

Articles and Interviews

Turin 1999

"One, holy, catholic and apostolic," replies to questions posed for the book Sopravviverà la Chiesa nel terzo millennio? (Will the Church Survive the Third Millennium?). Pier Michele Girola — Gian Luca Mazzini, Paoline Editoriale libri.

1. *I believe because...*

Tertullian believed "because it is absurd," St. Augustine, "in order to understand." Why do you believe? Is it necessary to abandon the world to live one's faith?

I believe "through Christ our Lord," as St. Paul taught. And I also believe because I need to. Faith is God's light for the intellect. With this light we can know the truth about God that he reveals and the truth about the world and about man. The one who, by God's grace, has experienced the security, the warmth and the light of faith, ends up needing it: without faith everything turns cold, dark, frightening.

To live one's faith, there is no need to abandon the world. For most Catholics it is precisely the world that is the path they must follow to reach God. We find his hand in nature, in man, in work, in all of creation. I dare

to say that the world is a book written by God for man and, at the same time, a book that man writes by his work to speak with God. My faith doesn't take me out of the world but impels me to love the world passionately.

2. *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus?*

"Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus." Is this affirmation still valid in the Third Millennium?

The Church is the sacrament of salvation that Christ wanted for all mankind. This is a truth that doesn't have any "expiration date" and that therefore continues to be valid at the end of this millennium. It is, of course, true, as Pope John Paul II has reminded us in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, that a morally upright life, that is, a sincere search for the truth, is a means of salvation for those who have not received the gift of faith. But even for these men and women salvation always comes, in a way that is invisible and incomprehensible to us, from Christ himself and from the Church in its reality as a salvific mystery.

Thanks to the Church, man knows his origin and his destiny. Thanks to the Church he finds the path to eternal life and the relative happiness that one can achieve on this earth. Outside of the Church, on the other hand, man is confronted by serious difficulties that make the search for truth and the discovery of the path to salvation quite complicated.

3. *The gnostic temptation*

*At least in the Christian West, the 20th century has reached its end under the powerful influence of the "New Age." Man feels himself to be God, part of a vast cosmic energy that he is asked to become conscious of. This offers a salvation gained by one's personal efforts, without the need of grace. We are in the same 20th century in which Bernanos concluded his *Diary of a Country Priest* with the often quoted phrase "Everything is grace." What has happened in the intervening years?*

It seems to me that Western man at the end of the century, more than feeling himself to be God, feels himself to be a free master of himself, and, at the same time, the prisoner of a complex set of circumstances that he doesn't dare to confront. Behind it all lies a type of "conformist" freedom: an easy, but at times cynical conformism, since it renounces the encounter with the true and the good. It seems to me that, in the West at the end of this century, the only challenge to the ruling conformism comes from the voices of those who have taken Christ seriously. They are a minority, certainly, but they are the hope of those who want to free themselves from the conformism that is sustained by multiple interests, including economic ones.

The gnostic movements today are trying to offer a rational response to mankind's concerns about salvation and life's meaning, so it is not strange that they find an audience. The faith requires a consistent response that is "materialized" in one's daily life. And one is always free to

refuse to accept the moral demands that the faith entails. In other words, it is always possible to neutralize in one's conscience the message of the saving cross of Christ and to deny the reality of sin, a recurrent device of the gnostic temptation.

In these circumstances, the announcement of a "salvation" attained merely by the acquisition of previously hidden knowledge could make headway in some poorly formed minds. The New Age phenomenon does not find an audience among those who have not forgotten that faith in Jesus "works through love" (Gal 5:6) and that "faith apart from works is dead" (Jas 2:26).

The last Council referred to the rupture between faith and life as "one of the gravest errors of our time" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 43). To overcome this rupture it is very important that the Christian faithful are taught the genuine meaning of salvation and encouraged to approach the sources of grace, in order to renew in an effective way the conversion of life to which they are committed by baptism.

