

Cardinal Godfried Danneels

At the crossroads
of faith
and culture

Challenges facing the
Catholic Church today

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Crisis: the interface between Church and world

Since God has come into the world, He has made himself vulnerable to all the adventures of history. He has exposed himself to all of humanity's challenges, starting with the fickleness of the human person: the 'yes' and 'no' of human freedom. He allowed himself to be 'hurt' by what people did to him. He has chosen to follow the winding roads of history.

The Church shares the same fate. She too has confronted all the challenges of a changing history. Is the Church not the Body of Christ? She experiences all that Christ has experienced: His death and resurrection. Is the Church in crisis? She has always been. In Pascal's words: "she is in agony until the end of the world," as Christ himself. The history of the Church is God's painful journey in our world.

Always in crisis

"Are things going good or bad for the Church?" the little boy asked. The wise man replied: "Both: good and bad". The Church has always been in crisis. However, the crisis

today is unparalleled. Not only is the content of the Christian faith nowadays challenged, but faith itself is also fundamentally questioned. Moreover, for the first time in Europe there is no longer broad social support for Christianity. In addition, faith is not so much attacked as faced with great indifference. In the eyes of many, faith has become simply irrelevant.

Certainly, the negative events in the Church have always captured the front pages. But is it not true: good developments are rarely news. News is always bad. The truth, however, is quite often just the opposite. Information is more and more hidden manipulation: it is opinionated and determines public opinion. People would much rather see yellow grass after a dry summer than places where the grass is already turning green again.

There are many 'green' growth areas in the Church and there are many things in the Church that are going very well. *Ad intra*, there has been indeed a biblical and liturgical revival over the last century. The Bible is present in many homes and schools; and it is studied and discussed in a great many Bible schools and Bible-study groups. Our liturgy of course cannot be compared to that of the time before the Second Vatican Council. Today there is even, after a sometimes too 'liberal' post-conciliar freedom, a new sense of tradition, style, and sacredness. Yes, occasionally the balance shifts a bit in the direction of rubricism and clericalism.

The involvement of lay people in pastoral care and liturgy has become a normal way of doing things. This has happened for sound theological reasons, not just out of necessity due to a shortage of priests. And indeed there is a growing problem in broad circles: that of recognizing sacramental reality. The presence of Christ in liturgical actions – so strongly underlined in Vatican II (Sacrosanctum Concilium 7) – must not be eroded and reduced to an empty symbolism. Positively, there is a great sense of interiority and spirituality in the Church. Prayer is 'in' and prayer books, along with Bibles, fill the religion shelves in bookstores. There is a kind of revenge of affectivity, of the heart, and of the physical in liturgy and church life. The body celebrates it. Faith must be at a certain level 'experienceable'. The study of mysticism is booming. And there is, especially in France, the whole new phenomenon of the *recommençants* - the 'start-over people': people who in their mature years, whether previously baptized or not, are rediscovering the faith. Nor can one ignore the growing crowds of adult catechumens each year at Easter. There are once again many more neophytes in today's Church, and the Easter vigil has once again become baptismal night.

There is also a new hunger for the theology of the Fathers and for the monastic tradition. Along with scientific theology (*scientia sacra*) there is a growing interest in the *sapientia* or *sapida scientia*, the wisdom theology of the Church Fathers and the monastic tradition.

Indisputable is the presence today – yes still – of a massive volunteerism in the Church. The life of the Church is supported by volunteers, precisely because there is joy and dynamism in church life.

Is it not still true, what Pope Paul VI wrote in his remarkable last will, that our days are at the same time both "beautiful and tragic"?

Asking the right questions

The Church today is besieged by innumerable questions in all kinds of areas. These are mostly new and growing daily in number and relevance. The days of obvious faith thriving under the clear blue sky are definitely gone. The *civitas christiana* is over and gone. There are clouds in the sky, but behind every storm cloud the sun is still shining brightly and it makes the edges of the clouds shine as well. There is never a storm cloud without a silver lining.

The Church struggles to answer a thousand questions springing from science, technology, public opinion and changing cultures. But is this so negative? They teach the Church to ask the right questions. Is it not true that science has forced Biblical scholarship to pursue a hitherto unknown path? The book of Joshua says that Joshua made the sun stand still. Then the day could last longer and Israel could win the battle. Since this was rightly rejected by science, the Church was obliged to revise its exegesis. Not every Biblical text should be taken literally. This had major implications for Biblical study. Something similar applies to the creation story in Genesis. The world was not made in six days. Otherwise how could the light, already present on the first day "the great light for the day and the small lamp for the night," still be hung in the sky on the fourth day?

The sometimes brutal questions that science asks the Church can help the Church to ask the right questions. The creation story is not actually about the question of 'how' or 'what', but about the question of 'why' the world was created. One should not expect the Bible to answer questions that it has not even asked.

Internal and external problems

The problems that most dominate public opinion are often the internal problems within the Church: that of priestly celibacy and the accessibility to the priestly office, the relationship between center and periphery, and so on. These are hardly negligible problems. The Church itself needs to resolve these problems. But are these the principal problems? René Rémond points out another internal problem. “A sort of fascination for decline, for fragility, which may be traced back to the origins of the Christian message itself. A fear also, with respect to the errors of history and the dark areas of the past, which a call for penance, by John Paul II, has put forward in an abrupt way. Christians are now a minority. They fear contact with the world which they find hostile and they prefer to retreat into their own identity. And finally, there is the refusal to confront faith with understanding, and reason with the faith-filled life.” (R. Rémond, *Le christianisme en accusation*, Desclée De Brouwer, Paris, 2000, p. 93).

