

The Church and the World: dialogue and path of salvation

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LECTURE

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CA Lay people from the Second Vatican Council towards the third millennium

Introduction

The Second Vatican Council has marked an epochal turn in the relationship between the Church and the World. This is due to the new formulation given to "mutual relationships", which were always complex and delicate. New horizons and new paths of evangelization and dialogue with the earthly affairs have therefore opened before the Church.

More than 30 years have passed from the close of Vatican II. Many things have changed in the world and in the Church, but the conciliar teaching continues to be a task which every Christian has to measure himself with. Every generation must learn the Council, must catch its spirit and try to give substance to its doctrine. All of us are indebted to Vatican II and the only way to settle this debt is to put into practice its teachings in our individual life and in that of our ecclesial communities.

In the context of the preparation to the Great Jubilee the Pope invites us to a serious examination of our conscience, that must concern in particular the reception given to the Council, this "great gift of the Spirit to the Church at the end of the second millennium" (n. 36). And then he explains: "A serious question is raised by the nature of the relations between Church and world. The Council's guidelines - set forth in *Gaudium et Spes* and in other documents - of open, respectful and cordial dialogue, yet accompanied by careful discernment and courageous witness to the truth, remain valid and call us to a greater commitment" (ibid). In my lecture therefore I am going to present a general outline of the problems concerning the dialogue between the Church and the World, as it is formulated by the Vatican II and by the postconciliar papal teaching. In fact the living spring of the ecclesial magisterium should always be a sure point of reference for all Christians, a continuous encouragement to a stronger commitment, and a basic measure to verify the "style" of the relations with the contemporary world.

1. Living the mystery of the Church

In the dialogue with the world, the Christians' selfconscience is of the utmost importance. *Ecclesia, quid dicis de te ipsa?* This leading-question of Vatican II was answered by a wording both synthetic and full of meaning: the Church is a mystery of missionary communion.

The Church is primarily "mystery", that is a reality which originates neither from our imagination nor from our powers, though we can find and live it. It is a gift, full of charm, that surpasses our capacity of understanding.

The Church, then, is "mystery of communion", deeply rooted in the trinitary life of God himself. In *Christifideles Laici* the Pope explains: "The communion of Christians with Jesus has the communion of God as Trinity, namely, the unity of the Son to the Father in the gift of the Holy Spirit, as its model and source: united to the Son in the Spirit's bond of love, Christians are united to the Father (...) "I am the vine, you are the branches" (Jn 15,5). From the communion that Christians experience in Christ there immediately flows the communion which they experience with one another: all are branches of a single vine, namely, Christ" (n. 18). This communion is a free gift of the grace, but it is also a task, a commitment. Each of us is called to build it according to his/her own vocation.

The Church is, besides, "organic communion" as it is characterized by a diversity and a complementarity of vocations, ministries, services, charisms and responsibilities: bishops, priests, women and men religious, lay faithful. All however fulfil the same mission entrusted by Christ to the Church. There is neither opposition nor division, but reciprocity and coordination. How important is to recall these principles in the practice of our parish and diocesan communities!

Finally the Church is mystery of "missionary communion". So it is not withdrawn in itself, but turned towards the mission, towards the world. The missionary dimension of the Church's mystery has deep consequences on the life of the lay faithful and of the ecclesial communities.

It requires primarily a renewed awareness of our Christian identity founded on the Baptism: inserted in Christ, living members of Christ's Mystical Body which is the Church, new creatures. Here is the great mystery of the Christian vocation.

By Baptism the Christians have been made sharers in the threefold office of Christ: the Priestly, Prophetic and Kingly mission. Sharing Christ's Priestly office, the lay faithful are called to offer God their spiritual worship and the fruits of an authentic sanctity (cf *Lumen Gentium*, 34). Sharing the Prophetic office, they are called to announce the Gospel through their word and the witness of their life. This announcement acquires a special effectiveness because it is accomplished "in the ordinary circumstances of the world" (ibid. 35). Finally, sharing Christ's Kingly office they are called to build the Kingdom of God in the world: "Let the laity band together to remedy those secular institutions and conditions which are an inducement to sin, so that they may be brought into line with the rules of justice, favouring rather than hindering the practice of virtue. By so doing they will imbue culture and human works with a moral value" (ibid. 36).