I think that at all levels we should continue developing, as the core of the new evangelization, a constant catechesis on redemption and grace. In pastoral work we need to foster with renewed vigor devotion to the Eucharist and participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice, as the center and root of Christian life, which encapsulates all the Catholic faith's teaching about our Divine Redeemer and his work of salvation. Pastoral teaching about the sacrament of penance, where a Christian experiences

the divine mercy that forgives and moves one to forgive in turn, is also of vital importance. From his very first encyclical, the Pope has reminded us that the Church in our time has to be "the Church of the Eucharist and of penance" (*Redemptor Hominis*, 20).

4. *Alter Christus, ipse Christus*

Everywhere we see a multiplication of sects and movements where people are rediscovering a spiritual dimension in life, but at the same time society is becoming more and more secular. People are going ever less frequently to Mass. Young people often say that they believe in a God conceived as an abstract entity. Christ and the Church are notable for their absence. Many holy places have been transformed into tourist attractions; and even in religious marriages, the sacred aspect has become marginal. How can the Church resist this tendency?

Unfortunately, we see many of our contemporaries drifting aimlessly as far as religious and spiritual values are concerned. But we should not lose sight of other positive aspects of the present moment such as, for example, the universal regard for the Holy Father, whose generous commitment to his ministry has attracted so many people to God, especially young people. We should also consider the evident signs that, together with the "desacralizing" tendencies, there is no lack of efficacious efforts in the opposite direction. For example, the impressive witness of solidarity and dedication to others for love of Jesus that can be seen today in so many and such varied examples of the practice of Christian charity.

This spirit of service, so moving on many occasions; this Christian and self-sacrificing love for others, beginning with the weakest and most needy; this love for the cross that is essential to Christianity, are an unequivocal sign of God to people today, reminding us of the dignity of each person called to be a child of God. One can see, therefore, many positive elements alongside the wave of paganism that afflicts large sectors of contemporary society.

It is clear, nevertheless, that not a few Christians have deserted their religious duties. Some of the signs of Christian identity that should shine forth most clearly have become obscured. Although one should never try to give brief explanations of complex problems, nor oversimplify things, I think that behind the giving in to secularism and the indifferent attitude of some believers, besides ignorance, there lies — and I think it is good to emphasize it here — a lack of courage on the part of those of us who know ourselves to be children of God to make a personal commitment to the truth and to its ethical demands.

What can be done about this? Today, as always, true Christian witness demands grasping once again that sanctity is the real goal of personal commitment. We have to show men and women today the great attractiveness of Christian sanctity, of a sincere following of Jesus in the midst of the circumstances of their own life. We need to be convinced that the proclamation of sanctity, to which God has called all of us, is capable of awakening, with the help of grace, many lethargic consciences.

Blessed Josemaría Escrivá said it in these words: "This can be done; it is not an empty dream... We must, each of us, be *alter Christus, ipse Christus*: another Christ, Christ himself. Only in this way can we set about this great undertaking, this immense, unending task of sanctifying all temporal structures from within, bringing to them the leaven of Redemption" (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 183).

5. Unity of life

The Church's "confrontation" with the modern world begins with Pope Pius XII and is fully carried out in the Second Vatican Council. But after this event, according to some, the Church was invaded by secularization, as had already been the case some time earlier in the great Protestant denominations. Do you share this diagnosis? And, in any case, what should we do to prevent this from happening?

The Church, since its very beginnings, has been "confronting" the world in every age. You know the letters of that famous convert, Paul, as well as the life of Peter, and Augustine, and Thomas More, John Henry Newman, and Edith Stein. These are people who, faithful to the Church, have been deeply involved in the society of their time, giving clear witness to the Truth and Life that is Jesus Christ. And thus in every moment of history, the multitude of saints (canonized or not), the mass of the "faithful," have been in the world, being of Christ and bearing the spirit of Christ in the weakness of their own flesh. There is only one formula to counteract the secularization of which you speak: realizing that Christianity is not a sum or abstract dogmatic or

moral truths, but the astounding event of God made man, who lived among us and who calls us, who is calling everyone to share in his life and to continue fulfilling the mission for which he came to this earth and died and rose from the dead: that of redeeming man from the solitude into which he is plunged by sin. It is in this encounter with Christ, which is offered to us in the Church, that man finds the great perennial newness which gives a fullness of meaning to his daily life and enkindles with new light all of his earthly doings, from the most outstanding to the most modest.