Nevertheless, do the real problems not rather lie in the area of the interface between Church and world? The confrontation between faith and science, faith and culture, faith and technological civilization, Church and society, politics, economics and ecology raises a great many questions. These interface problems are especially important because on this confrontation depends the resolution of the internal problems as well, for example an issue such as centralization or decentralization.

These are the real challenges for the Church, but they also constitute great opportunities for the Church. The disappearance of the *civitas christiana* implies, for example, that faith has become much more a matter of personal choice and personal decision. The coexistence of multiple cultures and religions is not only a challenge but also an opportunity for mutual enrichment. It teaches one to delineate ever more sharply one's own faith identity and does not necessarily lead to a kind of fusion but rather to a peaceful coexistence and societal enrichment. The challenges of economy and politics mean that ethics is ever more called upon and has a growing impact on social events. Does not every faculty in today's universities have a department of ethics or an ethics component? Everything today leads to ethical questions.

Challenges

God and the invisible world

A major challenge for faith in our days is undoubtedly the impoverishment and fading of the perception of the invisible world and of God and all transcendental reality. Since the Renaissance, and especially after the rise of the positive sciences and technology, there has been an eclipse in the consciousness of the Western world, an eclipse of what medieval people simply took as an evident reality: the supernatural world. An anthropocentric culture arose, dominated by rationality, efficiency and verifiability. Only what reason and the senses observed was real. And the quantitative became the language and measure of reality.

This positive scientific perception of reality has, of course, its legitimacy and truth. But the problem lies elsewhere: it is in the claim of exclusivity. Is there no other level of reality than that covered by reason and science?

Romano Guardini, already in the previous century, stigmatized this inability of modern humans to perceive the invisible. The contemporary human, he said, has a blind spot on

the retina and is blind to the meta-empirical, to what is not verifiable by the intellect and science. The contemporary human lacks a kind of reality depth-perception.

Nevertheless, in the last half century, there has been a change in this poverty of perception. More credit is given to those willing to probe ever more deeply. There is indeed a new attentiveness to what is not covered by the senses or pure reason. It would be very difficult to call our times a-religious. There is attention to the mysterious. One may already call this 'religious' in the very general sense of 'what connects with an invisible world', although it is immediately clear that this is not about Christian faith. This fascination with the 'mysterious' resembles somewhat the consciousness of late Antiquity. People back then looked in all directions for meaning and happiness. This is evident from their links with the mystery religions. Certainly, something is already becoming clear in our contemporary culture: the flat materialism and blind rejection of any transcendent reality is in retreat.

Contemporary religiosity is sometimes labeled *religiosité sauvage* ('wild religiosity'). It contains a bit of everything and yet it is difficult to find a common denominator. It is characterized by a certain narcissism: the 'I' or the *Ego* interests and holds the central place. This religiosity is very ego-oriented and has a great therapeutic focus. If God exists, then God is preferably a therapeutic doctor. Asklepios then.

True religion, especially Christianity, does not know this ego-centrism. It is ex-centric, facing outward, more focused on praise and thanksgiving than supplication. The true God is not simply the extended arm of our powerlessness, a 'divine therapist' to liberate us from our lameness. What is most lacking in this 'new religion' is the demand for personal conversion. True religion makes demands on the individual: it is not an automatic medication that requires nothing of ourselves. We are not completely blind to what is beyond the senses. There must indeed be 'something'.

The sects

Another contemporary challenge is the phenomenal growth of religious sects. In some continents, the sects are the biggest challenge confronting the Roman Catholic Church.

Sects miniaturize. They like things 'small'. They offer the cocoon feeling: cozy and warm. Sects keep it simple: they are content with a few passages from the Bible and do not need the entire Biblical library. In addition, they stress a clear moral code that makes

conscience and decision-making easier and less complex. They escape casuistry. Their ritual entails affective physicality, movement and emotions. The whole person is involved. And there is more attention to the heart. Feeling takes precedence over understanding. Sectarian leadership is strong and speaks a clear and simple language. It frees people from too much doubt and hesitation in decision-making. The authority is the source of all knowledge.

Why are sects so successful? Some people see sectarian movements as the direct result of secularization and its aftermath. They respond to the failure of science and technology to make people really happy. For many people, sects are the better answer to the quest for human happiness. They respond to the pain of living in anonymity and under the regime of powerful bureaucracies. They are a kind of antidote against human acidification and isolation. Contemporary people need small and warm groups that integrate them into fellowships that help them bear the ravages of time.

Besides the effects of secularization, there is perhaps another reason for the success of sectarian movements. Are sects not the 'unpaid invoices' of the large churches? Large churches have these characteristics: greater anonymity, complex dogma, detailed moral directives and regulations, and all too often a 'cold' ritual that often appeals to the mind and is indifferent toward the heart. For them religion is mostly thinking, less about feeling, and more about teaching than celebrating. And physical involvement is rather weak.

On the other hand, the major churches have themselves all the qualities that the sects promote and cultivate. But these often remain an untapped potential and are not effectively put into operation. Therefore, is it not time to pay our 'bills'? The sects pose a good question.

And does the greatest reason for the success of the sects not lie in the low attractiveness of the general Christian influence on society: by their way of life and their lack of boldness in speaking the Gospel? Then there is no Paul-effect. The treasure remains buried in the field.

