

CHRISTIAN FAITH IN TODAY'S WORLD



UNPACKING THE EMMAUS SERIES

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Designed and produced by Patrick Lim*

THE EMMAUS SERIES



Questions Catholics ask on their journey of Faith

CHRISTIAN FAITH IN TODAY'S WORLD

SESSION 1

Introductory reading

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world of Vatican II (nn. 1-4)

The joy and hopes, the grief and anguish of the men and women of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts ... That is why Christians have a sense of deep solidarity with the human family and its history ...

Ours is a new age of history, in which momentous and revolutionary changes are spreading to all corners of the earth. They are produced by human intelligence and creativity; but they have an influence on the outlook and desires of people (individually and collectively), affecting their attitudes to people and things. We are in the midst of a social and cultural transformation with repercussions that affect the religious life of the peoples of the world ...

The spiritual uneasiness of today and the changing structure of life are part of a broader upheaval, whose symptoms are increasingly evident on the intellectual level, in the development of the mathematical and natural sciences ... and on the practical level, by their effect upon technology. The scientific mentality has brought a change in the cultural sphere and in habits of thought; the progress of technology is now reshaping the face of the earth ...

Advances in biology, psychology, and the social sciences not only lead humanity to a greater self-awareness, but provide the means of profoundly influencing the lives of whole peoples as well ...

The accelerated pace of history is such that one can scarcely keep abreast of it. The destiny of humanity is viewed as a complete whole. No longer is it seen merely through the particular histories of various peoples: now it merges into a complete whole. ♦

Questions opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the Booklet 'Getting Started' pp .14-15 – sharing reactions to the following questions:

Questions

- ♦ Many influential people in today's world are in strong disagreement with the outlook of Christians. What, in your judgment, has caused this situation?

- ♦ Do you see things in our contemporary world that are encouraging for Christians?

Viewing of DVD

- ◆ Introduction
- ◆ Chapter 1:
A turning point after the first millennium
- ◆ Chapter 2:
The West without its wisdom tradition

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet, 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing immediate reactions to the presentation:

Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

Reading related to the theme

An alternative reading is provided in page 13

Modernity: Christianity's Estranged Child (2000) p.7
by John Thornhill SM

The situation of our Western tradition at the end of the medieval period brought a polarisation of creative energies which gave rise to conflicting ideological movements. Western civilisation had reached a state of maturity which led it to call into question fundamental assumptions of the culture of medievalism – in particular, a reverence for tradition which was exaggerated, giving its support to social and ecclesiastical systems of inherited power and privilege open to serious criticism, and providing the warrant for a scholarship which too often degenerated into an intellectual formalism. The development of the cultural tradition of the West had reached a stage at which its peculiar genius called for a more adequate accountability. It was inevitable that a questioning of assumptions which had become so fundamental to the ideological consensus which animated the hardy culture of medievalism, and bolstered its securities, would provoke a defensive reaction. The creative energies of our Western tradition became identified with two very different outlooks which must be understood if we are to find a satisfactory understanding of the development of the past five centuries. ◇

An alternative reading

Modernity: Christianity's Estranged Child (pp 42-43)
by John Thornhill SM

Early in the 20th century, Max Weber, the great sociologist, spoke of the mood of the contemporary world as a 'disillusionment' – anticipating the sombre mood which was to overtake modernity in the course of the century. One writer (Richard Tarnas) sums up Weber's often-quoted evaluation of the effects of the Enlightenment, as the creation of 'an iron cage of bureaucratic rationality that permeates every aspect of modern existence.' (It was Weber who first coined the phrase, 'economic rationalism'). Tarnas cites Weber's own words:

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or if neither, mechanised petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For the last stage of this cultural development, it might be said: 'Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilisation never before achieved'. ◇

Final reflective sharing

This final sharing of personal responses to the questions given below is the most important phase of the session, and should be entered into generously, in the spirit of the Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15.

It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:

- 1. An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately.*
- 2. The sharing is brought to a conclusion, with each participant expressing, in a few words, what is their personal response to each question – in view of all that has been discussed in the session.*

Questions

- ◆ The Church and the modern world parted company, as has been suggested, at the beginning of the second millennium. How would you summarise the reason given for this in the presentation?
- ◆ How would you express the difference between 'scientific knowledge' and 'wisdom'?

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SESSION 2

Introductory reading

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (nn.33-34) of Vatican II

Today, efforts to increase life's possibilities for the world's peoples have achieved a measure of success – mastery over nearly all the aspects of nature continues to increase, thanks to science and technology ... The human family begins to recognise its unity throughout the world. Human ingenuity now produces many things which in former times were looked for from heavenly powers.

In the face of this immense enterprise, now involving the whole human race, people are troubled by many uncertainties. What is the meaning and value of this endless activity? How ought these gains be used? To what goal is this individual and collective striving heading?