The key to the Christian's relationship with the world, in one's daily life, can be expressed with a concept that is very characteristic of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá's teachings: *unity of life*. The Christian should not be following two parallel paths, those of his spiritual life and that of his professional activity. Instead he should be following only one path, in which he seeks holiness by ordering earthly realities to God.

6. Piety of children

Some people complain at times of the separation between the religion "of the people" and that of the theologians. Popular religion tends to be devotional, especially devotion to our Lady, while the religion of theologians seems to be more centered on the Protestant themes of distinguishing between grace and nature, between faith and nature. How can this breach be repaired, if it exists?

Popular religious devotion, which is so similar and yet so varied throughout the Catholic world, is of

great importance no matter how you look at it, whether from the viewpoint of reason or from the simple but no less profound viewpoint of the heart.

How does the Catholic theologian look at it? As it exists: as a manifestation, at times multicultural, of a religious faith converted into a living expression, into a source of meaning for one's own life, into an "inculturated" faith. Behind popular devotion there often lies a great deal of doctrine and theology. It is an expression of the mysteries of the faith, which the Christian people believe and express in these manifestations of piety, approved, of course, by the authority of the Church. We must not forget that the Church gives an extraordinary value to the *sensus fidei* of the people of God, which, in the words of a Father of the Church, is defined as what has been believed "*semper, ubique et ab omnibus*." The perseverance in the faith seen in people in countries where an attempt has been made to uproot Christianity is a wonderful thing.

Pope John Paul II has spoken of the renaissance or rediscovery of the authentic values of popular religious piety and has emphasized its role in the context of the new evangelization (cf. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p. 116). We can recall, for example, the popular manifestations of Eucharistic piety in the Church, which has developed so greatly in the millennium now coming to a close. It has been said, and I agree, that Eucharistic piety forms an important part of Europe's cultural identity. For example, all over the continent the feast of Corpus Christi has given rise to important social attitudes and cul-

tural and artistic expressions. These would have been impossible without the support of theological reflection.

Piety needs theological doctrine to give it solidity and a strong foundation; and theology should foster piety and be nourished by it in turn, for we cannot separate the knowledge and love of God. The greatest theologians have been great saints.

7. *Never shut up in a ghetto*

Catholic theologians are frequently accused of expressing their teachings in accord with the dominant culture. Don't you think that Catholicism will continue being a force, a point of reference, precisely because it tries to avoid becoming identified with the prevailing cultural outlook?

The Church doesn't have a "ghetto" mentality, since it exists precisely to extend itself as the Kingdom of Christ, continuing the priestly, prophetic and royal mission of its Lord.

The dialogue between faith and cultures is necessary to enable the Gospel to illuminate earthly realities from within, purifying them and converting them into an occasion for an encounter between man and God. For this reason, as Pope John Paul II has stressed, "a faith that does not become culture, is a faith that has not been fully accepted, nor deeply considered, nor faithfully lived." For the faith to be accepted by men and for it to display its salvific power, it needs, with God's grace, an intelligible proclamation that enlightens those who hear it, that penetrates in a natural way their spirit, their way of thinking, their habitual channels of communication.

In all of this, it is important to distinguish between the correct inculturation of the faith (“a faith that becomes culture”) and the falsification of the teachings of faith by submission to the reigning culture. A faith subordinated to the prevailing culture would be the antithesis of the Gospel proclamation.

