

The world we live in

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I was asked to talk about the world we live in, the world about which the Gospel says "So much loved God the world...".

Talking about the world in such a comprehensive fashion, entices one's imagination into a wealth of data on macro dimensions, global indicators, megacategories, major processes and trends, an overview of the various continents, high levels of abstraction.

It may also happen that a vision of our world tunes us up to the philosophic thought, where, rather than statistical data, we would seek qualitative analyses.

All this is fine for, somehow, we must resort to all sources in an effort to grasp such a complex reality.

The great questions you have answered (situation, causes, trends, attitudes, and expectancies of the world and the Church about the laymen) have been of use to me in identifying three major issues, which I wish to propose and which describe a world both promising and contradictory, with paradoxes and great realizations.

1. The issue of globalization.
2. The issue of validity of values in the contemporary culture.
3. Finally, some notes on the world we want to live in.

1. The issue of globalization

There is a generalized consensus that with the fall of the last empire in the XX century, the soviet empire, an era in contemporary History has come to an end, and that we now witness the dawn of a new age, abounding in challenges but also in possibilities so far unknown.

A glance back to this painful and warlike century, marked by totalitarisms and genocide, can but elicit a comparatively positive view of our current reality.

A single piece of data would suffice to illustrate these possibilities: world's illiteracy is declining. Nowadays, illiteracy totals 23% whereas fifty years ago, figures were in the order of 50%. Also, scientific knowledge is now at its highest level in mankind's History. On the other hand, scientific knowledge has spread into countless technological applications which astonish us day to day. Many of these applications were devised for war purposes and are now used for peaceful ends, having reached the commercial scenario. Health and life span lengthening, a decrease in costs and times in communication and transportation, a lessening of the threat of nuclear war, widespread dissemination of democracy over entire continents... and the list could go on to include many more promising elements.

We also perceive that, somehow, our world and lives have moved on to a new scale.

The vital reference for major decisions, is no longer just my country's political, historical and geographical framework, but that of an elaborate, world-scale network of relationships, reaching - either directly or indirectly - the 5.7 billion people living in our planet.

Each one of us is indirectly related to the rest of the planet in many different ways, but a direct relationship also takes place through information.

We live in an information-saturated, superinformed world.

All in all, a paradox arises: information is not equal to knowledge or understanding. We may now know, more clearly than ever before, where we come from. However, our knowledge of where we are going to is far from being clear. We do not even quite know where we are.

Several names have been brought forward in an attempt to describe or define this new age: new international order, postmodernism, end of History, clash of civilizations. These sorts of answers are not by any means available in the marketplace. At best, we may say that we are in a phase within a process of change. We do know for sure that this will neither stay as it is nor end here. We do not know, though, how long it will last.

There is an uncertainty horizon. We should not be surprised at the fact that, concurrently with displays of opulence, we find disappointment, insatisfaction, depression, suicide and evasion through drugs.

Perhaps, we live at a rhythm which does not allow us to ponder, think about and assimilate such a plethora of information. Furthermore, a unique thought is mentioned by some who consider that, with the arrival of the end of History, there is no room for ideologies, but only for a single final, triumphant ideology. A weak thought is also mentioned, this would reflect

some sort of existential tedium, a lack of commitment, an incoherence between discourse and behavior, a light approach to life. There is also the so-called useless knowledge, which just like a boring circus performance is featured by "The society of show", the audio-visual culture. Our world then, is afflicted by a deficit of awareness and understanding in the midst of oceans of information.

Those most skilled, most highly trained, or those possessing the best information may survive and take advantage of a widened world. They can embark on the possibilities and demands of a globalized world. Before them, a network of loyalties expands and goes on beyond the national scopes. Identity appears now more diffuse than in times past. Going to an extreme, a nation's symbols will not elicit the same feelings among the youngsters who live this experience and thus, old national interests may, to some extent, lose significance for them. On the other hand, for those lacking such an ample access to information and training, the choice is to stick to their region, their country, their society, their ethnic group, in the face of an external inrush which arises unknown, misleading or threatening. In the later case, ostracism may ensue.

