

CARING FOR THE LORD'S FLOCK 3
SEARCHING FOR TRUTH
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**The Word was made flesh and lived among us.
May our ears be ever more ready to hear the word.
May our hearts and minds be generous in welcoming the word,
May our lives be willing to accomplish the word.
May our lips be eloquent in speaking the word.
When our life is done may the Incarnate Word welcome us
into the glory which he had with the Father and the Holy Spirit
before the world was made.**

Pope John Paul, as a young priest in the 1940s, did his doctoral dissertation on the subject of the doctrine of faith in the works of St John of the Cross. Over fifty years later, as Pope, he issued an Apostolic Letter, called *Master in the Faith*, to mark the fourth centenary of the death of St John of the Cross. In that letter, he sums up the challenge we face:

Our age speaks of the silence or absence of God. It has known so many calamities, so much suffering inflicted by wars and by the destruction of so many innocent beings. The term dark night is now used of all of life and not just of a phase of the spiritual journey¹.

The world is not silent – which is part of the reason why we do not hear God. There is sound and music all around us, and we carry it with us. We are perhaps a little like Elijah surrounded by noise like thunder and earthquake. But Elijah found that God is not to be heard in the wind or the earthquake or the fire but only in “a still, small voice”, or what one modern translation calls “a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kg 19:12).

The foundation for our attempts to hear God's voice today must be the fundamental questions, “Who am I? What is a human being? What is the meaning of human life?”

Although these questions may not often be heard in those terms, they are by no means absent from contemporary experience. They show themselves in events like September 11th, earthquakes, tsunamis, bombs and mad gunmen, perhaps a major flu pandemic, and of course, the smaller, more personal tragedies and crises that beset the life of every human being. They show themselves at present when we begin to wonder what the Celtic Tiger was all about. Those questions underlie great art, which often springs out of human anguish or searching. Art is not, in itself, a religious activity. It does, however, open up the kind of questions of meaning, questions of who we are, which are also addressed by religious faith. It does, therefore, provide a potential common ground for dialogue about the transcendent dimension of human existence. However common ground can also become the patch that we fight over. Each may address the same questions but fail completely to understand the different language in which the questions are responded to by the other.

FAITH, ART AND SCIENCE

The question of faith and culture can best be considered not by approaching them as two abstract terms but by looking at them in the life of the individual human person. They are both ways of approaching the fundamental question, “Who am I?” Perhaps that is why a great work of art, like a significant religious experience, is marked by a sense of awe. And they tend to speak most effectively in an atmosphere of recollection which excludes distractions. Both seem to demand silent attention.

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Master in the Faith* (1990).

One mustn't be too narrow here, Most of the people on the planet and throughout history have never been in a concert hall or a library or a theatre or an art gallery. Culture exists wherever human freedom has changed the world. In that sense every artefact made, every word spoken, is part of culture. But the most significant expressions of culture are the works of art, the literature, the music, and the great achievements of human ingenuity in science and technology, in architecture, in exploration and so on. These in different ways are part of the human quest for truth and beauty, for love and peace. And they offer the possibility of some advance in our understanding of ourselves, some expansion of our ability to live freely and truly and humanly. The great works tend to remain significant, but one should not underestimate the depth of human seeking and loving and understanding that are expressed in what may not survive but is very real when it first occurs.

The great figures of cultural creativity are rare, but the enduring value of their creations derives from the ability of their works to speak to the human heart. There are also phenomena of popular culture which do something similar. The daytime soaps, the studio discussions about the most bizarre marital tangles and betrayals, all touch the raw emotions which are signs of our vulnerability and of the unreliability of our expectations. There is something within us that reacts to the sight of other people rejoicing or shattered, or angry or confused as we are, or as we fear we may be. Star Trek and the X-files and so on, respond to our feeling that life is more mysterious and reality more transcendent than we fully realise. There are also popular phenomena which are in the religious field, from moving statues to tree stumps!.

It is easy to feel superior or to feel embarrassed by these phenomena and to regard them as pure superstition. But they too are a reflection of a quest for meaning, for truth, for trust. Perhaps one of the mistakes made after the Second Vatican Council was an unintended one. Extending the possibility of having Mass at any time had the by-product of suppressing many popular devotions – sodalities, novenas, 'Rosary and Benediction' the Stations of the Cross and so on. People said to themselves, "Why have Benediction when we could have Mass?" This also had the effect that even when we now try to revive such activities, they have not had the benefit of being adapted and renewed in the post Vatican II Church.