The wide range of religions

The market for religious offerings continues to expand, almost to saturation. Everything is now in stock. Previously, non-Christian religions were only known by specialists in comparative religion and a handful of tourists. Now the modern European is

confronted with them daily in all areas of life: language, culture, customs, worship and celebration. Increasing mobility and migration insure that it will continue in the future. The demographic pyramid points in that direction as well. The most important are the Eastern religions and Islam. Buddhism even appears to be the fastest growing religion in Belgium.

Islam

Islam is omnipresent in Europe and its influence is growing. It already holds a 'massive presence' in public life and society. Islamic feasts are gradually shaping the year's structure, just as was done by the Christian feast day calendar until now.

But there are two types of Islam. The first is the classical Islam, which by far has the most adherents. This Islam is 'monolithic'. Everything is linked together and inseparable: language, culture, religion, global solidarity and togetherness. It is a whole that cannot be split. It is: take it or leave it.

With this kind of Islam negotiation is difficult. Merging with an existing religion and its culture is impossible, and integration is perhaps impossible as well. Only a peaceful coexistence seems feasible. The isolation of Islam within European society grows larger and larger each passing day. There is little or no reciprocity. This type of Islam is very identity-bound and self-protective. The idea is apparently: everybody should be a Muslim.

However, one should not forget that, at a certain time and to a great extent, Christianity too has known its own form of identity-binding. It is known as *Cuius regio illius et religio*: with Clovis baptized, all of Gaul was supposed to become baptized. That was certainly monolithic religion. It was the French Revolution that broke through this: Church as distinct from the state, faith as distinct from politics. Belief is a personal choice. This division and separation of religion, culture, politics and economy has thoroughly influenced the Western way of thinking about religion and church: "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

But there is another kind of Islam, especially in academia, that has accepted this departure from the monolithic and has acknowledged its own kind of 'French Revolution'. With this kind of Islam, coexistence and dialogue are quite possible.

The Eastern religions

The classical religions of the Far East are on the rise in what was once Christian Europe.

Buddhism is particularly well known. The reasons for this success have not so much to do with these religions as 'religions'. Buddhism is actually not a true religion: there is no deity.

The reasons for success lie elsewhere: this 'religion' offers 'wisdom' and a recipe for happiness. With its self-control and relaxation techniques, Buddhism plays to the specific needs of contemporary people searching for happiness. It is a religiously oriented therapy for modern ailments under which so many people are suffering: stress, disharmony, haste, anxiety and psychological distress. It helps people to relax, to control their emotions and to find harmony. These self-control techniques are centuries old and are certainly valuable resources for achieving a happier life: soul and body do have a certain harmony. And nonviolence is an effective way to neutralize fanaticism, which many religions are often suspected of promoting.

A new problem: inculturation

Another contemporary challenge is the inculturation of the Christian faith on foreign soil. It is often thought that this is a problem set mainly in Africa. But is this so? In fact, there already is a rather well inculturated African liturgy, which has grown from the grassroots. It is an almost organic growth that has evolved and has been pruned and purified by Christian faith. This has happened in Africa in a rather spontaneous way, like the shoot of a plant that develops on the trunk. African culture is indeed a young culture. It is like molten lava in which the Christian faith is poured out. It penetrates easily. This culture is still malleable and permeable.

Inculturation will proceed with much greater difficulty with the great Asian religions. Their culture is centuries old, even older than Christianity. The lava solidified long ago and is less permeable. Inculturation there requires a lot of time.

Will it ever succeed? There are many reasons to believe it will. The Christian faith has a great capacity for 'transculturalization' in new ways of thinking, and in new languages and cultures. Christianity originated in the Semitic world. It has evolved over several centuries and has been fully able to inculturate in Greek thought and language. Greece has very different forms of thinking than the Bible: thinking and language are completely different. And yet almost all the content and wording of the Christian *Credo* of Nicaea-Constantinople is expressed in Greek thought and wording. The same thing happened later with Roman legal thinking and the Latin context. And north of the Alps,

the worldview and the culture were very different: with a strong sense of shapes and colors, for concreteness and visualization. So for example, the liturgy of the Pontifical of Durandus of Mende contains rituals – especially in the ordination liturgy – which are rooted in the feudal world. And is Vatican II not the reformulation of classical doctrines in a new language? John XXIII wanted a pastoral council and a modern way of speaking. So far, Christianity has always been able to respond to the challenges of each era and culture in which it had to spread. It possesses a remarkable capacity for absorption and adaptability: a vocation to universality. It integrates new cultures and is not swallowed up by them.

The whole development of theology is equally culturally bound. The theology of the Church Fathers is different from monastic theology, or that of Trent and that of our time which must be practiced in a world of rational thought, sensitive to verification and the new contributions of the humanities. Moreover, it is imbued with a critical sense, sometimes claiming to be the only valid approach to the mysteries of faith.

The anthropological center from which all contemporary thinking departs, can indeed lead to a Christianity whose dogma is simply reduced to symbolism and all of Christianity reduced to mere morality. In that case, what is central is the autonomous human, not the human in relationship with God.

The uniqueness of Christ the Redeemer

A particular challenge today is the uniqueness of the figure of Christ and His salvation. Is He the only one, or one in a line of such people? Christianity certainly claims that there is no salvation outside of Christ. Without Him there is no salvation.

Something like that seems at odds with the sensitivities of many contemporary people. According to their view, all religions have the same God. After all there is only one. They are all roads and vehicles which end up at the same terminus. Take the vehicle, they would say, that passes along your front door. Most Europeans opt for Christianity, Asians an Eastern religion, and Africans a nature religion. The choice of the path is determined by geographical location and surrounding culture. All religious founders or prophets are nothing more than launch vehicles, which set people in a divine orbit. Once there, the rocket will be dropped because it is redundant. After all, man has reached God. The Christ is here regarded upon as only one of the great religious geniuses, one in a row of several and not at all unique and indispensable. The roles of religious founders are then interchangeable.

