

“CATHOLIC IDENTITY AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY”
Catholic Cultural Diversity Network Convocation
Thursday, 6 May 2010, 7:00 PM - Notre Dame, IN
Archbishop Pietro Sambi - Apostolic Nuncio to the United States

Thank you for your kind invitation to speak with you at this evening’s Convocation introduction on the important themes of Culture and Catholic identity, from the perspective of the Holy See.

Each day in the Easter Season, the Church’s liturgy reminds us how the message, the ‘Good News’ of Jesus Christ went from the Apostles’ preaching in Jerusalem, to all regions, and households, and throughout various cultures. The Acts of the Apostles chronicles the Church and her early, marvelous growth. Today, we heard about the evangelizing work of Peter, Paul and Barnabas, and James.

My own personal journey in the diplomatic service to the Holy See has taken me to different nations and continents, regions and cultures: serving in the Diplomatic Corps of the Holy See in Cameroon, in Jerusalem, in Cuba, in Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, in Nicaragua, in Belgium and Luxembourg, and in India; then serving as Pro-Nuncio and Nuncio in Burundi, in Indonesia, in Israel, Palestine, and Cyprus, and now as Nuncio to the United States of America and also as Permanent Observer to the Organization of American States. In that journey of 41 years in the Vatican’s Diplomatic Service, I have come to know, and admire, the various cultures of Africa, Asia, the Middle-East, Latin America, Europe, and now North America. From the Church’s history, and from my own history, I feel blessed to speak with you about Culture and Catholic Identity.

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council paid great attention to culture, and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* dedicated a special chapter to it (GS 53-62). The Council Fathers were concerned to point out the perspective in which the Church views, addresses, and promotes culture, considering this task as one of the “*more urgent problems deeply affecting the human race*” (GS 46). The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* emphasized the following points:

- the fundamental importance of culture for the full development of the human person;
- the many ways in which salvation and culture are linked;
- the mutual enrichment of the Church and culture throughout the history of civilizations.

In her relations with the world of cultures, the Church always places man, the human person, at the center, both as the author of cultural activity, and as the one to whom it is destined. The Servant of God Paul VI had very much at heart the Church's dialogue with culture. Following the Synod of Bishops on Evangelization in 1974, he wrote, in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

“The Gospel, and therefore Evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the Kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them” (EN 20).

According to this Apostolic Exhortation, it is the compatibility of the Gospel with a culture, and with all cultures, which is paramount.

In more recent years, in 1982, the Venerable Pope John Paul II founded the Pontifical Council for Culture; in 1993, he enlarged it when the Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Non-believers was absorbed into it. Among the tasks of this Council on Culture would be:

- To promote the encounter between the saving message of the Gospel and the cultures of our times
- To manifest the Church's pastoral concern in the face of the serious phenomena of the rifts between the Gospel and cultures.
- To foster the Church's and the Holy See's relations with the world of culture, by undertaking appropriate initiatives concerning the dialogue between faith and cultures, and intercultural dialogue.

Building on this richness we have received from the Second Vatican Council, the Synod of Bishops, Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II, and our

Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI, I wish to share two points with you this evening:

I. the *first* is Culture and Catholic Identity;

II. the *second*, which flows from the first, is Culture and Catholic Leadership.

I. Culture and Catholic Identity

- a) Our point of departure in evaluating cultures is Catholic identity, which we hear expressed in the familiar words of Saint Paul to the Ephesians:

“Strive to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:3-6).

This evening, when seeing the various groups of different ethnic origins, different languages, different cultures, passing on the stage in their ethnic dress, but all confessing with their lips that Jesus is Lord, and believing with their heart that God raised Him from the dead (Rom 10:9), I experienced the same joy that the Apostles felt in the first days of their ministry when people of different origins, cultures, and tongues embraced faith in Jesus as their Savior.

- b) Yet the Church, living the *‘unity of the spirit’*, and the *‘one faith’*, possesses a profound openness to borrowing from all cultures, and permeating them with the Holy Gospel. The Catholic Church is open to all cultures. She does not identify with any one culture, and remains independent with regard to them. Yet, as the human person is profoundly linked to a culture, *“the building up of the Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing from a culture or cultures”... “The Gospel and evangelization... are capable of permeating them without becoming subject to any one of them”*(Evangelii Nuntiandi, 20)

The Church is called to evaluate cultures, and cultural values, as to their harmony with the Gospel. Aspects of any culture that can be so harmonized are accepted; other aspects may need to be purified; and, at times, some aspects of cultures which cannot be harmonized with the Gospel are to be rejected.

This week marks the 400th anniversary of the death of Father Matteo Ricci, SJ, the great Jesuit missionary to China. He was perhaps ahead of his time in embracing many aspects of Chinese culture in his ministry. But for him, as for us today, it wasn't simply embracing cultural diversity for the sake of diversity; rather, it was embracing particular aspects of a culture for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of evangelization, for the sake of mission, for the sake of salvation. He was well known for his appreciation of Chinese culture in general; he used existing Chinese concepts to explain Christianity; the Chinese '*Lord of Heaven*' was identified with Jesus Christ; he supported the Chinese tradition of the veneration of the dead. Yet, at the same time, Father Matteo Ricci strongly condemned the prostitution that was widespread in Beijing and within Chinese culture at that time.