The Church is the guardian of the heritage of the divine Word ... but the Church does not always have ready answers to every question ... The great effort of humanity through the centuries to improve the conditions of mankind presents no problem for believers – considered in itself, such efforts correspond to the plan of the God ... Far from considering the conquests of human genius and courage a challenge to God's authority, Christians ought to be convinced that the achievements of the human race are evidence of the Creator's greatness and the fulfilment of God's mysterious designs ... There is no question, then, of the Christian message discouraging men and women from building up the world, or dedicating themselves to the good of the human family; on the contrary it is an incentive to do these very things. ◇

Question opening up the topic

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing reactions to the following question:

Question

- ◆ Christians respond in different ways to the unfriendly attitudes of our secularised world. What are some of the responses you have observed, and what evaluation would you make of them?
- ◆ 'Post-modernism' is often mentioned in the media these days. Do you have an understanding of what 'Post-modernism' is?

Viewing of DVD

- ◆ Chapter 3:
Opposed reactions of the 'Post-modern' period
- ◆ Chapter 4:
Reactions within the Catholic tradition
- ◆ Chapter 5:
How should Christians respond?

Sharing of reactions to the presentation

Groups have a Buzz Session – in the spirit of Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp.14-15 – sharing immediate reactions to the presentation:

Question

- ◆ What has struck you as enlightening, inspiring, or even puzzling?

A reading related to the theme

Modernity: Christianity's Estranged Child (pp 182-184)
by John Thornhill SM

Those who uphold the religious traditions of the world must, today, reassess their task within the rich context of awareness provided by the research and historical studies of the modern period. Let us consider, in particular, the part that should be played by witness, as the world's traditions offer a fuller appreciation of the wisdom that can give an authentic meaning to human existence, for those identifying with the outlook of today's secular world ...

The sharing which is appropriate in the interchange between the world religions and the outlook that is shaped by the concerns of modernity should be at the level of witness. By 'witness' we refer to a communication which resonates with overtones of personal authenticity and existential discovery. It is normally 'witness', in its many forms, which inspires those seeking to give meaning and value to their existence to join a cause, to share a vision, to take up an avocation; it inspires lovers to receive declarations of love and abiding fidelity with a trust that is beyond the normal confines of human language. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that it has an important place in the life of religious traditions ...

For Christian theology, 'witness' involves both faith's encounter with the divine mystery, and a verbal or symbolic expression of this meeting: it is a human communication which derives its power from the fact that it resonates with personal discovery and authenticity. ◇

Final reflective sharing

This final sharing of personal responses to the questions given below is the most important phase of the session, and should be entered into generously, in the spirit of the Sympathetic Listening described in the booklet 'Getting Started' pp. 14-15.

It may begin with a brief period of silent reflection, which is followed by two stages:

- 1. An informal Buzz Session in which each participant is able to express their response to each question – questions should be discussed separately.*
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Questions

- ◆ What new insights have you gained from the presentation, concerning the Church's present-day situation?
- ◆ In your judgement what forms of Christian 'witness' are called for today?

SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION

Today's Western world is not easy to understand – with its immense achievements and apparently insoluble problems. This talk explores the suggestion (G. Lafont) that our problems had their origin at the end of the first millennium. The Christian outlook of the first millennium was shaped by the genius of St Augustine. In the tradition of Plato, this outlook saw all truth coming "from above", through a divine illumination that gave access to the order of eternal truths – an approach very congenial to a period (the Dark Ages) in which the Church virtually "ran the world", because it was the only agency capable of preserving the traditions of civilized life. But, in the High Middle Ages, as the Western tradition regained its vitality, the Platonic tradition was called into question – it was recognized that many vital truths are not given "from above" but are found by intelligent inquiry; created reality has its own intelligibility and relative autonomy; the Church should not be "running the world". This dawning recognition initiated a new era in the development of Western civilization. Though it was almost impossible for those involved to recognize the fact, the Church faced a momentous decision. It could accept that the secular order has a valid autonomy (something clearly affirmed by Vatican II), or it could reject this claim. In fact it chose rejection – with serious consequences for our Western tradition and for the Church itself. The Church began to live more and more estranged from the "modern" world coming into being; and our Western tradition set out upon its hazardous new path deprived of wisdom resources that had been so much identified with the Christian tradition.

A "modern" culture emerged that was in strong reaction against medievalism. It would make a new interpretation of its world; it would employ what we have come to call the "scientific" method of inquiry - experiment wedded to mathematical analysis (Descartes, Locke, Capitalism). The achievements of this approach (science, technology, democratic government) were enormous. As a consequence, until the 20th century few moderns were disturbed by the fact that the prevailing mathematical approach could give no answers to the most important issues we face as human beings (the dignity and value of the person, the meaning and purpose of life, love etc.). The horrors of the 20th century brought a terrible disillusionment, giving rise to two very different reactions. On the one hand, the "post-modern" outlook is sceptical of any attempt to give a comprehensive interpretation of human existence – seeing all such attempts as "ideological" (the expression of the interests of a particular social group). In the other hand, some people identify with the questionable "certainties" of a "new conservatism", and promote the slogans of different varieties of "fundamentalism" (religious, political, nationalistic etc.) Clearly, these developments in our Western tradition are very challenging to the project of evangelization. On the other hand, our Catholic faith tradition has the resources humanity hungers for. We must communicate the wisdom the world sorely needs, not by abstract teaching (necessary as it is in itself) but by witness (a message that resonates with personal commitment and authenticity). It is discipleship (a lived relationship with the Saviour) that will give authenticity to our witness. In a culture that distrusts abstract pronouncements, the lived faith of a revitalized liturgy must be an important bearer of the great message we have to communicate. ◆

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