The sources of the Christian faith do not confirm this view at all: Christ is the only mediator between God and humanity, and apart from Him there is no salvation. “Because through nobody else can we be saved, because His name is the only one on earth that offers salvation” (Acts 4:12). Christ himself says: “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6). He is not only the Way, He is also the ultimate goal: the way and truth coincide. Therefore, the problem is not primarily a problem for the Church. It lies in the words of Christ himself.

The problem of the uniqueness of Christ cannot be escaped. The gospel says it bluntly: He is the Son of God. The Jews understood what He said: that is why they seized Him and handed Him over to Pilate. “And the high priest said: ‘I adjure you by the living God, tell whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’ Jesus answered: ‘Thou sayest it.’” (Mt 26:63). After this statement of Jesus there remain only three ways out. Either one suspects Him to not be in His right mind. His family did that. Or one says that Jesus slanders God. The Jews decided that and condemned Him. Or you believe in Him and become His follower. And often in history, the followers suffer the same fate as He.

Is there no salvation then for those who do not follow Christ? Vatican II has addressed this problem and has given a clear answer: “Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.” (Constitution on the Church 16). Also for them, all salvation comes through Christ, but we do not know the roads along which this happens. Only God knows those roads. We know ‘what’ but not ‘how’.

Faith and reason

For Christians, there are two sources of truth: reason and faith. The truth itself is one, but there are two roads leading to it. Right from the beginning, there was a confrontation between faith and reason. First there was a confrontation with philosophy, and later a further confrontation with the – mostly positive – sciences.

God is the source and origin of all truth and knowledge: of science as well as of faith. Ultimately, these two cannot contradict each other, because the truth itself is one. These parallel access roads come together over the horizon into infinity. Therefore, it has been clear for very long that the response of fideism, with its focus on self-identity, is not a solution, nor living in a conflictual relationship. On the other hand, being absorbed in

natural reason and extinguishing all faith cannot be accepted either. Indeed, one is then simply denying the problem, not solving it.

Faith and reason, the two sources of truth, will continue to relate as a dialogue and a dialectic confrontation. This is an ongoing process that will never end. For faith is the acceptance of what we do not see, while reason investigates the observable reality.

Consequently, reason and science constantly question and critically challenge faith. This criticism is a gift for faith; it helps purify faith of what was once thought to belong to faith. The waste is removed and just the pure ore remains. Throughout history, science has often freed the pure ore of faith from these impurities. The relationship between faith and science is like that of the relationship between the sculptor and the marble block. The sculptor stands before a rough piece of marble. The image is already in the marble: it must only be freed by chipping away at the pieces not belonging to the image. From Galileo up to our times, this process has been underway and it will not end until all the strange pieces have been removed from faith. Science cuts away and liberates. When practiced with pure intention, it is a beneficial partner to faith.

What is less frequently seen and said, concerns the other side of the coin. Faith also criticizes reason and science. There is more than one dimension to reality: physical, psychological, mental, and why not even the supernatural? For the terrain of knowledge that the sciences cover, is that piece of reality that is knowable and verifiable through the scientific method. This terrain is not the complete reality, but just one section of reality reached through scientific endeavor, whose quantitative dimension can be expressed numerically. This scientific approach to reality is entirely legitimate, but it can make no claims to exclusivity. The true positive scientist recognizes the limits of science and knows that just a piece of the total reality has been set apart and made subject to scientific expertise. The genuine scientist knows what Hamlet said to his friend: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Everyone knows that music does not coincide with its score and that poetry is more than a certain number of words put down on paper in the right order. And love is infinitely greater than simply a reflection of human hormones. Science that is not aware of and accepts its own limits is guilty of a kind of reality robbery. In just the same way that faith that rejects science is untrustworthy.

All of this applies in a very particular way to the interpretation of the Bible. Unprejudiced exegesis and a historical-critical approach are legitimate and even indispensable. They

strip the Biblical text of historical misrepresentations concerning historicity and look for the literary forms present within the Scriptures. The Bible contains poetry and history, texts and stories, wisdom and proverbs. Each must be read properly and each has its limits. In a narrative such as the book of Job one should not be looking for history. It is useless to go looking for who Job was and where the 'land of Hus' was situated. And that creation could not have been historically accomplished in six days does not mean that God did not create. There is nothing to be gained in the widening scope of contemporary fundamentalism.

Truth and freedom

But there are still more challenges. Truth and freedom are two major concepts and pillars in our contemporary culture and society. They are the foundations for our thoughts and actions.

Truth

The Church has always regarded truth as an objective reality. It is not made by humans but it is given. It is the human who knows the truth, and so this knowledge will always happen with a degree of subjectivity. It is human knowledge, but the truth itself is objective. It is a temple not made by human hands, although on the inside, the human can indeed fashion the furniture. But the human discovers the truth, he or she does not create it.

The Church has always defended the objectivity of truth. Truth does not have a wax nose that can be shaped and pushed in any direction. From this sense of immutable truth, firmness of mind and the objectivity of morality flow. Many of the Church's basic moral rules and her entire fundamental morality flow from this view on truth. It brings the Church much criticism, especially in its sexual morality.

