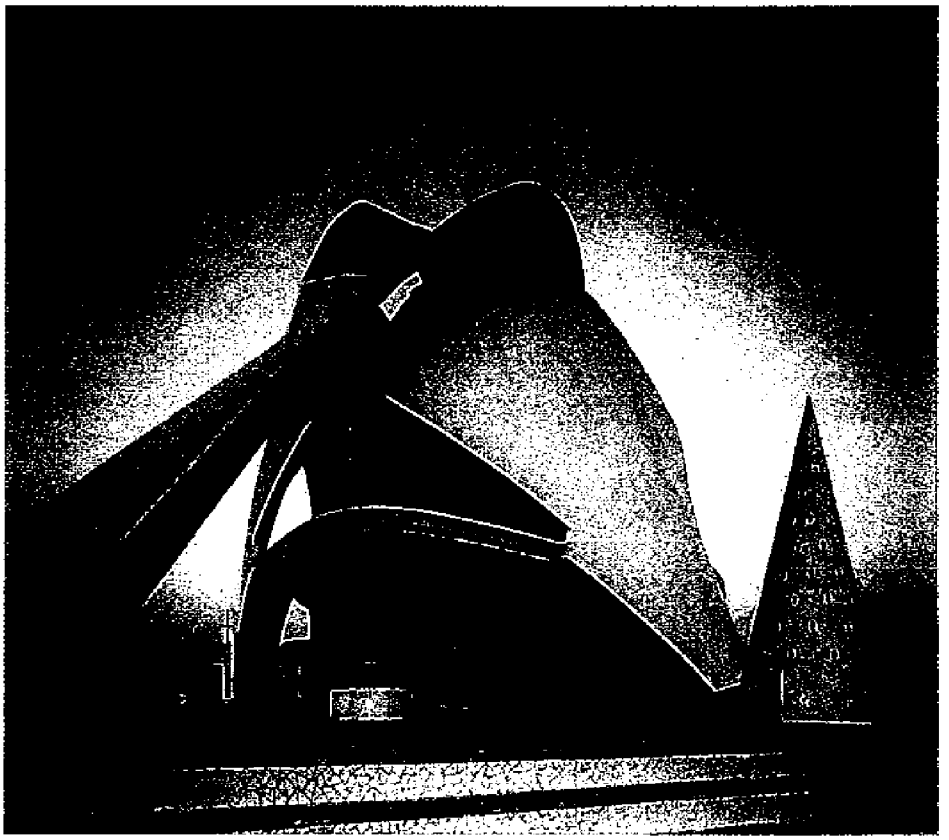

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CHRONICLE

Chronicle of the Plenary Assembly 10-13 November 2010

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The choice of theme, method and style of the 2010 Assembly emerged from the previous Plenary meetings. *New Languages* and the demands of effective *Communication* had been touched on by previous assemblies (cf. Secularism (2008), Beauty (2006), Unbelief and Religious Indifference (2004), Handing on the Faith (2002)) and also mentioned in the document *Towards a pastoral approach to culture*. But now the desire was to put them forward as priorities, in the very title of our meeting. This area also reflected the interests of the new president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, whose own background in the world of media is well known and who, having arrived in the Roman Curia from outside, was critical of the self-referential nature of some of the Church's communications practice. He was aware of the need for a strategy able to be attentive to the demands and expectations of contemporary men and women in their cultures, with the consequent priority of communications issues and the possibilities made available by the evolving new languages. The choice of theme also led also to an updating of method and style, with attention to a more interactive period of preparation, a media strategy that included interviews and a press conference, and efforts to engage with the wider public in reflecting on the theme. There was also a preferential choice for interpersonal dialogue and experience rather than texts and formal exchanges, and so outside experts and protagonists from the various fields were invited to lead reflections and give time for questions and dialogue.