Faith is found in the human quest for truth, beauty, love and peace. In the case of Christian faith, we believe that it is not just an expression of our quest for meaning but an acceptance of the God who creates our hunger for meaning and who comes to reveal himself to us. The revelation of God answers the human quest beyond every expectation.

SAME QUEST, DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

The first thing to be said is that there is clearly not any simple link between these two facets of an individual human person the artistic and the religious quest. It can happen that a great saint is also a poet like St John of the Cross, but that is not often the case. Nor is it necessarily true that the more deeply religious a society is the more it will produce great art. There are very committed believers who do not make a significant cultural contribution and there are cultural giants who are non-believers. Many great artists, like Leonardo da Vinci, are religious people and scientific and artistic geniuses.

It may sometimes happen that cultural vitality can go hand in hand with religious decline. This is because, even if the answers are rejected, the questions never go away. In a situation of religious decline, the question may even be felt more acutely because the feeling that an underlying sense of meaning has been lost.

Faith and culture are two distinct but interrelated aspects of our lives in both of which we address what is deepest within human existence, but there one cannot make any easy identification between them:

Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence².

A reflection on the relationship between faith and culture is, in the first place, a reflection that begins within each believer and it is at the heart of the ministry of the priest. The dialogue between believers and non-believers is a subsequent step – it is a dialogue between people who may well share the same culture, but some of whom do not see the religious dimension as relevant to the question of what it is to be human. But a priest who has not faced the questions himself cannot participate in that dialogue.

QUEST AND QUESTIONER

The real challenge for the Gospel lies in trying to meet human persons who are struggling to find their identity and direction for their lives and in allowing them to see that the word of God touches what is deepest within them. The word of God, in other words, speaks to the issues that we face in the primordial realities of life -- realities like birth, love, hope, commitments and relationships, vulnerability, fallibility, and death.

Perhaps our training has left us with a tendency to think that the docile, unquestioning lay person is the ideal. But surely the ideal parishioner someone who has entered most deeply into the questions, who has contemplated the world and its sorrows in the light of the Gospel and who has glimpsed the enormity of the challenge of bringing that Gospel to those whose whole being hungers for it, even if they are not aware of it. In other words, the ideal Christian is one who has not fallen into the temptation, identified by Pope John Paul, of thinking "that ordinary Christians can be satisfied with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life"³.

The challenge for the artist, for the culturally creative person, is to touch the same deep recesses of the human mind and heart and spirit that our preaching and celebration tries to touch. The great cultural achievements and insights speak to us not on any superficial level but at the point where we face the fundamental realities of birth and life and death, of what it means to be human. It is because they touch the most basic human questions that we can find ourselves, and one another, in them. It is also because these truths and experiences lie so deep within us that they can be heard only as a still small voice.

Culture is about the ways in which human creativity and freedom seek to make sense of the world – or perhaps about how they protest against its apparent absurdity. It is about searching for and expressing some kind of meaning or outlook on life which is no mere illusion and which refuses to evade the reality of the human condition.

Perhaps we tend to idealise the past, but it is hard to escape the impression that people used to live much closer to these basic human questions and realities than they do today. Of course, even if one tries to ignore the issues, one can never completely escape from them. In the context of birth or bereavement or serious illness or shattered hopes, we find ourselves facing the question of meaning. But in any case, we face these realities in the people we serve. In these circumstances too we encounter people in depth, in their vulnerability and their brokenness. That is when, in the words of Cardinal Newman's motto, 'Heart speaks to heart'.

In most of the circumstances of our daily lives, however, that kind of encounter in depth would seem out of place. A great deal of our social interaction takes place at a shallower level where people meet one another as customers or clients or colleagues or competitors. Then they are in contact with people whose 'private' lives remain virtually unknown.

This semi-anonymous kind of interaction is inevitable in our kind of society. The most obvious reason lies in the complexity of modern life which brings us into contact with so many people

² JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus*, 24.

³ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 34.

in so many different contexts that it would simply not be possible to enter into any serious level of relationship with them. This is a huge contrast with the situation of people, say five decades ago, who were, ninety nine per cent of the time, dealing with people whom they knew well, and whose families and family histories they knew in embarrassing detail.

Another reason for this standing somewhat cautiously apart is that history has taught us about the profound divisions and even violence which can arise between groups which adopt different answers to questions about the meaning of life and death, between groups that have different but keenly felt loyalties in the area of religion or ideology. We have been tempted to think that it is better to keep quiet about topics like religion lest they prove divisive.