8. *Only one model*

In the opinion of some people, today's circumstances demand new models of the Church. They speak of less hierarchy and more democracy, of decentralization of ecclesial institutions, of showing understanding towards all cultural traditions, of a theology at the service of the community and with absolute respect for freedom of research. Isn't this democratic vision dangerous? How can one reconcile democratic principles with the ex cathedra power of the Vicar of Christ?

Just as there is only one Church of Jesus Christ, we can speak only of one “model of the Church.” This is the one that He willed to found in the Holy Spirit, following the plans of his Father. Therefore the only model of the Church is the one professed in the Creed: the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, which has the Roman Pontiff as its visible head on earth. Other “models” that might arise cannot be accepted.

And what is immutable in the mystery of the Church? Precisely that which is furthest from us and from our will: the nature and mission that Christ has given it. To express this idea better, we can cite a teaching of the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8) regarding the

profound analogy between Christ and the Church. Just as one cannot arbitrarily suppress the reality that Christ is both God and Man and his mission as Redeemer, so we can never eliminate from our perception of the Church its divine and human nature and its redemptive mission, manifested in the ecclesial image that we have seen realized in history from the beginning. This image contains some unchanging elements: the equality of all of the faithful as far as the dignity of baptism is concerned, a community of mission, a distinction established by the Holy Spirit among the faithful through the diversity of gifts that he distributes and the functions of service to the common mission for which they are capacitated. A basic structural element is the existence of a common priesthood of all the baptized and a ministerial priesthood, essentially distinct from one another and complementary and mutually ordered to one another.

That there is in the Church a common priesthood shared in by all the faithful, and, at the same time, inseparable from this reality, an ecclesiastical hierarchy linked to the reception by some of the faithful of the ministerial priesthood and, by it, a specific teaching, pastoral and sanctifying function, is not one among other possible models of the Church of Jesus Christ. It is simply the exact and immutable expression of the one Church founded by Him.

As Blessed Josemaría said, “Hierarchy means holy government and sacred order, and never human arbitrariness or inhuman despotism. Our Lord set up in the Church

a hierarchical order which must not transform itself into tyranny, because authority itself is a service, as is obedience." The Pope, the head of the hierarchy and of the whole Church, is often called the "Servant of the Servants of God." To view the nature of the Church as similar to democratic societies would be senseless.

9. *Not only ex cathedra*

The infallibility of the Pope. An obstacle in the way of ecumenism or a great treasure of the Catholic tradition? Will the Pope be a little less infallible in the Third Millennium? And if we go in this direction, what will remain of the Church as we know it?

The infallibility of the Pope in the case of *ex cathedra* dogmatic definitions is only one aspect of his ministry as successor to the Apostle Peter as visible head of the Church: an aspect of his office (*munus*) of teaching, of his universal magisterium. The primacy of the Pope refers also to his mission of sanctifying, as Supreme Pontiff, and of governing, as Supreme Pastor of the Church.

In virtue of this primacy, which our Lord conferred on the apostle Peter and his successors, as the Church's tradition has transmitted to us from the very first moment, the Roman Pontiff is the "perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity" of the Church (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 23). We can never see an obstacle to unity in the person who is precisely its source and foundation.

Efforts to foster ecumenism will benefit by considering this truth in

depth, not by obscuring it. Specifically, it is very important to understand that the universal Church and its visible head are not something external to the particular Churches, but something internal, that is, a constitutive element of their reality. The universal Church is not a federation of Churches, but a *body* of Churches. A body in which it is essential that there be union with the head. If there is a wound in that union, it will not have a full life, and if the rupture with the head is total, its life could disappear. Communion with the Roman Pontiff is what constitutes the life of the particular Churches. As our Lord said in his prayer to the Father at the Last Supper: "That they may all be one . . . so that the world may believe." (*Jn* 17:21).

10. *Dangerous short cuts*

A synodal government for the Church, eliminating the sacred from worship, secularization of the priesthood, ordination of women. These are "temptations" which are presented with the argument that they would promote the unity of Christians and overcome historical obstacles. Don't you think that to see Catholicism as a historical figure is to risk leading it to ruin?