Globalization sets everybody in competence with the whole world, and those who do not feel prepared, back off. There is a growing difference between societies and people that participate in economy and globalized society and those people and regions that remain aside, in an informal or illegal economy. Illiteracy decreases in the world, but persists in Africa and Asia. There is, therefore, an inequality of access to knowledge. Lacking knowledge, it is very hard to become a part of the global system, and exerting freedom is severely conditioned. Also, in the issue of knowledge, globalization poses a second concern, which is its governability, its management.

Participants and their interdependence relationships have manifolded in the world. There are now more states, more multi-national firms, more banks and more news agencies.

But there is also a crisis in the public scenario. A State which withdraws from society, undergoing overall weakening while, youngsters disregard politics.

Here we perceive another paradox: an ever growing number of problems requiring joint and solidary action: Environment, the propagation of massive destruction weapons, external debt, drug traffic, terrorism, while, on the other hand, nobody seems to have much control over the world in its global condition. The instances of Somalia, Bosnia, Zaire, Rwanda and now Algeria reveal an international political system which does not value solidarity very highly and shows its constraints to intervene so as to solve problems or prevent their occurrence.

Vaclav Havel says that "the causes of the problems in our current civilization, now facing the entire mankind, must be looked for in that catastrophic and express lack of responsibility for the destiny of the world".

We live, then, in a globalized world which, in spite of the information we now possess, we do not quite understand, with many encouraging possibilities, but without anyone arising to assume, in a solid and joint way, the responsibility of making existing resources bear fruit to the best interest of all of us, to the best common interest.

2. The issue of validity of values in our contemporary culture

Values are elements which guide the conduct of men in their relationships with their fellow men. It is worth noting a few points about the validity of the values of truth, freedom, justice and peace, in our current culture.

Truth

There is a problem with truth in our age.

Communism was a victim of truth. It did not withstand glasnost.

Although communism is gone as a concrete manifestation of historical empire, Marxism has inherited upon us a vision of the course of History as the sole criterion of truth. (We Argentines remember the phrase: "the only truth is reality"). A view of social structures as the sole origin and explanation of truth was established. This is but a political truth, one of power, serving interests, mostly economic ones. This interpretation has pervaded deeply into the minds of many who see everything from a relative standpoint, with neither transcendental principles and values nor objective criteria.

If everything is relative and there is no objective truth (Pilato's "what is truth?") we have fallen

into relativism, whose sole conduct principle is, ultimately, everybody's own self. Every individual turns his/her experience into a criterion ruling over truth, justice and good. The risk is that such truth may be just the one that suits his/her interests, justice may be only for him/her and good may solely be to his/her own benefit.

Relativism leads to individualism, to lack of solidarity, to every-man-for-himself! ... (but first of all, me). The word salvation takes on a purely and exclusively egotist and earthly dimension.

"Mr. So-and-So is saved" has come to mean that he gathered enough wealth, through whatever means, maybe even illegal ones.

Logically enough, if History, the course of events, if the occurrence of passing facts are the only things that matter, the only criteria for truth, then there is no sense in the notion of eternity. Only those things occurring are taken into account, only what takes place in the century: this is secularism.

As time does not fulfill men's infinite aspirations, we live in a world that is thirsty for truth, sense, religion and transcendence.

Freedom

From the reports prepared by you, a great wealth of complementary approaches becomes evident. The freshness adopted by the countries in transition is remarkable in the way they value freedom. The Pope himself, instilled by the culture of Poland, a country undergoing a period of transition, attributes an enormous value to freedom. During his last visit to the United Nations he mentioned freedom dozens of times, while referring to peace only four times.

It is as every age had prevailing values and freedom together with its related values were especially relevant in our age.