While looking at it from one angle, this missionary saw cultural diversity in the Church; from another perspective, he saw that Catholic identity, Gospel values, and Christ, could be found in certain aspects of all cultures. This was the great insight of Father Ricci.

The *crux* of this work, and this convocation, therefore, is Catholic identity. Can a culture be consonant with its own history and traditions and harmonize with Catholic identity? The answer will always be: "*sometimes yes, and sometimes, it must be purified.*" The norm for that discernment is the Holy Gospel. Our Good Shepherd in this work is Jesus Christ. The Church is the one who confirms this work. Our inspiration is the Holy Spirit of Pentecost, who unites and blends all the languages of the world, and many other cultural expressions, for the praise of the "*one name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved*" (Acts 4:12).

II. Culture and Catholic Leadership

In this new century and new Millennium, there has been a renewed call for new Catholic leaders from all cultures, who embrace all cultures. This need is especially acute in the United States.

The Catholic Church in the United States has always welcomed various cultures. The presence of an Apostolic Delegate, the predecessor to the Nuncio in the United States, goes back to a moment, 1893, when some in the Church in the United States were ready to embrace new cultural traditions, such as language, in schools and other apostolic works; others

perhaps were not so ready. In some ways, 117 years later, the Church is still being called to address these issues.

I cannot ignore the demographic shifts that are part of the Church's life, and growth, in the United States in this 3rd Millennium. Today, a majority of Catholic youth and young adults in the United States, those below the age of 25, are from Latin American cultures.

So, Latino leaders for the Church in the United States in the 21st century are a real necessity. But this must be more than simply Latino leaders for the Latino Catholics; or Asian-American leaders for Asian-American Catholics; or African-American leaders for African-American Catholics. No. The entire Church needs Catholic leaders of various cultures, and of all cultures, for the growth of the one Church. Again, paramount is Catholic Identity in such leaders. To identify such persons, and to cultivate in them the gifts that are necessary for Catholic leadership, is our important task.

Possessing the Virtues:

A Catholic leader must be virtuous; possessing both the human virtues and the Christian, *theological*, virtues. Faith, hope, and love, just as we hear Jesus calling us in today's Gospel "*Remain in my love*" (Jn 15:9). These are essential for a Catholic leader, and for his or her Catholic identity. So, too, are the *cardinal* virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, along with truth and love.

Manifesting Leadership Qualities:

A Catholic leader must also possess leadership qualities, beginning with the spirit, and attitude, of service, the spirit of Christ: "*For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Mk 10:45). One who is a servant will lead, not by imposing, but by proposing, and by journeying together with the flock of Christ, toward Christ, the one who *came to serve*. To that spirit of service, there must also be present:

- *a spirit of initiative;*
- *the ability to lead others, to dialogue, to stimulate and receive cooperation, to analyze and organize;*
- *to carry out decisions;*
- *to direct and engage in teamwork;*

- *appreciation for the role and the collaboration of religious and laity, both men and women, and for a just share in responsibilities;*
- *concern for, and engagement in, resolving the problems of the universal and local Church.*

All these are the marks of a good Catholic leader. This pertains to Latino leaders, and to leaders from other cultures, but always with a common Catholic identity, a Catholic core, and a Catholic heart.

So Catholic Cultural Diversity, or better, Catholic identity manifesting itself in a wonderful, rich, universal, cultural diversity- YES! Such is culture from the perspective of the Catholic Church.

“Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all” (EN, 20).

In our work, together, in the New Evangelization, and in this New Millennium, those words of Pope Paul VI are also my prayer for you. May God bless you, and may Our Lady, Notre Dame, greatly venerated in so many cultures of the world, intercede for you, and for the Church.

I will end with a personal remembrance:

When I was in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, where the Catholics are only 3.6% of the population, but very active, well organized, and having remarkable influence on the cultural and social life of the nation, I used to give them these four principles:

1. Have a Clear Catholic Identity
Decide what you want to be. Otherwise you will be like a drop of wine in a glass of water: in a few seconds it will lose its color and disappear in the water. So will it be for Catholics without a clear identity, living among a majority of non-Catholics
2. Have a Sense of Belonging
To preserve your identity, you need a community - the Catholic Church. The community needs you. Whoever walks alone will soon find himself lost.

3. Have a Fancy for Excellence

Excellence in human and moral qualities; excellence in family life; and excellence in professional life. If you are a minority, you cannot emerge by number. The only way to emerge is by excellence. If you are a 150 watt light bulb among thousands of bulbs of an equal 150 watts, nobody will pay attention to you. But if you are a light bulb of 300 watts among bulbs of 150 watts, everyone will turn his or her eyes toward you.

4. When you have a clear Catholic identity, and a sense of belonging, and a fancy for excellence, be open to collaborate with everyone who cares for the common good, and for the integral growth of society.

These are the **300 Watt Catholic Leaders** that we need!