The points that you suggest are, indeed, "temptations" that arise in the course of the search for Christian unity. But unity will never come by way of this path. These are attitudes which differ profoundly from the authentic Catholic sense of the mystery of the Church, and, within that treasure, of the conception of the priestly ministry.

Her teaching on the priestly ministry is so central to the faith of the

Church that any defect or grave error in its proclamation (as would happen, for example, with the acceptance of a feminine priesthood) would generate complete doctrinal confusion. Equally central is the teaching about the common priesthood of the faithful, which has undergone important developments in the Second Vatican Council and in the post-conciliar Pontifical magisterium.

If the Holy Spirit has led the Church to a greater degree of self-knowledge, helping it to make progress in its theological understanding of the sacred ministry and the lay state — not to mention now the consecrated life — it would be unreasonable to think that the unity of Christians will be attained by abandoning these paths of growth. Now that we are preparing to enter a new millennium, we must continue working on the theology of the priesthood and the laity, and also on the practical application of the ecclesiological teaching of the Council, which is firmly based on the mutual relationship between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood.

11. "Disjointed" man

The Church has fought against materialism and rationalism in all its forms and harmful manifestations. Today, both veins of thought are in a state of crisis throughout the world, but the orphans of one or the other don't show signs of being attracted by the Good News. They seem to be disoriented. Could it be that Christ is no longer speaking to people through his shepherds?

Some forms of materialism and some aspects of the way of thinking

that you mentioned that were very influential in the past have entered into crisis. But *other* forms of those same errors have not ceased to be present and to influence individuals and society. Can one really say that the influence of materialism on people's behavior and attitude at the end of this century has diminished? The fall of the Berlin Wall, if we consider for a moment this symbolic event, did signify the crumbling of many intellectual myths, many pseudoscientific social and political constructions, many lies. But not all of this is in the past: their practical effects did not disappear with the collapse of the Wall. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the fact that part of these errors also had their origin in a practical materialism spawned by liberalism.

Today we often find men who are interiorly divided, or to put it even more forcefully, as Blessed Josemaría Escrivá used to say, "disjointed." One only needs to consider the pathetic attempts of many to combine "a good name with indecency, a slavery to vice with a good image." Isn't it pathetic to see the effort of so many to try to convince themselves and others that public life is one thing and "my private life" something completely separate? Perhaps here one finds the key to so many "deviations," not only moral ones, of mankind at the end of this century.

The practical crisis of ideologies and the consequent weakening of their cultural hegemony has left many people without a point of reference. But this does not mean that the vacancy will be filled automatically by the proclamation of the Gospel. The Church's teaching is not an ideology

that can simply flow into the vacuum left by others. It is the wisdom of God and a gift of God. And it requires first of all a conversion and interior change, without which there is no room for a living faith. This is why the new evangelization, which is so necessary, is primarily a call to a spiritual conversion, a fearless opening of one's heart to Christ.

Rather than orphans, I think all of the contemporary materialisms have left many people wounded, blind to Christ's light, or rather, enclosed in a region of darkness, of rejection of the truth. Therefore, this is a time for re-evangelization, for a new proclamation of the Gospel with one's word and with the eloquence of one's deeds, both on the part of the ordinary faithful and their shepherds.

The Church — and I am referring, I repeat, not only to the hierarchy but to all the baptized — has no other path but that of two thousand years ago: Christians have to learn how to set forth and make known, with the witness of our own lives and words, the great permanent “novelty” that is Jesus Christ, true God and true man, alive and present among us. We face the immense challenge of making men discover that only in Christ can they find the doctor and the medicine for their illnesses. If the Church — that is, all Catholics — is content to be “modern,” it will find itself immediately “out of date,” like a decorative museum piece. The Church, faithful to Christ, is and always will be something new for all stages of history. And therefore it will always be, on the one hand, a sign of contradiction for the conformists, and on the

other hand, a sign of hope for those who understand the deep meaning of their life and recognize their own weakness.