The Pope will travel to Cuba, a nation characterized by a remarkable lack of democracy. Cuba is the exception, for Latin America as a whole, is living, for the first time in its History, in free political regimes, that is, in democracy. Central and Eastern Europe are living equally encouraging political experiences.

Democracy and freedom have made the experience of integration possible. The European case is exemplary, and Latin America is going through important economic - and even political - changes. Mercosur is definitely in way to consolidation, to the benefit of our countries.

On the other hand, it is true that freedom is privileged and technology is advancing. Now, the progress of freedom has much of social Darwinism. Since relativism prevents recognition of objective values, the chances to pursue a career - greatly improved by technology - are restricted to a few. From freedom as a value we shift to freedom as an ideology. In societies in transition, and as a reaction to the oppressing state rule of socialist realism, unimaginative, bloody and inefficient, the State resigns its obligations and responsibilities. The instrument of privatization, often properly applied and consistent with the ethical principle of subsidiaries, has at times resulted in privatizing the State itself and privatizing its agents through corruption. A few grab what is everybody's asset.

Justice

The validity of freedom should not make us disregard the value of justice, which is still waited for in a world where 20% of the population owns 80% of the assets. In your remarks, you have brought forth the inequality in distribution of wealth, or inequality of access to goods and services. Above, we have talked about inequality of access to knowledge.

But, among the expressions of inequality, widespread unemployment stands out. The problem of unemployment afflicts many. Unemployment results from a number of processes. In some instances, what is called robotization, consisting of technical processes and machines taking the places of human labour. In other cases a rationalization of labour is sought, where a State's budget can no longer afford subsidize an inexistent or non-productive job. In many countries there is no institution equivalent to unemployment security. Usually, unemployment goes hand in glove with deficient labour training or low educational and formative levels, that is, again, a deficit in knowledge. This is certainly a bad point in market economies, to which capitalism, as a regime or system, does not seem to have found a workable solution.

Here we face yet another paradox: a world in which everything is to be done and where there is so much unemployment.

Peace

If we talk about truth, freedom and justice, we must not miss their fourth, inseparable sister: peace.

Since 1945, 140 wars have killed 130 million people, most of them innocent civilians.

Notwithstanding the fact that a bipolar confrontation is now over, bloodshedding conflicts which have arisen after 1989, and the persistence of those previously existing, are an indication that things can easily escape control, that once they are out-of-control, irreparable damage is produced and that it is highly costly to recreate an order once it has been lost. Lacking truth, freedom and justice, peace is endangered.

We should not be surprised, then, to hear about the coexistence of two cultures: the one of life and the other of death, and that every now and then we witness the manifestations of either.

We have just learned that in Sweden, one of the countries with the most activity in the defense of human rights, until as late as 1976, a mandatory sterilization program for 60,000 women was in force as part of an eugenics or ethnic cleaning program. Now investigation is underway on the scope of this program, including its ties to a permissive policy in the issue of abortion. Health and life sciences serve abortion, sterilization and death.

Pedro Morande says that a juridical system, a society which accepts divorce, does not respect the free giving of self of the individual. The world we live in is impoverished if the family, which is the cradle of life, declines or if it loses its sense of commitment. This is what the decrease in the number of matrimonial celebrations, the increase in the number of divorces and in the number of children born outside the marriage reveal. What kind of young people, fathers, citizens can street-children be?

Ethnic cleansing is equally been at the heart of the war in ex-Yugoslavia. Tribal wars in Africa have caused the death of hundred of thousands of people. This policy of exclusion is the antithesis of the solidarity for which man is aspiring.

Interreligion tolerance has been sabotaged even in Algeria and is continually under attack in the Middle East.

The contrast between these sad experiences and the manifestation on the occasion of the World Youth Day could not be more eloquent. If these Days, the last most striking of which was held in Paris, are a testimony of the pro-life culture, we must single out the great protagonist in this field: woman.