As G. K. Chesterton pointed out, however, that is the very opposite of the correct conclusion to draw:

Religious and philosophical beliefs are, indeed, as dangerous as fire, and nothing can take from them that beauty of danger. But there is only one way of really guarding ourselves against the excessive danger of them, and that is to be steeped in philosophy and soaked in religion.⁴

THE QUEST MARGINALISED

For a variety of reasons, therefore, we have a unique situation: we have a culture in which the religious question is marginalised. Most of the time, people encounter one another without knowing, and apparently without wishing to know, what the other person believes, if anything, about the purpose of human life and the character of human destiny. This is one of the things that the Islamic world finds incomprehensible about the West. They trace it back, incidentally to the Peace of Westphalia (1648) which ended the Thirty Years War among other things sought to end religious wars in Europe, but which resulted in a sort of compromise of silence, letting each prince do his own thing.

That incidentally is an event that ranks very high in Islamic websites, because they see the Peace of Westphalia as having done two deplorable things – to marginalise religion in public life and to establish the sovereign nation state.

The desire to keep religion “in its place” and to keep it, and associated controversial moral questions like abortion or capital punishment, out of the arena of polite conversation is designed to avoid the divisiveness and conflict that these matters can bring. But there is a paradox here. Even if it could avoid ‘divisiveness’, it could never achieve any depth of unity. If human beings avoid advertent to the deeper dimension of themselves, their deepest convictions, then to that extent they meet superficially, deliberately excluding some areas of their beliefs and convictions from the relationship. If this is adopted as a general principle to be applied throughout every sphere of public life, we need to ask what that does to society.

Even without religious faith, of course, people can be united in facing together the fragility of the human condition – fallible, mortal, longing for the infinite yet living in an all too limited world, with hopes that can never be fulfilled and questions that can never fully be answered in the temporary and finite context of this world.

The religious and the cultural aspects of life, sometimes to the surprise of both, may find themselves allies in challenging the growth of a superficial and depersonalised approach to life which oversimplifies and diminishes the person. They may find that they are at one in resisting the identification of a person with his or her function or job or role in the economy. They may find that they are agreed on the need to challenge dehumanisation or exclusion of particular individuals or groups. They may both want to protest at a tendency to reduce people to statistics, ideas to sound bites, and society to a mere political structure.

⁴ CHESTERTON, G.K., Heretics, in *Collected Works*, I, Ignatius Press 1986, p. 203.

THE SOUL OF SOCIETY

The overriding issue in modern societies tends to be money: "It's the economy, stupid!" But eventually the question must begin to dawn, "What is all this for?" Is the only ideal, we put before ourselves, that we should be *rich*? When the inadequacy of that answer emerges, then perhaps may hear again that we do not live on bread alone – nor even on caviar or on business class flights or five star hotels. When the Celtic Tiger suddenly dies, these questions may begin to be asked: "What was that all about?"

If we operate on the basis that what one believes, what makes one tick, one's deepest feelings, are all private matters, then we could perhaps conduct public life in Esperanto, that is in a language with no culture, no literary tradition, no lived history. Or perhaps the truth is that we already do! How much of our lives pass without reference to anything that lies beneath the visible surface of things? A great deal of modern life proceeds on the assumption that these questions do not matter, and are perhaps even a distraction from the real business:

Nowadays there is a tendency to claim that agnosticism and sceptical relativism are the philosophy and the basic attitude which correspond to democratic forms of political life. Those who are convinced that they know the truth and firmly adhere to it are considered unreliable from a democratic point of view, since they do not accept that truth is determined by the majority.⁵

That is not to say that we should ignore "the excessive danger" of religious and philosophical beliefs. History can scarcely allow us to forget the way in which fanatical convictions can destroy peace and social justice. But the answer to false and exaggerated convictions can only lie in the truth, it cannot be found in pretending that these convictions do not exist. If only the visible, functional aspect of ourselves is relevant to the public arena, then there is no need to seek further to find why our participation in the political process is less than wholehearted.

It is no accident that modern democracies seem to be marked by a profound disillusionment with the political process. This is at least partly because the whole process seems to tell people, 'Do not enter here with your whole self. Your religious views must be kept to yourself; they are a private matter. Your moral views must not intrude into political life, they are divisive and probably unrealistic or absolutist.'