Preparations began with a period of study by the newly created *Department for Languages and Communication* and a series of meetings with those engaged in the field, including other Vatican entities, academics from secular and pontifical universities, and practitioners in the pastoral field: the fruit of this exercise was a paper sent out to Members and Consultors under the title *For a Cultural Reflection on Language and Communication* (reproduced in *Cultures and Faith*, Vol XVII, (2009), n.2 pp.143-144). With brutal brevity, this paper called to mind issues ranging from fundamental theology, public relations, social studies, philosophy of language, institutional media management, pastoral theology and the communication of the Christian Faith, the use of communication in apologetics, understanding communication issues through the prism of theology, and fostering theological reflection through the languages of the arts.

The responses to this missive were themselves emblematic of the diversity of approaches to communication that exist: some academic papers were sent in proposing and partially resolving philosophical problems tied to semiotics, linguistic analysis and communication development, other papers were more sociological in outlook, or indeed took up theological aspects of the presence of the Church in the world. Other correspondents chose to send in long reflective essays, others sermons, still others reflected the style of a short two-page collection of key ideas. Also the medium began to diversify: while some papers still came in on embossed and headed paper, others arrived via email and, in a case of medium and message converging, some simply sent links to websites. Alas there was also one virus.

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Amalgamating all this material and rooting out the main areas of interest, expertise and concern was the next task of the Dicastery. The method chosen was that of a synthesis, which categorised all the thoughts into a harmonic whole, and then the translations into each language with the necessary weakening of impact this often entails. This material was sent to the members and consultors, with the request that they chose the specific fields for the programme of the Plenary Assembly. Hence the programme was formed, with the dominant theme being the fascinating field of the New Technologies of Information Technology, and other languages or means used to communicate also being represented. While the full details of the programme can be seen elsewhere in this monographic edition of the Review, prominence was given to the youth, the arts and artists, communication ad extra, and careful attention to what is perceived, not just to what we intend to transmit. Oh the gap between what we intend, and what people understand!

The result of this exercise – and the logistical issues that are always to be expected in any major international meeting – saw the arrival of 19 Members, 21 Consultors and 12 outside experts and advisors converge on the Vatican for the Plenary Assembly. Thanks to an engagement with sponsors, there was a particularly fulsome presence, especially of consultors, which obliged us to seek a larger venue and receive the hospitality of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity.

The timeline of the media strategy, which gave attention to journalistic needs to preview the event, saw two preparatory moments. The first being the Press Conference held in the Holy See's *Sala Stampa* on the 3rd of November 2010, and the second being the opening session in a very public and Roman venue, the *Palazzo Campidoglio*, on the Capitoline hill, on the evening preceding the plenary, the 10th of November 2010.

At the **Press Conference**, then-Cardinal-designate Gianfranco Ravasi spoke about how language can have little impact if it is too self-referencing. Sometimes in the Church our linguistic categories are like code, and not understood on the outside. Due to the radical shifts that periodically occur in communication, there is a need to update our linguistic approaches, especially for the sake of young people. At the same time there is a need to be aware of the weaknesses of the new models of communication and supplement them with our heritage, particularly regarding the «virtual» nature of digital interaction, which sometimes mean that people no longer communicate with each other through the colour and warmth of the skin, through voices and through physical encounter, but through the coldness, the iciness of the computer screen.

Subsequently I spoke on the issues that arise as cultures and language develop. Using the terms "Save, Justify and Convert", I asked whether the listeners were thinking of dogmas or clicks with the mouse. This raises the question not just of different meanings being attributed to the same words, but the way that ideas from different cultures can intersect and influence each other. Not only do we need to consider how people will understand our talk about saving souls (oft now interpreted as a form of fixation of a given moment that could last to eternity), but also how we ourselves are changing our way of doing theology and see new languages being applied and transforming older categories. Also, as the grammar of our culture in the digital age is increasingly marked by a dialogue model characterised by immediacy, brevity, efficiency, interactivity and a convergence of image, text and sound, as opposed to the «informative monologue» model, there is a hunger for new ways of engaging in evangelisation, while recalling that the traditional models still have their place.