Each lay faithful, by Baptism, becomes an active and responsible subject of the mission of the Church. And this fact must affect a personal relationship with the Church, characterised by attitudes and acts of love, confidence and commitment.

In the vocation of the lay faithful a deep permeation between Church and world is realised: the Church in the heart of the world and the world in the heart of the Church. This is what *Lumen Gentium* declares: "It is the special vocation of the laity to seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. They live in the world, in each and every one of the world's occupations and callings and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, form the context of their existence. There they are called by God to contribute to the sanctification of the world from within, like leaven, in the spirit of the Gospel, by fulfilling their own particular duties" (n. 31).

2. Understanding the reality of the world

The Christian lives in the world, though he is not of the world. To fulfil his vocation he must therefore understand the reality of the world and its meaning. He must be "citizen of the world".

The world we live in is a world of great and deep changes at global level (the globalisation!) which are going on with a speed never known before. It is a world of great scientific, technical and social conquests, which are raising so many hopes, but at the same time a world which is living deep tragedies and is looking at the future with anguish. Plenty of detailed analysis are being made about the situation of the contemporary world. But the quantity of information, often contradictory, which is bombarding us, instead of helping us to understand what is happening, increases the confusion of many people.

The Christian who lives in the world, must try to understand the current processes - social, cultural, economic, political - and their causes, but he must not stop here. We read in *Gaudium et spes*: "The world which the Council has in mind is the world of women and men, the entire human family seen in its total environment. It is the world as the theatre of human history, bearing the marks of its travail, its triumphs and failures. It is the world which Christians believe has been created and is sustained by the love of its maker, has fallen into the slavery of sin but has been freed by Christ, who was crucified and rose again in order to break the stranglehold of the evil one, so that it might be fashioned anew according to God's design and brought to its fulfilment" (n. 2). This is a dynamic vision of the world, which has two essential coordinates: the mystery of creation and that of redemption. As a work of the Creator the world has its own value and its intrinsic goodness, confirmed by the words of Genesis: "And God saw that it was good" (1,10). At the same time as a creature, it is not an absolute because it does not find in itself the final reason of its existence, but it sends back to He who created it, that is to God. It is besides a world wounded by sin, also in its social structures that is a world which needs to be redeemed. Or, rather, which is already redeemed. "For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (Jn 3,16). The redemption fulfilled through the cross and the resurrection of Christ gives the whole creation and the existence of every man in the world the last meaning; "Constituted Lord by his resurrection and given all authority in heaven and on earth, Christ is now at work in human hearts by the power of his Spirit; not only does he arouse in them a desire for the world to come but he quickens, purifies, and strengthens the generous

aspirations of humanity to make life more humane and conquer the earth for this purpose" (Gaudium et Spes, 38).

From these theological basis springs the positive attitude of the Council towards the world: an attitude which is not based on a superficial optimism, but on the realism of faith.

In working out the relationship between the Church and the world, the Council has reaffirmed three essential principles, which are always to be kept in mind:

- the primacy of the human person. The man is the fundamental criterion of a true social progress. "Human activity is for the benefit of human beings, proceeding from them as it does (...). People are of greater value for what they are than for what they have. Technical progress is of less value than advances towards greater justice, wider kinship and a more human social environment. Technical progress may supply the material for human advance but it is powerless to achieve it" (Gaudium et Spes, 35). The Council looks at the world through the prism of the human person, of its dignity and of its "integral vocation".
- The close relation between the present world and the "new heavens and new earth". Gaudium et Spes says: "Although we must be careful to distinguish earthly progress clearly from the increase of the kingdom of Christ, such progress is of vital concern to the kingdom of God, insofar as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society. When we have spread on earth the fruits of our nature and our enterprise - human dignity, sisterly and brotherly communion, and freedom (...) we will find them once again, cleansed this time from the stain of sin, illuminated and transfigured" (39). Then the eschatologic perspective is essential to understand the present world thoroughly. The world missing the perspective of an afterlife is a world with no hope, an inhumane world. This principle decidedly contradicts all ideologies of self-salvation and earthly salvation. It reaffirms besides that Christianity speaking of the eschatologic dimension of the world is no "opium of the people", is no flight from the world, but it is a call to commitment to build a "new humanity".
- The earthly affairs, that is science, culture, economy and the same society have their own autonomy. They have their own laws and values, and man's task is to discover, use and order them (cfr Gaudium et Spes, 36). The Church, seen for a long time as an obstacle to scientific and social progress, now presents herself as an ally of modern man. But this autonomy does not mean total separation of the world from the Creator. From this spring - for example - the vast problems concerning the relations between socio-political life and ethics, between science/technique and ethics (see the development of the genetic engineering). I deemed it very important to recall, at the beginning of my lecture, the essential elements of the vision of the world outlined in the Council. In fact, it is necessary to understand first what the world and its destiny is in order to be able to lay out the right foundation of the dialogue of salvation with the world.