Since the Renaissance, human self-consciousness has grown. The 'I' has been awakened from a long sleep, where it had previously slumbered, hidden in the warmth of the collective 'we'. In this way subjectivity was awakened as well, even a subjectivism that recognized the human as the source and founder of truth.

Hence the discussions about the position of the Church on objective truth and the scale of values seem to be located mainly in the field of philosophy. This is apparent in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* that has run up against a veritable 'toll' of public opinion. The core of the problem about the morality of the Church appears to be situated more in the philosophical

domain than in the theological. The encyclical is built on philosophical pillars: the human does not possess the *regula veritatis*. The human can only measure its size.

Freedom

Something analogous happens in the area of that other pillar of our civilization: freedom. Here also a cultural mutation has occurred that poses another challenge for the Church. What is actually today the prevailing concept of freedom that is called the modern approach? In fact it is really not so modern: it is rather the view of the 18th century, the century of the Enlightenment.

There are two conceptions of freedom. One is indeed that of the Enlightenment. It argues that freedom is total human autonomy, free of all constraints. It is the freedom of being free from any internal or external coercion and being authorized and able to determine the rules of conduct, considering only the (rather vague) restriction of being of no disadvantage to the other. Ultimately, such a concept of freedom can lead to the power of people to decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong. Such a concept of freedom makes the human independent of any objective rule of conduct and any objective scale of values. This concept of freedom – freedom *from* – has now been honored just about everywhere.

But it raises a new question. If the human person is free *from* any compulsion to do what he or she wants, it is not clear what a person is free *for* nor what he or she can do with that freedom. Though a person is then free from being caught in a tight pinch, he or she still has no indicators to point and guide in the right direction toward happiness. Where to go? Even if the human is liberated from all constrictions, he or she still suffers from a lack of orientation and meaning. ‘Freedom *from*’ without ‘freedom *for*’ can be deadly. Many suicides, particularly among young people, can be traced to this: they are meaning-blind. They do not know where to go, so they choose ‘nothingness’. They have been liberated from everything, but no one has ever told them where to go.

Is the ability to orient ourselves and to find meaning for this life not ultimately grounded in the presence or absence of a transcendent? Or to put it another way: by accepting a superhuman Source of truth and freedom?

It is sometimes said that the acceptance of a transcendent God is not compatible with human freedom. God and the human, they say, are competitors and there is no room for both. If God exists, the human is crushed. This inability to know God and the human

inclusively is still very strange. Would the diamond accuse and blame the sun because it shines and say: “You crush me”? Or would the diamond rather say the opposite: “The more you shine, the more I sparkle”?

So it is between God and the human. God is not a competitor of the human. God makes humans more human: “The glory of God is man fully alive” (Irenaeus).

A new path to God

Another challenge for the Church is the Church’s right and duty to establish the credibility of the existence of God and to bring it to every culture and time. For centuries there has been evidence that God exists. Here and there on the planet, God’s existence – and that God is transcendent and not a deification of creatures (Cf. Rom. 1) – is still largely self-evident, although it often involves multiple gods.

The Middle Ages (and the Greeks) had their theodicy. They had no hesitation to accept that God’s existence could be proved by reason. This shows how great the confidence in the relevance and reliability of human reason was. Aristotle had already mentioned the unmoved Mover and Thomas had his five proofs for God’s existence.

In our time, there is much less faith in human reason. Although Thomas’ proofs are still valid, his path is not commonly followed anymore. His proofs can only persuade if one follows his underlying philosophy. And for those who do, the proofs remain cold and do not warm the heart. Proofs of God’s existence have to be ‘experiential’ for our contemporaries, not based on mere knowledge but also on relationship. *Connaître* is not sufficient, there also has to be a bit of *saisir*. God is not only known but also embraced, felt. Love plays a role in this specific knowledge relationship.

God has three names: truth, goodness and beauty. These are the three classic universals: *verum, bonum, pulchrum*. They also constitute three ways to find God. Our mind can find the truth. It is imbued with an inner dynamic to always know more. It is also imbued with a transcendence-vector. Who knows, will always want to know more. This urge and unrest will never stop. Therefore, they point to the transcendent truth, the place where one finally finds peace.

The same is true for God as the supreme good and absolute happiness. Our thirst for happiness is never satisfied. After all conquests to be happy, we feel more and more what

is missing in that happiness. Here the 'drive' of a transcendental dynamics is present as well: another pathway to God.

Pulchrum is also a way to God. Every time an artist has completed a new work, he or she finds it so imperfect that the creation of a new work is set in motion.

However, our contemporaries have difficulty with these pathways for finding God. The search for truth is indeed one of the pathways, but immediately Pilate's question comes to their lips: "What is truth?" Hence the pathway to truth becomes difficult to pursue. Skepticism is deeply imprinted in modern man.

The same goes for *bonum* – goodness and happiness. Yes, God is good, but I – unfortunately – am not. God's happiness sometimes makes me rather unhappy. It is too high for me. The pathways of truth and goodness bring problems. Truth brings skepticism and goodness discourages.

And the pathway of beauty, *pulchrum*? Is this not the pathway for which our contemporary culture is the most open? If the other doors to God are just ajar, this one is still half open. Certainly, in principle, the other roads remain passable as well, but they are strewn with obstacles. They must first of all be cleared of debris. There is skepticism and discouragement on those roads. Nevertheless, beauty disarms.