At the same time there is a certain rejoicing in the discomfort of politicians and heroes, churches and the debunking of traditions, and past achievements. One can, of course, only welcome the honesty which refuses to allow things to be swept under the carpet. But there is a danger that we may find ourselves with no heritage to be proud of and no foundation on which to stand. That would not only be dangerous, it would be an illusion. It might suggest that we are willing to delude ourselves that we are somehow better, more reliable, more honest, more enlightened, more virtuous than those who went before us. It might also suggest that we think we have nothing to learn from our predecessors – or that we learn only from their failures but not from their achievements.

We risk ending up with a society which is made up not of living people but of abstractions, with a life which is lived in the shallows. We may find that society is made up of "citizens" who behave in their public lives as though there was no depth and no mystery to human life. We end up with a society which forgets that its own foundations lie in a reverence for the dignity of the human person, in the kind of questions to which faith and culture respond. What then is to stop us arriving at a society which believes only that what is profitable is good, what is legal is moral, what is bigger is better? A life based on such principles would necessarily be disillusioning.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus*, 46.

Modern political societies get themselves involved in a kind of contradiction. They tend to regard religious beliefs and moral convictions as private matters to be respected from a safe distance but not to be allowed to interfere with public debate and decision-making. That is probably less true of the US than of almost any other modern democracy, but it has its echoes there too, when, for instance, the Church is criticised for interfering in questions such as abortion or same sex marriage.

Everybody seems to recognise that tolerance and pluralism are necessary. But pluralism cannot be based on the idea that the views and attitudes which are to be respected are mere matters of opinion which have no reference to the life of society. If you think my beliefs are just my idiosyncratic opinions and that I should not let them influence my vision of society, then you are not respecting them, because you are not recognising the significance which they have for *me*.

In fact, every society needs some shared moral convictions. If every moral conviction is private with no practical implications for public life, then society itself would be, by definition, amoral. Without a shared conviction about the inalienable dignity of each individual, democracy would be in danger of becoming a tyranny – with the ethnic or religious majority treating minorities unfairly.

Democracy is not itself the source of the values on which it is based. The vote of the majority does not decide what is right. That is why there can be such a thing as an unjust law which fails to respect the dignity of some individual or group – a dignity which does not derive from any democratic decision and which no democratic decision has a right to deny.

The reality is that no society can function without a sense of integrity, a commitment to justice, a readiness to consider the needs of others. But these attitudes do not find their origin in the public life of society but in what is regarded as the private arena of religious, moral and family experiences and values. If a person has never begun, as a child, to recognise the significance of the word “we” – that it implies a recognition of other “I”s, other people who have their own perspective and history and worth that do not derive from their usefulness to me – then they will only with the greatest difficulty learn to relate in a truly human way.

This does appear to be beginning to be recognised in various ways. Tony Blair a few weeks ago spoke to the Friendship among Peoples Conference in Rimini. He is quoted as saying:

This is surely the role of faith in modern times. To do what it alone can do. To achieve what neither a person, nor a state, nor a community on their own or even together can achieve. To represent God's truth, not limited by human frailty or by the interests of the state or by the transient mores of a community, however well intentioned... This is faith, not as an insurance against life's pitfalls, but faith as the salvation of the human condition. Faith not as magic, not as an escape from life's complexities, but faith as purpose in life. Faith not as a mystery we seek to solve, but faith as a mystery which expresses the limitations of the human mind”⁶.

Professor Lieven Boeve of Leuven, at the recent conference of the European Society of Catholic Theology in Mary Immaculate College spoke of the need for theology to engage with society in new ways and to read the signs of the times. Perhaps society is now becoming ready to realise how important that may be for its own well being. Both the Church and the state can benefit:

If, as a consequence, the reflexive understanding of one's religion in light of the current situation prevents from both falling prey to nihilism and fundamentalism, it is society itself which may profit from it⁷

⁶ Reported by WATERS, J., *Irish Mail on Sunday*, 30 August 2009.

⁷ BOEVE, L., *Theology at the Crossroads of Academy, Church and Society*, ESCT Conference Mary Immaculate College, Limerick 20 Aug 09

WHO AM I?

Faith and culture, each in its own way, addresses the question of what it means to be human. Christian faith does that in the light of God's self-revelation. Pope John Paul said that the deep amazement at human worth and dignity which comes from seeing ourselves in the light of Christ "is the Gospel, that is to say: the Good News. It is also called Christianity".⁸

Every culture worthy of the name expresses a human perception or experience of reality in a way that is capable of echoing in the hearts of other human beings. These expressions may be as different as the small, almost ordinary perception of his childhood memories or familiar scenes in some of Kavanagh's poetry on the one hand, and the disturbing grandeur of Michelangelo's Last Judgment on the other.