12. Guiding, without giving ready-made solutions

The fall of Communism and Marxism has opened a path for a greater influence of the market economy, at least in theory. The Church, which was one of the principal rivals of Communism, and in the pontificate of Pope John Paul II also one of the determining factors in its collapse, appears uncertain. It condemns the “excesses” of capitalism in the name of solidarity, but one does not see an economic model being held up as an alternative. Does such an alternative exist? Is it the task of the Church to intervene in these matters? If so, how, and to what extent?

The Church, although it will never cease to condemn errors, does not consider itself anyone's rival. The Church announces the truth of Christ and defends it for the good of humanity. For this reason it does not have an economic model of its own, just as it does not have one in any other field that God has left to man's freedom and responsibility. The Magisterium's interventions in this area are directed towards guiding men and women, fostering justice, defending the dignity of the person, exhorting all to charity and solidarity, rejecting and combating theoretical and practical errors, etc. It is not its role to give specific solutions or provide technical criteria. The scope of its teaching in this area is determined by the nature of its magisterial function; that is to say, by its transcendent goal and finality.

13. *Christians and politics*

Do you think that in regard to politics Christians should see themselves, as "the salt of the earth," scattered throughout every corner of society, or rather would some form of unity be desirable, common points in debate, battles waged together? To what extent should the Church direct, counsel, and intervene?

Within the ambit of the Catholic faith transmitted by the Church and, therefore, within the Christian conception of man and the world, we have to proclaim and defend the full freedom of Christ's disciples in matters of opinion. And therefore we have to affirm the freedom of each one to intervene in politics in the way that seems best to each, working to build up society, always respecting, of course, the fundamental truths about man that Christ has revealed.

Given these presuppositions, it is logical that Catholics be present in many sectors of political life — there is no reason why there should only be one position — in accord with their personal convictions and with respect for those of others: especially those of other Catholics, who within the same faith, hold opinions that differ from theirs in economic, social or political matters that are open to the free and upright choice of individuals.

This should be the normal situation in a healthy social body. But there are, of course, situations that cannot be considered normal nor healthy, for there are societies with profound wounds. For example, when a nation does not recognize and protect the human right to life from its concep-

tion, or the indissolubility of marriage, or does not facilitate the practical exercise of the right of parents to educate their children, or the creation of schools that respond to their legitimate convictions, or does not protect the conditions of justice and public morality required by human dignity and freedom, then not only Christians but all morally upright people should unite to cure these wounds.

In other words, while respecting the legitimate diversity of personal choices, the efforts of Christians in social and political life should be unanimous in everything pertaining to the natural law, and which therefore may not be contradicted by human laws. So when a Christian insists that it can never be legal to kill an innocent person, because this is never morally licit, he is not trying to impose his faith on others, but is simply stating what it means to be *human*.

Therefore, unanimity among Catholics should be fostered in regard to the fundamental rights and duties of the human person, even though specific individuals may uphold very different political views. It should not seem strange to us, the opposite would be strange, if the hierarchy of the Church, in the exercise of its own pastoral responsibility, should intervene publicly, when circumstances require it, calling for a common position by Catholics on specific points (in regard to objectives or, more rarely, in regard to means).

14. *The temptation of integralism*

Why is it that while religious integralism and fundamentalism are

spreading everywhere throughout the world, with grave consequences in the political sphere, this is not seen among Catholics? Is this a credit to the Church or a symptom of weakness?

Any kind of religious-political fundamentalism tends to impose forms of political organization and social life of an absolute and unquestioned nature, which extends sacred realities and attitudes of faith into the terrain of the opinionable, confusing the sacred with the secular.