However, it must be said immediately that beauty is not primarily the aesthetic beauty of art, notwithstanding the fact that, even today, a great many works of art lead to the 'religious' and often to God. But the pathway of beauty is used here in the Greek sense of *kalos* which, like the Hebrew *shalom*, is a sort of generic term for everything that lifts the soul and brings it happiness. Perhaps 'attractive' is a good word. Beauty makes us happy and that is also the goal of religion. An ordinary woman in France was asked this question in a survey: "A quoi sert la religion?" ("What is religion for?") She replied: "Elle sert à devenir heureux, sinon elle ne sert à rien!" ("She is there for us to become happy; if not, she has no use!")

Not in all centuries has it been as it is today. But perhaps now the time has come to go looking for God through the gateway of beauty. There is an infinite number of 'beautiful' things around and within us.

The universal Church and particular Churches

There is still another contemporary challenge. Since her foundation, the Church has affirmed that she is a universal Church: Christ's message is intended for all people. And it is also very clear that this universal Church is what the founder willed: "Go and teach all nations..." (Mt 26). Inherent in the message of Christ is the spreading of the Gospel and making all nations His disciples. That mission was not primarily intended as a way of expanding power and total control. It was more an inner necessity: the redemption the whole world by the one Christ. This cannot be reached in any other way than through preaching and evangelism. The Church does not have Caesar-dreams but Christ-dreams.

Through the mutation of our culture – the mobility, the variety of our communication networks and our rapid access to all continents, our living together and many other cultural developments – combining universality and unity has become a difficult task for the Church. These problems require the Church to straddle a reality it never really knew before. The world is so wide. And yet the combination of unity and universality must be guaranteed. Is Christianity, since God's incarnation, not a religion full of paradoxes?

Unity and universality are two irreducible poles that can never coincide. There will always be a tension between the two. And with the changing of times and civilizations, the Church must become increasingly flexible.

Neither a merger into one big gray mass, nor a division into autonomous particular Churches is acceptable. Christ wants neither a merged church nor a divided church. Each particular Church does have its own legitimate identity. The Book of Revelation, in its eschatological vision of the last day, speaks not of a melting together of the Churches, but of one universal Church in its diversity. John saw "an innumerable multitude from all races, nations and languages".

This universal dream already began with the covenant with Noah, which was not only meant for Israel but for all nations: "Here I close an alliance with you and your descendants, and all living things... And this will all be the sign for future generations: the covenant between me and you and all living creatures. I set my bow in the clouds: that is the sign of the covenant between me and the earth." (Gen 9: 8-12).

It is the paradox of Christ's Church that universality and particularity belong together; neither can blend into the other and universality does not overwhelm particularity. The

best illustration of this is the relationship between the individual and the community in liturgical celebration. The 'I' is not absorbed by the 'we'. It remains the individual itself and does not disappear in the crowd. This liturgical combination of 'I' and 'we' is exemplary for the whole Church community.

There is also the problem of the relationship between Rome and the periphery, between the central Church and the other particular Churches. This has everything to do with the relationship between the primacy of Peter and the collegiality of the College of Bishops, between the ministry of Peter and that of the Twelve.

Obviously, the actual organization of the primatial-collegial relationship will also have to take into account the ongoing development of cultures and how we live together. It is clear that during the first millennium, the Church was governed in a relatively decentralized way. In the second millennium, governance was thought about and exercised in a more centralized way.

In our own time and culture a further decentralization is undoubtedly desirable and even necessary. The seed of the Gospel's message is now scattered over many different kinds of soil. Certainly the role of Peter does not grow lighter with each passing day. It will be a heavy cross to carry: keeping both poles – center and periphery – together. How can anyone keep both arms open to keep all together, except on a cross!

But how does one organize this concretely? One could think of a kind of privy council around the Pope, not as a corporate board of directors but rather as a consultation with cardinals and bishops from all continents who meet regularly to advise the Pope and to inform him about the situation of the Churches. Membership would be temporary and the members not necessarily chosen from the upper classes of the hierarchy, but selected from those possessing the greatest competence, faith, openness and management skills.

Also the synods of the Church remain important ways to help the central Church to stay attentive to the particular Churches and their unity. Therefore, the members of the synods must speak out more and dare to speak much more freely. That is entirely in their own hands. The interventions of bishops should not be limited simply to reports about their Churches, but should also contain suggestions about what would be beneficial to their Churches and for the world church. There is little room now for debate in the synods. Everything is reduced to a sequence of messages, without much discussion. The

decisions therefore have the character of a synopsis of activities. They contain far too few initiatives and concrete suggestions.

Finally, a further internationalization of the Roman Curia is absolutely necessary. Communication between the dicasteries is practically nonexistent. Each does its own work without consultation and communicates to the outside without contact with another congregation. The Pope should be the linchpin of this entire network. That takes time, lots of moral strength and good management skills. The Papal trips are expensive for the local Churches, for sure. But Peter has a double and perhaps nearly impossible task: to travel and to stay home. But bishops have that too.

Religion and public organization

In practically all European countries there is a growing gap between the organization of public life and convictions of belief. Faith and belief are increasingly forced back into the private sphere. There is hardly ever any support for churches and beliefs. And where there is, one sees increasing resistance from the states.

Nor is there support for the moral authority of the Churches, except perhaps for the Church's social morality. Civil law in many cases runs counter to Church morality. Law therefore loses its supportive teaching and educational character. Morality is increasingly reduced to the lowest common denominator of moral views that currently prevail in public opinion. It is established and accordingly evolves from election to election and from survey to survey. The law gets more and more a punctual character with varying interpretation.

Thus interpreted, civil law is not always based on truth and an objective scale of values. It is the result of citizens' private beliefs – a majority ethics – especially when it comes to the beginning and the end of life, and marriage and the family. There is no fixed or permanent way-of-life code but rather procedural changes to civil law and penal code.