It is not enough to try to build civil society on its own structures and on the various spheres of human activity which can be described as public or civic. If one thinks of the human being simply as a citizen, equal before the law, invested with various civil and legal rights, one still has to answer the fundamental question of *why* we should accept that persons make such inescapable claims on us. If, for instance, a human being is no more than a particularly complex, though temporary, arrangement of chemicals, it is not self-evident why he or she should be seen as having inalienable rights.

The real source of human rights lies deeper. It lies in the recognition that the other person, every other person, is another "I". That in turn raises the fundamental question, "Who am I?" – a question that lies in the field in which the great cultural creations and religious faith are at home.

I am concerned here to try to reflect on what all of this means from the point of view of priestly ministry today. Would it be true that for many people, their spontaneous answer to the question, "Who am I?" has changed considerably? I suspect that a few decades ago, the top ten elements in a response would certainly have included the person's family background and place of origin, the person's religion, reference to the person's spouse and children and perhaps other relatives well known in the area. Nowadays, I suspect that the answer would be much more focused on the person's function in society, the person's possessions and contacts, how the person is doing in the recession, whether the person communicates mainly through Facebook or Twitter or is he or she old-fashioned enough not to have advanced beyond the mobile telephone!. In other words the emphasis has shifted from who I am to the functions I fulfil, from who I am to what I have and what I do and how I fit into a changing environment.

But, and here is the point which we need to address, this is not because human beings have fundamentally changed. Each of us still lives under the shadow of death, each of us lives in relationships which are essential to our sense of identity. But the person who asks "Who are you?" is now perceived as asking, "What role do you fulfil?" The question is no longer seen to refer to your personal and family background, your deepest loyalties and to the relationships which are most important to you as a human person; it is much more concerned with the position you occupy in the structures of society. [Perhaps this is changing again now in the light of the potential embarrassment of putting the question 'what role do you fulfil' to someone who has just lost their job] In much the same way, someone asking, "How are you?" is not asking about one's state of medical, psychological or emotional well being, but simply saying, "Hello".

There are many spheres of our lives which we are not expected to enter and participate with our whole selves. That, I suspect, is why people can feel so alienated in their work, in their participation in society local or national. There is an often unexpressed awareness that 'nobody here knows who I really am, nor do they want to know me'.

⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), 10.

That loneliness is the subject of a book by Ronald Rolheiser, first written in the 1980s but which has recently been republished. He suggests that loneliness and alienation are fundamental ways of opening us to God:

Loneliness is not something at the fringes of our lives, which we can ignore at will. It is a dimension of our self-awareness, something co-extensive with our personalities. We exist in the world as lonely beings, as thirsty and yearning at all levels of our persons. Our bodies are lonely, our minds are lonely, and our very souls are lonely. But what are they lonely for? ...We are thirsty for love and community, for unity with God and others in a body, the body of Christ. Loneliness is God's way of drawing us into that body⁹.

FAITH AND CULTURE: MUTUAL ENRICHMENT

The underlying fear in contemporary society is the fear of meaninglessness. We see a world in which people suffer and die in poverty and we do not want to send to ask for whom the bell tolls. We see the tragedy of young children killed in road accidents and fires and cruel diseases and we are not very ready really to face the challenge of how a world in which such things can happen can make any sense. We see people's life savings – carefully invested in what they thought was the safest possible way, in bank shares – vanish in the madness of the property bubble. We see the vast incomprehensibility of the universe and we are afraid to ask whether we can still believe in a God who cares about puny and short-lived beings on this out of the way planet in an undistinguished galaxy.

We do not easily venture below the surface of life because we fear that there may be nothing there. Our century, as Desmond Egan the Irish poet and writer put it is, "obsessed, in its thinking and writing, with the perception of chaos." He goes on to say that,

"an intuition of meaninglessness offers a very shaky base for a full perception of the human condition... Not on chaos alone doth man live. *In* perhaps, but not *on*. If chaos and anxiety, and obsession with the abyss. . . lead to the rejection of any objective truth towards which the spirit might orient itself, then the chance to express anything of permanent value about human life may be lost".¹⁰

Chaos would be a shaky foundation because, if there is no meaning, then the search for truth is a mere illusion. The whole enterprise of culture becomes a nonsense. An oasis of meaning in an absurd universe would itself be absurd. Many great writers and philosophers feel themselves surrounded by chaos. At the same time, the very anguish and protest which that evokes speaks of a refusal to take refuge in evasions and a courageous facing of the absurdity of life. It is an attitude which is closer than it might at first seem to the search for a truth which is permanently beyond our grasp.

