christian

to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas... True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, specifically the proclaiming of, and bearing witness to, the tenderness of God in Jesus Christ represents for the Church a new opportunity to present herself as the mother of the womb that generates, welcomes and accompanies men who are brothers in daily human experience. The men and women of our time, who live on various levels of pain, disappointment and loneliness that often transform into anger and arrogance, need first of all to perceive God as not being distant and detached, as though our experience and existentially most disparate situations did not concern Him or that their relationship with Him did not involve the wealth of our emotions and our feelings. We need to bring back to the candelabra of our preaching the subjects of the tenderness and the mercy of God with great strength and incisiveness. They are not contemplated in our current epoch that is increasingly narcissistic, digital and bio-technological and yet they represent the contents with which contemporary man interacts and can re-understand his experience and personal choices.

As Pope Francis observes with reference to the Virgin Mary (cf. *EG*, no. 288), humility and tenderness are the virtues not of the weak but of the strong who do not need to ill-treat others in order to feel important. Whereas expressions of arrogance and overbearingness often conceal a basic existential weakness, the proclaiming of the tenderness of God towards men enables people to understand an overturning of things at the level of values: arrogance is the real weakness whereas tenderness is true strength. One can but agree on the fact that humanity today,

either will allow itself to be forged by the culture of tenderness (as respect, stewardship of the creation and of ourselves, of life and love, of sharing and living

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Marco Guzzi, *La nuova umanità. Un progetto politico e spirituale* (Milan: Paoline, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 88.

well together) or will be dominated by an anti-culture of brutality (as violence, unsustainable development, the culture of death, of selfishness and throwing things away, of individualism and of power).<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately, we certainly have had experience on a vast scale of the poison of the anti-culture of inhumanity and aggression, yet the ecclesial community is aware that by its evangelising activity and the strength that comes from the sacraments, it possesses an antidote to this.

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<sup>24</sup> Claudio Rocchetta and Rosalba Manes, *La tenerezza grembo di Dio. Saggio di teologia biblica* (Bologna: EBD, 2015), 14.

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UTRATA POCZUCIA GRZECHU I AROGANCJA ŻYCIA.  
DZISIEJSZE WYZWANIA DLA EWANGELIZACJI

Streszczenie

Na początku 2014 roku, podczas jednej z porannych medytacji, papież Franciszek, nawiązując do znanej wypowiedzi Piusa XII, stwierdził, że utrata poczucia grzechu jest złem tej cywilizacji, złem, które umacnia chrześcijańską przeciwność i jest odwrotnie proporcjonalne do uwagi i budowania Królestwa Bożego wśród ludzi. Kategorie poczucia grzechu i poczucia winy, przynajmniej teoretycznie i bez uogólnień, mogą być zrozumiałe w ramach doświadczenia chrześcijańskiego i sumienia kościelnego, ale gdy rozszerzy się horyzont ludzki, te dwa pojęcia nie znajdują racji bytu, ponieważ kwestia tak naprawdę nie pojawia się w rzeczywistości. Dzieci i twórcy współczesnej kultury, mężczyźni i kobiety naszych czasów, choć ukierunkowani na Królestwo Boże, są silnie dotknięci mentalnością zeświecczoną, globalistyczną i pluralistyczną, która negatywnie wpływa na ich postawy, zachowania i ekspresje egzystencjalne. Kościół, zarówno *ad intra*, jak i *ad extra*, staje przed problemem, jak przemienić przejawy tej nowej antropologii na wartości ewangeliczne; problem polega nie tyle na tym, jak przywrócić poczucie winy i grzechu, ile na tym, jak przywrócić lub wzbudzić wiarę w sercach ludzi. Skuteczna ewangelizacja ma na celu przywrócenie Ewangelii w sercach ludzi i wychowanie ich w sensie Boga, tak aby współcześni ludzie mieli wyższy paradygmat (Jezusa), z którego mogliby czerpać inspirację.

**Słowa kluczowe:** antykultura; arogancja; poczucie winy; kultura; ewangelizacja; globalizacja; poczucie grzechu; pluralizm; sekularyzm; czułość; świadectwo; wstyd.