3. A Church in solidarity with the world

Our times are characterized by an increasing gap between the Church and the world.

This phenomenon is one of the elements of a process which goes back to the Enlightenment.

At that time was born the trend of thought which, fostering emancipation of the world from the influence of the Church in particular and from religion in general, made the dialogue Church-world extremely difficult.

Vatican Council II was the answer of the Holy Spirit to this great challenge of the modern time.

And the courageous programme of the Council to relaunch the dialogue with the world is fully expressed in the sentence: the Church in the world. That "in" changed many things of a relationship which was always delicate, complex and difficult.

The Church therefore is not "against" the world, is not opposed to it; it is not "above" the world, it does not rule over it - but it is "in" the world with an attitude of solidarity and service.

The Church of Vatican Council II is a Church solid with the world, the Church of the preferential option of the poor and of those "blessed by life".

The very first words opening the constitution Gaudium et Spes say this: "The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts" (n. 1).

This Church listens to the world attentively as she knows that God speaks also through earthly

facts and events. This is why she pries constantly into the "signs of the times". It is to underline that this is a theological and not only a sociological category, as it is part of the theology of history. The Council says: "With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the whole people of God, particularly of its pastors and theologians, to listen to and distinguish the many voices of our times and to interpret them in the light of God's word, in order that the revealed truth may be more deeply penetrated, better understood and more suitably presented" (n. 44).

The solidarity of the Church with the world and with man has deep reasons: John Paul II writes in *Redemptor hominis*: "Man in the full truth of his existence, of his personal being and also of his community and social being (...) is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission: he is the primary and fundamental way for the Church, the way traced by Christ himself, the way that leads invariably through the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption" (n.14). We must strongly underline that this is no "anthropocentrism" but "Christ-centred humanism". In fulfilling her mission of salvation the Church "heals" the world, makes it more human.

The Council explains: "In pursuing its own salvific purpose not only does the Church communicate divine life to humanity but in a certain sense it casts the reflected light of that divine life over all the earth, notably in the way it heals and elevates the dignity of the human person, in the way it consolidates society, and endows people's daily activity with a deeper sense and meaning" (*Gaudium et Spes* 40). The Church then presents herself to the world not only as "expert in humanity" (Paul VI), but also as "good Samaritan" (John Paul II). Nevertheless the attitude of solidarity and opening towards the world is not enough to remove all tensions and all hotbeds of possible conflicts. The world we live in is wounded by sin. A world where the Church often cannot but present herself as "sign of contradiction", causing opposition and even hostility. Saint Paul's admonition: "Do not be conformed to this world" (Rom 12,2) is still valid today. Rather, today more than ever, as in our times many Christians miss courage to oppose the fashions, to resist the charm of modernity. Card. Joseph Ratzinger writes: "I really think that we need a kind of revolution of faith in many senses. First we need to recover courage to go against common opinions (...). We ought to have courage to go also against what is seen as "normality" for the man at the end of the 20th century, and to rediscover faith in its simplicity" (*The salt of the earth*, p. 40-41). It seems that today the chance of the evangelization of the Church depends mostly on the capacity of the Christians to go against the mainstream.