Woman's role in the world - always transcendent - has now started to be always more acknowledged and valued. The life and death of Mother Teresa, known and loved all the world over, makes us reflect on the importance of every human life. Looking at her, she was not beautiful, rich or powerful. However she radiated joy, peace and strength.

3. The world in which we want to live

It is important for us to listen to what today's culture has to say. We should try to find out where the Spirit is blowing, what "Thy will be done" means in our times. Fernando Storni says that when non-Christians speak in a Christian way, the Church should approach them to find the signs of the times there.

In front of the world in which we live, we are at times like the emarginated deaf and blind whom Jesus brings back in contact with reality. Now that, thanks to Jesus, we can hear and see, we can look at the world in which we live with a hopeful attitude, with compassionate eyes and with a desire to change it.

Let us look at the world in which we live with a trustful attitude

Very often Christians have the tendency to enlist the things that go wrong and moan about them. We easily fall into moralizing when we do not express concrete proposals together with our complaints. For example we point out that a loss of what is transcendent or a diffusion of sects is ascertained. In both cases we should strengthen our transcendent life and our presence in the streets and in the abandoned areas.

We should look at the cultural globalization or homogenization as a new opportunity of evangelization, just like when faith was spread with the new conquests which man made in the world. Today we must make use of Internet and the new means of communication to promote a network of solidarity.

As laypeople we have, in this field, an irreplaceable role.

Mons. Karlic said some years ago that the Church is "for" the world. Not to oppose or impose but to propose its message. The example and message that we give through our witnessing, through the sacraments, through our preaching and teaching is not only a horizon of abstract human ideals but is the fruit of the strength of grace on which we base our hope. This makes it possible for us to love in a way as Jesus has taught us (mons. Mendes de Almeida).

Let us look at the world in which we live with compassionate eyes

For Christians it is precious not only the rich, the gifted, the successful in this globalized world, but everybody, every individual, especially he who has nothing, he who cannot defend himself. Our God is near those with a broken heart as we also should be. This should be our daily preoccupation. We should use our intelligence, will and imagination to meet these people, to look for them and to make them feel that they, each one of them, is important because he is created by God. Each one of them has a mission and a vocation. The Church, we should help them to discover their calling and to live it so that God's plans and will may be accomplished.

But let also look at this world in which we live with a desire to change it

As members of the people of God, as lay people, we should work for this change so that God's kingdom may come and not to find heaven on earth in this world.

We should substitute the culture of doing nothing by the evangelical culture of the talents which everyone should try to develop according to what he has received and at all times of the day. This should be no wasting or squandering the riches which God has given to the world with every human life. We need to develop our sensibility to find life, to look for it when it is not evident or visible or outrightly despised! The example of innumerable Christians who dedicate themselves to the poor, the sick, the emarginated, has a tremendous value. This urges us to mobilize the enormous lazy potential of lay people in the Church which has not as yet been tapped. We must thus overcome the division among Christians and work towards ecumenism.

We know, through faith, that only Christ, redeemer of man and centre of humanity, is the fullness of all man's aspiration (Card. Pironio).

Let us then show to the world what the world cannot discover by itself: the theological character of its existence (Card. Hamer).

Man's true identity is being God's image (mons. Kasper).

It is the saints, whom God raises in the Church, who keep her on her feet. We must all be saint, since we are all called to be so.

We must be men and women who value the interior life. We must reflect Christ whom we meet every day in our prayers. Our real character, our real contribution is that of living the presence and action of the sanctifying God in our life.

To conclude, I do not think that a new age necessarily needs a new doctrine. It is not the doctrine which lacks. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes* are still a mine to be discovered and are still waiting for us to put them into action.

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Christ, the one Saviour yesterday, today and for ever

IN DIALOGUE WITH GOD, IN THE CHURCH, WITH THE WORLD AND THE CULTURES