Monsignor Pasquale Iacobone then introduced some of the other moments of the event, which were to be considered as an integral part. Each morning Mass was to be celebrated publicly, on the 11th and 12th of November, in St Peter's Basilica, at the Altar of the Cathedra, with Cardinal Jean-Pierre Ricard, Archbishop of

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Bordeaux and Cardinal Telesphore Toppo, Archbishop of Ranchi presiding and giving homilies. On the 13th it was the turn of Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi at the altar *caput S. Petri.* Also in the plans were a visit to the Catacombs in via Latina under the guide of Prof. Fabrizio Bisconti to experience at firsthand the language of witness and the early Christian symbols, and then a Gala dinner, which Fr Lombardi also described as being quite appetising to the journalists. These and other moments were planned as an integral part of the Plenary, which wanted to underline the social dimension of communication within a community, as well as attention to tradition.

Finally Bishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller elaborated on one of the underlying themes of the Plenary, namely the moral issues posed by the new communications systems, before presenting the German edition of Volume XII of the Opera Omnia di J. Ratzinger, titled "*Künder des Wortes und Diener eurer Freude – Theologie und Spiritualität des Weihesakramentes*". This was a happy display of the fact that older more traditional and academic forms of communication continue to have their place within the life of the community, although the appeal to different audiences was evident.

And so we come to the **Grand Public Opening of the Plenary** and the choice to break out of the mould of intra-ecclesial dialogue and symbolically engage in and with the world. The choice of place fell on the Capitoline Hill, the heart of Rome and witness to her cultural life. After welcome speeches from the President of the Dicastery and a hospitable and the extremely insightful *Assessore* Umberto Croppi, attention was given to the input of a journalist, a television critic, a film critic and the director of a national television corporation. The theme of the meeting, *Listening to the Soul in the City,* marked this attention to receiving outside stimulus through an act of discernment. A felicitous choice of backdrop was the image of the Opera House at Valencia by the architect Calatrava. Superimposed on the building was the shadow of a human person, as if to say, "look the stones speak as a man" or indeed "even the buildings reflect man's desire to communicate". What was pronounced by each of the speakers can be read in the various texts reproduced within this monographic edition of the review.

The next day we began the **working sessions** on *via della Conciliazione.* Some business matters were dealt with by our President in his opening address as he introduced the new structure of the Dicastery, which is now divided into interlinked and collaborating departments, each one with its own head (an official), programme, themes, and where possible and necessary, staff. Special mention was given to the Project STOQ (Science Theology and the Ontological Quest), and the theme of next year's major conference was announced: it is to be *Stemcells.* This Science Department is run by the Undersecretary Monsignor Melchor Sanchez de Toca y Alameda and Fr Tomasz Trafny. A second rapidly growing department is the *Courtyard of the Gentiles*, which responds to the Holy Father's 2009 discourse to the Roman Curia for the Christmas greetings and is constituted, as at the Temple of Jerusalem, as a place where even pagans and atheists can dialogue, see what believers do, and engage with them. Fr Laurent Mazas is preparing its solemn inauguration due to take place in Paris 24-25 March at the Sorbonne, UNESCO, the Academie Française, and on the forecourt of Notre-Dame with events for the youth, philosophers, academics and men and women of culture. Mention was also made of the geographical departments looking at cultures in emerging nations, and, of course, the departments *Faith and Art*, and *Economy and Human Affairs*, and *Languages and Communication* which had been heavily involved in the preparations of this Plenary.