The implication is that there is no longer a prevailing ethical consensus in society. Legislation is inadequate to guarantee the moral behavior of a society. Laws continually exhibit new holes through which people can easily escape. This creates, of course, the ongoing need for new laws to make the escape routes impossible. The codex of laws becomes so encyclopedic that the artificial memory of the computer becomes indispensable. And society becomes a network of judges and lawyers.

In this context, the Church – often standing alone – has the mission of finding this moral consensus and endeavoring to get it accepted by society. The Church has a duty to interpret and promote a code of conduct that ensures the happiness of a society. Therefore, the Church must also have access to the public forum. The Church therefore speaks rightly about citizenship, respect for the truth, solidarity (worldwide), fidelity to the given word, and recognition of the human person as the unique measure of the scale of values, concern for ecology, and the tempering of consumerism. Besides that, of course, it speaks about all that is typical of Christian morality.

This basic morality – often called natural law – has been expressed for centuries in the Mosaic Decalogue. Each of the Ten Commandments, except for the first one, phrases in simple words the basic morality that should underpin any moral consensus. It is the translation of the basic recipe for human happiness, individually and socially.

Christianity accepts the Ten Commandments integrally. It thus holds up an ‘abundant righteousness’, which is expressed in the Gospel, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. That includes not only the golden rule: “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you”. The Gospel does not stop there, but goes even further and asks to: “offer the left cheek when someone slaps you on the right cheek”. This evangelical morality makes people and society more humane and makes mankind more human. The Christian law is not only a lamp to show the pathway, but also a source of strength for the journey.

How Christians situate themselves in the community is beautifully expressed in the Epistle to Diognetes dating from the late second century:

“Christians are not distinguished from others, by their residence, or by their language, or by the customs they observe. They neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity... because they live in all the cities of the Greeks and other peoples, as fate has dealt them. They follow all the customs of their country, in dress, food, and living conditions. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners: As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as foreigners. Every foreign country is their country and their homeland is a foreign country. Like everyone else, they marry and have children, but they do not kill their children. They have the common table, but not the bed. They live in the flesh but not according to the flesh. They live on earth but their real homeland is in heaven. They obey the laws in force, but they go beyond what the laws require because of their lifestyle. They love all people, but

they are often persecuted by all. They are misunderstood and judged, they are put to death and they come back to life. They are poorer and enrich many. They can miss everything and yet they have everything in abundance. They are criticized, but that turns out to be their justification. They have respect for others. While they do good, they are often treated as criminals ... To put it simply: what the soul is to the body, that Christians are to the world. The soul inhabits the body, but she does not belong to the body. Christians live in the world but they do not belong to the world. The invisible soul lives in a visible body. Christians, if they can be seen in the world, their faith is not seen.”

Evangelization and intolerance

Day by day there is a growing allergy towards any pretense of the Churches, that they possess and affirm the truth and that they want to proclaim this truth to everyone in the public forum. And it must be said as well that certain sects do not fail to intrude into daily life with a certain aggressiveness to get their beliefs across. Even though freedom of expression is recognized everywhere, many people still feel uncomfortable and irritable when beliefs are aired from door to door, on street corners and in public squares.

Citizens do want to hear, but only in places where one can freely choose to be or not to be. When the Church speaks publicly, for example on abortion or euthanasia or conjugal ethics, the very fact of speaking publicly is seen today as a moral constraint and as a lack of respect towards those who do not share this conviction.

Ultimately that can result in a situation where every reference to an authority which is not democratically elected – even if that authority is God or the Church – is seen as an act of intolerance. For non-believers, preaching as such is then considered intolerant.

Certainly, Christians in particular must learn to evangelize without intolerance. They need to realize more and more that they preach in an environment where many faiths and philosophical systems are present. Society has become pluralistic. But was it not already that way for the first Christians?

But that should not mean that respect for others’ opinions and beliefs should lead to indifference or relativism, nor that the Church should be pushed into a kind of paralysis out of embarrassment or fear. Evangelization must be done without feelings of guilt or arrogance.

Preaching with conviction and reverence is a major challenge in our contemporary context. We will therefore need to have 'evangelists' who can speak out boldly while combining humility and serenity. Then the transparency and the harmony, between what they say and what they do, will be seen as unmistakably present. Additionally, one must consider that the power of the Gospel is so strong, that it can clear a path by itself to the hearts of those who hear it. As Jesus says: "From its own power the seed brings forth fruit" (Mk 4).

A concentrate of hope

Making God credible in a secularized world

Actually, there is only one major challenge for Christianity and the Church. All other challenges are simply applications and corollaries of it. This challenge is: how do we make God credible in a totally secularized world?

Secularism is a phenomenon that has no predecessor in history. Indeed, Antiquity had no lack of religiosity. Total atheism was rare. Paganism had many gods. There was no such thing as we now see: a total rejection of God.

But that is what current secularism is. God has become superfluous: people and the world do not need Him. People and the world today do not seem to be bothered by the absence of any God. Contemporary secularism is experiencing a quiet and serene *tranquilla possessio* of God's absence. Secularism appears to be the (temporary?) end product of the 'anthropological turn', which started in the Renaissance and has continued ever since.

It has become a continually progressing incapacity to grant God and the invisible world any status in reality. Widely spread is the agnosticism that at first seems a kind of comfortable escape route: 'God can exist or not exist. It does not matter'. Agnosticism, however, always carries the mark of being provisional. It is by definition unsustainable. It is a 'waiting position'.