4. The dialogue of salvation

The greatest service that the Church can offer to the world in any time is the evangelization, that is the announcement of Jesus Christ, the only Redeemer of man "yesterday, today and forever" (Heb 13,8). And to this regard, her mission of "universal sacrament of salvation" (cf *Lumen Gentium*, 1) is irreplaceable.

At this end of a millenary, the Church, in her work of evangelization, has to face great challenges: the spreading secularization is turning countries of old christian traditions into real lands of mission: the split between the Gospel and culture - that Paul VI stated as one of the dramas of our time (cf *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20) - is widening as well as the dichotomy between faith and life of many faithful (cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 43). Before such a setting all Christians must be questioned by Saint Paul's words: "I should be in trouble if I failed to preach the Gospel!" (1 Co 9,16). The Church of today then is called to a great missionary effort and John Paul II does not tire of encouraging her in her commitment for the "new evangelization", spurring all her members to search for the more suitable methods to bring Jesus' Gospel to the men of our time.

In this context the crucial problem the Church has to face is that of evangelizing culture. The necessity of re-establishing the dialogue with modern culture is felt as urgent everywhere. Paul VI wrote: "What matters is to evangelize man' culture and cultures - not in a purely decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots - always taking the person as one's starting point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God" (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 20).

The dialogue of the Church with culture of our time is of vital importance not only for the Church, but also and especially for humanity itself, faced by a dramatic alternative: in the third millennium, which is approaching, or culture shall help man to be more man, or, avoided of

true values, it shall destroy him.

But how is culture to be evangelized? It is a difficult process which requests a widespread action and courageous projects. An important starting point to evangelize culture in the countries with (sometimes) a long christian tradition, consists, for example, in rousing their historical memory, in awakening their conscience of their own Christian roots. John Paul II, during his apostolic journeys, recalls that very often to individual countries and to continents: "Europe, be yourself", "Latin America, be yourself". Be yourself, that is be faithful to your christian roots.

The Gospel, though it is not identical with any culture, imbues it of true values, elevates it, inspires it and opens it to transcendency. John Paul II who cares for the problem of culture very much, makes a remarkable comment to this regard : "The synthesis between culture and faith is not only an exigency of culture, but also of faith (...). A faith which does not turns into culture is a faith not fully accepted, not entirely thought, not faithfully lived" (Osservatore Romano, 21-22.5.1982). How does this happen? Through a process where faith, as a personal option for Christ as Lord and Teacher, is not lived in an individualistic way but it gives rise to a deep spiritual communion among people and to a style of life imbued with evangelic values, which becomes an integral part of the culture of a society or of a people.

Saint Paul's speech at the Aeropagus, that is the centre of culture of the Athenian people, (cf Act, 17, 22-31)), is the paradigm of the dialogue of the Church with culture: Paul does not wait, but he meets himself the world of culture of that time with courage; he begins a dialogue which can be considered the first example of "inculturation" of the Gospel message in the context of the greek culture. Also the momentary failure contains a teaching: in the difficult dialogue with culture, the Church must never give up nor be discouraged.

John Paul II, referring to that event of the Acts of the Apostles, speaks of aeropagus of modern times that the Church must evangelize (cf Redemptoris missio, 37) and among them he points out especially the world of social communications, culture in general, the world of science, politics and economy.

The Church cannot ignore the challenges of the contemporary world. Today accurate and concrete projects and programmes are needed. A vaste field opens to the lay apostolate. And we must say that Catholic Action's members have always been very attentive to the presence of the Church in the world of culture. You have already very valid experiences in various countries. A larger exchange of information and ideas would be very useful.

We are faced by a task which is very urgent, owing to great worldwide strategies which oppose the Gospel. The Church does not live out of the world. The "new world order", the "new world consent" - which are much spoken of - in the last years found expression in the world-conferences promoted by the United Nations. Now the anthropology which is at the basis of these programmes (which are imposed to the governments on a worldwide scale) is a non-christian anthropology. They use a new language to disguise the true intentions, but terms like "gender", "reproductive health" etc. aim always to the same goal: a politics opposed to family and to life. The Church, aware of the importance of these challenges, cannot leave the field of culture. Because the stake is the future of the same humanity. To the civilization of hate she must oppose a civilization of love: to the civilization of death a civilization of life.