In the Christian vision of man and society there is no room for a religious-political fundamentalism. For this is incompatible with the dignity of the person and with the profound love and respect for freedom of consciences taught by the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes, Dignitatis Humanæ...*). Nor is it compatible with the distinction between nature and grace, between natural and supernatural realities which are fused in a harmonious unity but without confusion in man — invited by God to participate in his nature and made a child of God in Christ.

The absence of fundamentalism fostered by Catholic teaching is, then, a credit to the faithfulness of the Church to the Gospel, that is to say, to the teachings transmitted to us by Jesus Christ, true God and true man, in a unity of Person but without confusion of natures. He who is the teacher of truth, Truth himself, is also the teacher of freedom, of understanding, of friendship, of community, of giving “to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mt

22:21). To my way of understanding, another of the profound lessons that Jesus has engraved on the Church’s memory in regard to the unity without confusion between the human and the divine, and the autonomy of created realities, is that provided by his years of work in Nazareth. This lesson of the Son of God incarnate, who showed himself to be a good worker and a good citizen alongside his fellow men and women, an exemplary fulfiller of the Law and of the civil laws, should be for us a cause for deep reflection.

The Christian is called to proclaim salvation in Christ and to make Christ’s kingdom present in the world, sanctifying it and sanctifying himself there. We Christians know that we have been entrusted with the task of undauntedly carrying out the mission of salvation. And we know that we have to carry this out with an openness to dialogue, with the deepest respect for each person’s freedom, beginning with respect for religious freedom, and for the value of creation: something completely foreign, therefore, to a fundamentalist approach.

15. When the Son of Man returns

Cardinal Ratzinger has written: “In the present stage of history, we do not see a massive movement towards the faith... It would be a mistake to think that there will be a radical change in the direction of history, and that the faith will come to be a mass phenomenon, a phenomenon that dominates history.” In the light of this reflection, how should we respond to St. Luke’s question: “When the Son of Man returns, will he find any faith on earth?”

Our Lord himself promised the apostles: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (*Mt 28:20*); and to Peter, in particular, he said: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it" (*Mt 16:18*). According to these words, we can be sure that the faith, in the sense of the deposit of revealed truths, will always be faithfully guarded by the Church. But whether our Lord, when he comes at the end of time, will find in Christians an adherence to his teaching, alive and operative through charity, depends on each of us, on how well we correspond to God's gift and transmit it to many other people, making it something alive and not just a theory.

And what can we say about the possibility of a massive conversion to the faith? The Gospels recount various occasions when large crowds followed Jesus, attracted by him and by his teachings. These scenes have been repeated in history every time that a Christian has endeavored to identify himself with Christ, letting his message be manifested in himself, as St. Paul was able to say: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (*Gal 2:20*). Such a Christian naturally attracts and wins over others: not by himself, but Christ by means of him. I saw this from close up become a reality in the life of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, who brought thousands of souls to God, trying "to hide and disappear, so that only Jesus would shine forth," as he used to say. And we are seeing it in Pope John Paul II who, in so many different countries and by being demanding, not by giving in, wins over the multitudes. Whether

the scenes of the Gospel, when multitudes of men and women followed Christ, are to be repeated today depends on the grace of God and on our freedom, our union with him. This was proclaimed by Christ himself when he said: "He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit" (*Jn 15:5*). If this does not happen, we cannot lay the blame on the times that we are living in. "If we are living well, in a Christian manner, the times will be good. We are the times: as we are, so will the times be," said St. Augustine (*Sermon 80, 8*). And St. John Chrysostom declared: "There would not be a single pagan if we were really Christians" (*Hom. in I Tim., 10, 3*). We have to make up our mind to resolutely seek sanctity, identification with Jesus Christ.

Madrid September 30, 1999

"An appeal to live the faith with the vitality of the earliest days," an interview published in Alfa and Omega, a supplement of the newspaper ABC, Madrid.

1. What are the priorities in connection with the evangelization of Europe and what is the role of the Synod for Europe in this regard?

First of all, I should explain that it is not my job to point out these priorities. The work of the Synod is precisely an opportunity to reflect about