The President then surprised us in developing the theme of language by presenting a guest speaker, the Spanish architect M° Santiago Calatrava, who spoke on the relationship between faith and art and was able

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to show us images of his works, which are witnesses and speakers on men and women today. Using video and music, he introduced his creations and explained how architecture, as a language, is able to communicate a host of ideas and cultural values, opening up new visions, desires and sense of the sacredness of reality, in a continuum with the past. Describing his art as being intimately connected to spirituality, he noted the nature of porous rocks, which can have significance and life when put together, or even an absolute value in themselves. One of the characteristics of his works is movement, fluidity; thanks to technological advances in mechanics and hydraulics, he is able to accent the fluidity of life, rather than be stuck in static systems. As stones are a testimony of memory, any Architect who wants to be enthused, must see himself as a worker who leads others by combining the wonders of creation (stones) and his science (artistic technique), to make art, with the help of God.

The three days of meetings then unfolded, following a trajectory articulated into five main areas. Firstly, **Identity, Person and Relation in Network.** The human person, created and redeemed, and his way of being within a culture of communication in continual evolution was treated in particular by Bishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller in his paper **The Space for Man in the Culture of the New Technologies of Communication: identity, person and relation in network.** The easiness of connections permits us to be in contact with every part of the globe, while the exchange of information at the intercontinental level favours the rapid diffusion of reciprocal awareness as well as a dialogue between different cultures that was previously very slow and complicated, guaranteeing the effect of being citizens of the world. Together with these encouraging results, however, there is some negative news concerning the current state of man: alienation, depersonalisation of human relationships, and loss of identity. These new techniques, in fact, invade the field of the authenticity of human relations. The relations between people vanish and a sense of reality and concreteness is lost. So there is a real need to be aware of the implications of the conquests of technology and the culture of the New Techniques of Information and Communication, to face together the risk of a lack of direct contact with people and objects, virtual relations, which with time can change the identity of the person himself. This action,

Mons. Dario Viganò, S.E. Mons. Gianfranco Ravasi, M. Ennio Morricone
(Foto: Ente dello Spettacolo)

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cultural and pastoral at the same time, is an attempt to humanise an area of life that is becoming technology centred.

Then time was spent looking at ideas such as **Symbol, Narration, Image** and how the language of art and the culture of beauty are privileged ways of communicating, able to touch the needs of different generations. So we had some **dialogue with an artist** to let us know how he translates, through his art, his thought, his vision of the world and of life. Maestro Ennio Morricone, whose music has provided the soundtrack to countless major films, described his experiences in being commissioned to write the music for the film *The Mission*, and how he selected several themes each of which was capable of expressing ideas that would take a thousand words to put on paper, and how he wove them together to carry the listener along a journey of intuition and discovery. And in dialogue with the film critic and president of the *Ente dello Spettacolo*, Monsignor Dario Viganò we saw how his musical language has taken up a life of its own, being transplanted into new contexts. Input from Jesuit Father Lloyd Baugh, who presented the use of symbols from African cultural traditions in the new film "Son of Man", gave further evidence how artistic creations can give communities the possibility of gathering around a shared history, and how images can be used to narrate our biography and interpret it. In this way we give meaning to our existence, we discover a way to bind ourselves, from within to the world, to others, to ourselves and ultimately to God. We were left asking how to draw on the efficacious expressive codes that can tell our existential story, in a way that is pertinent, with appealing stories, around symbols that touch the interrogatives and needs of people, through images that capture the attention and make us reflect. We could formulate the task in these terms: attempt to recover words, colours, sounds and images to present the Christian life as an experience which is valid, today and for all.

A third priority was that of **Communicating the Faith to the Next Generations.** The youth, in the society of networks, appear to be a complex grey colour, that is colourless, neutral, yet at the same time with great creative and dynamic power. The colourless tribe needs, sometimes in an uncontrolled manner, to show itself, to feel heard, to be an unstoppable communicating network that sometimes contradicts itself. With all their anxieties, they ask many questions, which means we have to find the right answers – words that are not cheap. While helping them to grow, to be citizens of this world, to believe, we walk with them the road of the faith and discuss seriously the question of living as believers. Moreover, when they distance themselves from the faith, it is important for them to check the faithfulness of those who remain, to know that there is a door waiting for their return. In order to be pilgrims in life and not homeless, without a point of reference, the personal relationship is once again fundamental. In this cultural context, how do we go about announcing, living and transmitting the faith to the youth? In his talk on **Communicating the Faith to the Next Generations: memory, creativity and relation,** Fr Robert Barron, who runs an internet ministry (www.wordonfire.org), showed how he uses the internet as a tool of outreach and engagement, and also how other users of the internet, particularly the young, express their particular needs. His application of apologetics focuses particularly on some recurring heresies on the internet.