The chief method of evangelization of the Church of Vatican Council II is dialogue, as outlined by Paul VI in his first encyclical Letter, *Ecclesiam suam* (1964). Dialogue there is not a mere mean of communication, but dialogue of salvation which has as a model the dialogue between God and man all along the history of salvation. It is a dialogue which starts from the free initiative of God and his endless love; a dialogue which does not depend from the merits of those whom it is addressed; which respects always every person's freedom; which embraces all without any discrimination; a dialogue which requests from those who practise it an attitude of esteem, respect, love, confidence, evangelic prudence, but also of courage to drive one's reasoning "out of the ordinary paths". Paul VI concludes: "In the very act of trying to make ourselves pastors, fathers and teachers of men, we must make ourselves their brothers. The spirit of dialogue is friendship and even more is service" (*Ecclesiam suam*, 87).

Paul VI, in outlining this charming picture of the dialogue with the world, was aware of its risks. The postconciliar period shew how right his concerns were. In *Ecclesiam suam* he wrote: "The apostole's art is a risky one. The desire to come together as brothers must not lead to a watering-down or subtracting from the truth. Our dialogue must not weaken our attachment to our faith. On our apostolate we cannot make vague compromises about the principles of faith

and action on which our profession of Christianity is based" (n. 87). These words have lost nothing of their relevance to the present.

At present we must strongly reaffirm the basic law of the dialogue of salvation which is that of being faithful to God and consequently being faithful to man. Because one cannot be faithful to man without being faithful to God.

Faithfulness to God requests some fundamental requirements from those who announce the Gospel:

- an authentic sanctity of life and a deep spirituality nourished by the prayer, the sacraments and the continuous meditation of the Word of God;
- a deep awareness to be servants - not owners - of the Word of God and of Truth;
- the knowledge of the contents of faith. In the context of secularizing pressure of today's society, the ignorance of so many Catholics with regard to this is a serious problem today. One needs study and a suitable formation to announce the Gospel. In this sense the new Catechism of the Catholic Church is an important aid and a sure basis;
- the ecclesial dimension of the faith. Our faith is the faith of the Church, it is not a private fact. The authentic announcement of the Gospel takes place only in the communion of the Church and under the guidance of the ecclesial magisterium. The laypeople know this well;
- finally also the criterion of integrity must be mentioned. We are called to announce all the truth of the Gospel. One must have the courage to propose the difficult truths and the radical exigencies of Christ to men. Even if always in a spirit of charity. An interesting example to this respect comes from John Paul II in his dialogue with the youths: "I am a friend of the youths, but an exacting friend". The apostle of Jesus Christ must dare to exact, even if always with charity.

From the faithfulness to God springs naturally the faithfulness to man, the sensibility to his problems. It is an anthropological criterion of evangelization. There is a close bond between evangelization and human promotion. The Gospel does not diminish the human person, but helps her to grow to full maturity. The faithfulness to man implies the process of "inculturation" of the Gospel message, a continuous inquiry about the most suitable ways to communicate it, in the full respect of the integrity of the revealed Truth.

The Church evangelizes "ad extra", that is those who do not yet know Jesus Christ (more and more often they live today near us in the secularized societies) and "ad intra", that is his sons who swerved from the life of faith, the indifferent ones.

All of us need to be evangelized, as all of us need conversion. In our time, the downfall of the ideologies has revealed in our societies a frightful void of true values, which can give sense to the human existence. This void is accompanied by the awakening of the longing for the sacred, felt especially by the new generations. It is enough to consider the World Youth Day and especially the last one held in Paris, which was attended by more than one million of youths. It is a "sign of the times" upon which it is worth while reflecting! It is a clear message that the youths gathered around Peter's Successor pass on to the whole world and also to the whole Church: here it is what we look for, what we need... The evangelic harvest is really great.

5. "It is time for action..."

In the dialogue of the Church with the world, which is called evangelization, the lay faithful have of course the role of active subjects. Through their Baptism they participate, in an active and responsible way, in the mission of the Church. Christ called them to put their specific competences, their talents and charisms at the service of the evangelization: in the sphere of the family, the work, the school, in their social and political commitment. And there "they are called to contribute, to the sanctification of the world, from within like leaven" (Lumen Gentium, 31).

