

# **The Church & Scientists Synod '77**

## **Delegation of the American Bishops**

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The relationship between the church and the scientific community was explored in a message submitted to the Synod of Bishops by the U.S. delegation. There is at present a real “opportunity for the church to offer to these scientists the guidance of the wisdom entrusted to it concerning the dignity and vocation of the human person and to collaborate with them in evaluating the impact which these discoveries have on human life,” the paper states. The church ought to demonstrate to scientists its willingness to work with them in a partnership for the benefit of humanity, it adds. The paper takes up questions concerning the catechesis of scientists, the relationship between Christian and non-Christian scientists, dialogue concerning the goals and limits of science, recognition of the rightful independence of science and the role Catholic colleges might play in promoting dialogue of the church with the scientific community. The text of the message follows.

Contemporary culture in many parts of the world is characterized, among other things, by a scientific and technological revolution which evangelization and catechesis must take into account (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 54). Part of the church’s response to the opportunities and challenges posed by this cultural situation should be directed at those men and women responsible for scientific research and the application of its discoveries. If the gospel is indeed to penetrate “into all the strata of humanity” and bring about a transformation of humanity’s “criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18, 19), the world of science and technology cannot be ignored. Of particular urgency today are the questions posed by advances in the so called life sciences. These appear to make possible the identification, dismantling, rearrangement and reassembly of the basic components of living organisms, including deliberately modifying the human organism. Humanity stands at the threshold of being able to direct its own biological future consciously and deliberately. Nor is it only a question of biological technology; it is also a matter of a kind of biological industrialization, that is, the integration of such fields as solid-state physics, genetics and neurophysiology. For example, scientists are talking about joining electronic circuitry to human brain function. These and other developments and possibilities raise serious questions about personal human integrity which are of enormous import to humanity and therefore to the church, which shares “the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1).

Moreover, the scientific community is very far from monolithic in its opinions concerning the significance of these discoveries. There is at present a real -- and, we would say, providential -- opportunity for the church to offer to these scientists the guidance of the wisdom entrusted to it concerning the dignity, and vocation of the human person and to collaborate with them in evaluating the impact which these discoveries have on human life. The Catholic Church has now a providential opportunity to demonstrate to scientists its willingness to work with them in a partnership for the benefit of humanity. It is opportune to recall the closing message addressed by the Second Vatican Council to the men and women of thought and science: “Our paths could not fail to cross. Your road is ours. Your paths are never foreign to ours. We are friends of your vocation as searchers, companions in your fatigue, admirers of your successes, and, if necessary, consolers in your discouragement and your failures . . . . Without troubling your efforts, without dazzling brilliance, we come to offer you the light of our mysterious lamp which is faith . . . . Never perhaps, thank God, has there been so clear a possibility as today of a deep understanding between real science and real faith, mutual servants of one another in the one truth. Do not stand in the way of this important meeting.”

Admittedly this effort involves a very precise and specialized form of catechesis, but it is one which cannot be ignored. Some of the fundamental components of such a catechesis are the following:

The recognition of the rightful independence of science. The faith of the church is not threatened by scientific discoveries. “If methodical investigation within every branch of learning is carried out in a genuinely, scientific manner and in accord with moral norms, it never truly conflicts with faith. For earthly matters and the concerns of faith derive from the same God. Indeed, whoever labors to penetrate the secrets of reality with a humble and steady mind is, if even unawares, being led by the hand of God, who holds all things in existence and gives them their identity” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 36).

The most important area of dialogue between the church and the scientific community does not concern the discoveries of science as such, but the uses to which these discoveries are put. It is precisely in this area that the most important concerns and questions raised by recent discoveries in the life sciences lie. The fundamental conviction which the Catholic Church offers to the scientific community is this: all problems regarding human life are “to be considered -- beyond partial perspectives -- whether of the biological or psychological, demographic or sociological order -- in the light of an integral vision of man and of his vocation, not only his natural and earthly, but also his supernatural and eternal vocation” (*Humanae Vitae*, 7).

The new biological technology, for example, requires the direct, immediate and systematic intervention into the human composite. This means that for biomedical procedures to be used successfully, in order to create new norms of physical, intellectual and psychological health, they must produce results which are both predictable and repeatable. Such considerations, however are proper only to a controlled or closed system. Therefore they cannot provide the ultimate criteria for the construction of a society that is truly human. They represent a threat to human spontaneity. They can only result in a society which is essentially static. Creativity is thus threatened. The human spirit, which is always open to a transcendent dimension which cannot be controlled, is stilled. Unless the values of human integrity and a respect for human freedom motivate scientific research and technological practice, we will arrive at a world in which nothing is independent, nothing is moved by its own vitality, a society in which even our children are not our progeny, but our creation. Partisans of large-scale eugenics planning are often motivated by noble humanitarian sentiments. Yet it cannot be the values of science which alone determine what human life ought to be like.

The Catholic Church believes that salvation cannot be obtained without the grace of God which is a gift. Human self-fulfillment, therefore, will not be brought about entirely by human planning. The ultimate resolution of the drama of human life lies in a divine intervention which transcends the limitations of space and time: the lordship of Jesus Christ. Hence the teaching of the Second Vatican Council: “the independence of human affairs . . . (cannot) be taken to mean that created things do not depend on God and that man can use them without any reference to their creator” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 36).

Admittedly, it is not easy to speak of God the creator and of the lordship of Jesus Christ to those scientists who are agnostics or atheists. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church has never despaired of the capacity of the human mind and the human heart to respond to the secret impulses of divine providence, even if their origin is not explicitly recognized. Moreover, many scientists today recognize the precise limitations of their methodology. They have become aware that dogmatism and ideology have not been absent from the history of scientific research itself. The use of the secret of the atom in weapons capable of massive destruction has been a humbling experience for them. In this connection, evangelization and catechesis by scientists who are men and women of faith are extremely important. They should be encouraged by the church. They constitute one of those small groups which will be responsible for so much of the mission of the church in the years to come. Scientists who acknowledge the reign of God should be encouraged to form communities where they may grow in their own understanding, experience and response to their Catholic faith, and where they show their insights into how the mysteries of redemption can be presented to their brothers and sisters who are seeking answers to the dilemmas posed by their scientific research.

Catholic institutions of higher learning should be encouraged to promote programs of this kind, especially since they are equipped to offer the opportunity for an interdisciplinary dialogue in which theology and philosophy can make an invaluable contribution (cf. *Gravissimum Educationis*, 10).

Finally, all the faithful should be made aware of the implications to the faith of what is taking place in these scientific investigations. They should be helped to become more familiar with the teaching of the church concerning the proper role of scientific research; the limitations of scientific discoveries; the positive and negative aspects of technological progress; the sanctity of life; the respect due the human person regardless of physical, intellectual or psychological characteristics; the supremacy of grace and the need to respond to unwarranted use of scientific discoveries with a resistance which may sometimes have to be heroic.