Faith is a vision of meaning, of completeness, an assurance that there is an objective truth towards which the spirit can orient itself. It is an ally not an alternative. The Gospel does not complete or replace the human quest because the meaning which is found in Christian faith is never fully grasped but it is in harmony with the true longings of humanity. There is interplay between poetic word and the Gospel message precisely because both are mysterious:

If God's incomprehensibility does not... draw us into his super-luminous darkness, if it does not call us out of the little house of our homely, close-hugged truths into the strangeness of the night that is our real home, we have misunderstood, or failed to understand the words of Christianity. For they all speak of the unknown God, who only reveals himself to give himself as the abiding mystery.¹¹

⁹ ROLHEISER, R., *The Restless Heart*, Doubleday, New York, 2004.

¹⁰ EGAN, D., *The Death of Metaphor*, Colin Smith, Bucks., and The Kavanagh Press, Newbridge 1990, p.133.

¹¹ RAHNER, K., *Theological Investigations 4*, Darton Longman & Todd 1966, p. 359.

The faith dimension of ourselves can only be the ally of the cultural on condition that we recognise the mysteriousness of what faith learns about God and about ourselves. If we adopt a complacent approach of "faith has all the answers to what culture is seeking", then our faith not only fails to be an ally of culture, it fails to be true faith. Authentic faith has to be awe-struck, filled with wonder, humbling.

The challenge that faces us is to **hear** the questions that are being expressed, in however halting and however inadequate and however hostile a manner in contemporary culture. We who are believers need to hear those questions not from outside, but within ourselves. That is where faith and culture meet – in the people we serve, and in us. We need also to help to pose the questions which our culture finds uncomfortable -- questions about death and moral issues and the possibility of justice for the living and even for the dead.

Neither art nor Christian faith could exist without a vision of the unity of the human person who is a tension in unity between the material and the spiritual, the temporal and the eternal. Both art and faith are expressions of the paradox by which the infinite is expressed in the finite, the universal in the particular, unlimited longings in all too limited and fragile desires. Karl Rahner indicates the link that must exist between the artistic word and the word of faith:

What then is the word which the Christian must have the power, the practice and the grace to hear, if he is to be able to hear the Christian word of God's message? He must be able to hear the word through which the silent mystery is present, he must be able to perceive the word which touches the heart in its inmost depths, he must be initiated into the human grace of hearing the word which gathers and unites and the word which in the midst of its own finite clarity is the embodiment of the eternal mystery. But what do we call such a word? It is the word of poetry...¹²

There are other such questions of meaning which are inescapable in our world. The more we learn about the world, the more the question of meaning arises. The human condition is betrayed, and a person becomes alienated, if there is no going beyond the self in self-giving to others and ultimately to God.¹³ I was very struck by a lecture I heard some years ago at a conference on Creation and Chaos. The lecturer spoke about the theory of chaos and about how certain phenomena are unpredictable not just in practice but even in principle. Then he displayed some computer graphics based on these 'unpredictable' phenomena and what appeared were exquisite designs, fractals, which, if they were woven into a carpet or made into a stained glass window, would have been greatly admired. It struck me that even the chaos is created by God with an extraordinary beauty and order which goes beyond our ability to explain.

The uniqueness of human dignity is placed in question, in popular consciousness though not always among serious scientists, by the search for life on other planets and by the search for what is called 'artificial intelligence', by the discovery of the building blocks of the human genome, all of which can seem to strengthen the picture of the human being as no more than a complex but accidentally emerging mechanism. Once again we are faced with the question, "Who are we?" Wherever that question is found, the challenge of dialogue with the world around us arises for believers, and particularly for us priests.

**O Mother, worthy of all praise;
you who give birth to the Word
who is most holy above all saints,
accept our prayer,
and preserve from every hurt and deliver from threatening punishment
all of your children who sing Alleluia. (Akathistos Hymn)**

¹² RAHNER, K., *Theological Investigations IV*, Darton Longman & Todd, London 1966, p. 363.

¹³ Cf. *Centesimus Annus*, 41.