The fourth area of concern touched on the fields of **Liturgy, Liturgical art, and Evangelisation.** The Prior of the Ecumenical Monastic Community of Bosé, Enzo Bianchi introduced the theme of **Mystagogical Communication: symbol and art for the liturgy and evangelisation**, accentuating the role of the Spirit in the Liturgy, which is always a moment of catechesis, mystagogical communication. Mystery, what has been hidden in order to be revealed, is what St Ireneus called the recapitulation of the history of salvation, and liturgical action, which is prophetic, precedes the epiphany and the acceptance, the welcoming of the event,

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the act of remembrance, the anamnesis. It is the liturgy which is the work of God, and all liturgical language needs to be ordered to show that it is the Lord's work, it is a communication of his grace, his presence. Liturgy is a language, which explains, shows and announces, so whatever language is used in the liturgy – words, music, art, architecture – must be able to lead to the mystery of salvation; the use of space, time, body and word, of all the cosmos, and all creation alludes to the Other and Beyond. Authentic liturgy, His action, must contain both the Visible and the Invisible, anything else is to deny the sacramental nature, where participation is knowing and experience. In differentiating religious art from liturgical art, we see that the latter is capable of narrating the beauty and the presence of the action of the Living Lord, stimulating awareness of gratuity and a stance of contemplation; this sense of mystery stimulates interest and desire, and the quest for more understanding, and helps us further participate in this communion with the Saviour.

And a fifth and final set of priorities lay in **Engaging the Person**. As there is often a sensation of not being heard, or of speaking languages that are no longer understood, of being unconnected from the real life of peoples, and answering questions that are no longer being asked, we thought it is necessary to ask ourselves what language are we using to engage the person. A reflection which can learn from the world of Business and Marketing, but which is founded on attention to the spiritual needs of the human person and the teachings of the Gospel. The one truly efficacious communicative code is that of life. There is a great word in our vocabulary to express this, sadly abused: it is the word *testimony*. Who is the witness? It is the third who puts into relation the two. The Gospel figure of the Baptist is a good example (cf. Jn 1, 29-34). Can we consider him to be a valid way of engaging the person in the itinerary of faith, at a time when culture is evermore "fluid" and even the Internet has reached a turning point? To reflect on these issues we were thankful to the presence of the Administrator Delegate of Microsoft Italia, Dott. Pietro Scott Jovane, who spoke about the future of the internet and the social transformations that are taking place, not just at the level of community cohesion and progress, but also the needs and expectations, hopes and desires, griefs and anxieties of the individual users. It was an eye-opening experience to see how another community which wishes to bear witness to its message, is looking so carefully at the languages of the future.

After each of the above speakers, questions, conversation and dialogue ensued, providing a first set of reflection and discussion from the participants. While a dominant pastoral concern lay in the use and effects of the new technologies, a solid appreciation for other traditional media appeared. But more encouragingly there was also a sense of hope and certainty for the value of the Christian Narrative, which has been able to inculturate itself into multiple languages, from art to story-telling, music to tour-guiding, literature to architecture, even dinning and the commerce of economics. It is our hope in this issue of the Review that by providing a selection of short written reflections that came into the Dicastery in the months following the Plenary, the reader will have some sense of the colour of conversation and the pastoral priorities in diverse parts of the world that our Assembly provoked, supported and stimulated.

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