It is urgent therefore that the lay faithful rediscover their own identity which is rooted in the Baptism, that is their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world. To rediscover means to live it with renewed engagement and enthusiasm. The old scholastic adagio says: "Operari sequitur esse". "Operari" that is our apostolic action, must organically spring from our Christian "esse". In the lay faithful the conscience of the dignity, of the beauty of the Christian

vocation must then grow. At the centre of the life of every Christian is always Christ, Teacher and Lord. It is from the personal meeting with Him that authentic witness of life and missionary energy spring.

In our times, a very special role is plaid by the organized apostolate. Especially in a secularized society like ours, one feels the necessity of Christian environments to refer to, in order to let its own faith grow, one needs to be supported by a community of people who share the same ideals. After the Council a meaningful flourishing of the catholic associations actually took place. We read in *Christifideles Laici*: "In recent days the phenomenon of lay people associating among themselves has taken on a character of particular variety and vitality (...). We can speak of a new era of group endeavours of the lay faithful" (n. 29).

This turmoil, aroused by the Holy Spirit, has found an echo also in Catholic Action, also through the birth of the International Forum of Catholic Action, acknowledged by the Pontifical Council for the Laity through the Decree of June 29th 1995. In the context of the various ecclesial groups, Catholic Action holds a special place. It is an association which has so many merits and a rich spiritual tradition. In the postconciliar period it was a yard where many elements of laypeople's modern theology have matured. And also today it represents a spiritual potential which the Church has a great need of. John Paul II did not hesitate to tell the Polish Bishops in their visit "ad limina": "Without Catholic Action the catholic lay associations would be incomplete" (13.1.1993). The Holy Father wanted so to point out that the plantatio of Catholic Action in the Churches of Eastern Europe was necessary. There, after so many years of suppression of the religious freedom, it was now possible to set up freely ecclesial lay groups. A very important field of action opens here to the International Forum..

What distinguishes Catholic Action from the other ecclesial lay groups, what constitutes the root of its identity is the collaboration of its members with the apostolate of the Hierarchy (cf *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 20). Paul VI in one of his speeches said: "Catholic Action is called to realise a peculiar form of lay ministeriality, aimed at the plantatio Ecclesiae and at the development of the Christian community in close union with the ordained ministers" (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 26.4.1977). This peculiarity involves special exigencies. All the lay groups are called to a deep insertion in the parish and diocesan community, to an unconditioned faithfulness to the ecclesial magisterium, to a deep "sensus Ecclesiae" in their attitudes and choices and to a spirit of generous collaboration with the Pastors, but in the life of the Catholic Action's members all this must come with a special intensity out.

Another peculiarity of CA, which is worth while underlining, is unity "ad intra" which is built around the Bishop or the parish priest. A unity however which is able to respect diversities: for example the diversities of the traditions of the local Churches.

All this requests a serious work of formation of its members - both organic and widespread. A formation which breeds enthusiasm of faith, love for the Church - in particular for the diocesan and parish Church - and a strong missionary energy. A formation which moulds consistent and strong Christian personalities, credible witnesses to Christ in the world. And CA has actually been in history and still is an important school of formation of the laity in the Church.

The whole Church is preparing herself to the celebration of the Great Jubilee of 2000. The challenges are great. CA, under the guidance of the Church's Pastors, will accept them with generosity and consistency. It is not out of place, therefore, to close this lecture with the same words that, some years ago, John Paul II addressed to the Italian Catholic Action. These words express the great love and trust of the Holy Father in this association, so deserving in the Church. The Pope said: "It is time for action! Uncertainties, bewilderments, passive waitings must never return. The Christian vocation allows neither dozing nor sleeping breaks. In the Lord's vineyard we must work with alacrity, zeal and perseverance" (13.1.1985).

It is difficult to find better expressions to encourage the *christifideles laici*, in particular those of CA, at the threshold of the third millennium.

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Christ, the one Saviour yesterday, today and forever
IN DIALOGUE WITH GOD, IN THE CHURCH, WITH THE WORLD AND THE CULTURES