Another source of secularism can be found at the practical level. Those institutions that ought to make the invisible God visible on this planet have failed to make Him credible. They exhibit many weaknesses and faults. Christianity proclaims a God whose image cannot be recognized in what Christians do.

Secularism also has many replacements for God: money, pleasure and power are idols with formidable power and with many worshippers. For ages, they have been the 'idols' of humans. They have an almost 'divine' status.

Another barrier blocking adherence to Christianity is the unsolved problem of suffering and death and the question about life beyond death. This problem is not cleared up by reason, nor is it fully resolved in Christianity. The problem can only be answered through faith in the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ. That belief does have a range of convergent motifs, but no strict proof. It is ultimately something to be accepted in faith.

It is true that Christianity has always had great credibility due to the many social, cultural and artistic contributions it makes to society. That remains somewhat the case. But health care, teaching and education, charity, social institutions and culture have now been taken over by others in society.

Are there no good reasons for credibility?

Yes, of course there are. The entire credibility of the Christian message is based on Jesus. That credibility is even Jesus himself! Nobody will deny that His character, His speaking, and His life and death still radiate an irresistible charm. This has not changed. Jesus' deeds and His life are exceptionally unique. The miracles are always modest, often conducted in secret, with no desire for effect and never shrouded in mystery.

His words from the Sermon on the Mount, in which poverty and chastity and forgiveness are promoted, are not in line with our basic needs. They meet secondary and what might be called latent needs. Thus, every person is born with a desire for possessions. But

deep beneath the skin there is a desire for simplicity, for giving away, even for poverty. The Eight Beatitudes, in their blessed advocacy of poverty, mercy and forgiveness even to those who persecute us, are a deposit of gold and silver, hidden underground. From where does such a secret power of attraction come for something that people initially did not want? It is like an exotic menu: strange, yet delicious, as is so often the case with exotic menus. Evangelical radicalism has touched countless people throughout history and vice versa.

The rapid and widespread dissemination of the Christian message – a man who dies and rises from the dead – in the whole Mediterranean area and even into the home of the emperor, indicates great credibility. To this day, despite errors and omissions, Christianity has imbued all of human history with kindness and has proclaimed and lived generosity – the giving and doing for nothing in return. Christianity's universal message of love has been a great source of civilization.

And is it not true that a person aspires, deep within, for more than can be seen and touched upon, that he hopes and puts his trust in things beyond his immediate grasp, that he is driven toward universal love? The human heart appears to exist to believe, to hope and to love.

The last supportive point for Christian credibility is the death and resurrection of Christ. Here you can get only through faith. But this faith is not without foundation: there is the apostolic witness.

Finally, the human person is captivated by a fundamental desire for happiness, beyond death. And there is an offer. Are this question and this offer then mere illusions? And is the human person *une passion inutile* ('a useless passion')?

The little girl Hope (Charles Peguy)

What can the Church give to society today? Most surely this: hope. Because when faith disappears, the curtain of the transcendental world closes. When love disappears, the world grows cold. But when hope disappears, everything falls apart: then there is no future anymore.

Over the centuries, the Church has presented to society important credentials, rich and varied: in terms of education, health care, maintaining a high sense of morality, and the

emergence of many forms of art and culture. But would it not be that today, in our times, the most precious 'credential' is this: giving hope to society?

The Church throughout her history has constantly grown and expanded: in power, prestige, membership and impact. However, in many European countries, the Church is now in the situation of a minority or at least of a crumbling majority. The Church is shrinking in personnel, in financial resources, in power and in outward prestige. This is a real concern for many Christians and often makes them sad. What does God want of us?

Should we not spend some time in Babylonian captivity, just as happened to Israel in times past? On the banks of Babel's streams, the prophet Daniel wrote: "Lord, we have nothing: no leader, no prophet, no prince, no incense, no sacrifice, not even a place where we can bring our first fruits to obtain your grace" (Dan 3:38).

But it was precisely at that time of exile that the prophets wrote their best texts, that they found the most tender words to speak about God's 'motherly love'. So perhaps it is the same again today? Daniel adds: "Nevertheless, with a contrite heart and in a humble spirit let us be accepted" (Dan 3:39). In former times, did we not perhaps think too much that we could do everything in our own power? We only needed God for a final push in the back. The rest we could do ourselves. But does God not teach us in this exile that we should expect everything from him?

Whatever it may be, Christianity will only flourish by our faith, by our love, and above all by our hope. It will have to do with much less power and prestige, with fewer numbers and with less impact on society. But the seed of the Gospel is a life-filled sprout. After the winter, it always shoots up irresistibly. But that growth process makes no sound and it is not aggressive. Besides, all the comparisons that Jesus used for this growth are taken from the 'soft sector'. They make no noise. As salt and light are for the world: a 'concentrate of hope'.

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+ Godfried Cardinal Danneels

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Cardinal Godfried Danneels

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Cardinal Godfried Danneels

Cardinal Godfried Danneels (born in Belgium in 1933) was, for nearly 20 years, professor in sacramental theology, first at the Seminary at Bruges, later also at the Catholic University of Louvain, before becoming bishop of Antwerp in 1977 and, barely two years later, archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels. In 1983 he was created cardinal. He soon rose to international prominence within the Catholic Church, being active at bishop synods and being member of several Roman congregations and president of Pax Christi International. After 25 years of service, Cardinal Danneels retired as archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels in 2010. He was awarded an honorary doctoral degree at the Theological Faculty of Tilburg in 2002 and at Georgetown University, Washington DC, in 2003.

