

EUROPE

Cardinal De Kesel glorifies world that 'converts' the Church

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On 30 October last, the inauguration of the academic year of the Theological Faculty of Emilia Romagna was held in Bologna, in the presence of the Chancellor, Cardinal Matteo Zuppi. The Prolusion was read by Cardinal Jozef de Kesel, Archbishop Emeritus of

Malines-Brussels. His *Lectio* was titled: '*Believers in a world that is no longer Christian*', which recalls the title of his book recently published by Libreria Editrice Vaticana *Christians in a world that is no longer Christian*.

It was a very clear-cut lesson presenting the reasons for the 'epoch of change' pointed out by Francis; an epoch of change for the Church or, if you like, a new Church. The humbly subdued tone with which it was delivered did not diminish, indeed it accentuated the radical nature of the cardinal's proposal, which we could summarise as follows: secularisation requires a Church present in the form of absence, a Church that is useful precisely in its uselessness, a Church that only meets others, without inviting them to change anything.

De Kesel argues that the 'cultural religion' typical of Christianity was succeeded by modernity with a secular culture. If in pre-modernity religion permeated all culture, religious pluralism and tolerance of modernity make this providentially impossible in fact and unjust in law because it disrespects freedom and diversity. Secular culture rejects cultural religion but is not without religion, it does not prevent people from being Christians, it is only pluralist and respectful of freedom.

This change of epoch or 'Copernican revolution', according to de Kesel, is good for the Church, which is not itself called upon to give rise to a cultural religion. For him, cultural religions, or religious cultures as they may be, are dangerous because they do not admit minorities. Of course, secular culture sometimes turns into secularism and in this case works to make religions disappear, but secularism is a different thing from secularisation. The change of epoch has made the Church realise that it is not called to live in 'its' world, in a Christian world, but in the world, as God's people among the nations. Vatican II no longer speaks of Church and world, but of Church in the world. The secular world is not without God, it was created by Him and loved by Him so much that He gave His only Son. The Church must not 'conquer' but only be present, it reaches out to all but does not want to be everything, it meets others but not to change their minds but only to meet them without ulterior motives, the Church shares. Salvation is the work of God and not of the Church. Thanks to modernity, the Church has opened its eyes and understood the Gospel. A 'clerical' Church, above the world, that does not listen because it already knows everything, does not need conversion, that is, to understand that it is a 'sign' that, as such, does not need to fill out a crowd.

The main characteristic of this *Lectio magistralis* by a cardinal of a Church that no longer instructs, this cultural elaboration to say that the Church should not have a culture, is to expose without appeal one of the two rival theological visions today. At this

time perhaps the dominant one: another oddity for a Church that no longer wants to dominate. In taking this position, the cardinal has condemned the principles of the other vision: no small thing for a Church that no longer wants to condemn. In the Church of the encounter, the other vision is not encountered.

The cardinal expounds a distorted conception of both Christianity and

modernity. In the former, the Church would invade every aspect of culture by imposing a totalitarian religious culture that he rashly equates with Islam. In reality, in Christendom there was a distinction of powers and the influence of religion on politics and all aspects of culture was not stifling but purifying. The supernatural does not take away from nature but perfects it. St Thomas' philosophy did not take away from Aristotle's but purified it. To look at any reality in the light of the Gospel is not to stifle it, but the opposite. It is only possible to think the opposite by believing that in Christianity, revelation and the life of grace have crushed what nature would be able to do with its own strength in the cultural field. To take this position, however, one must also think that nature is capable of grace on its own. A thesis widely shared by today's theology and, one understands, also by de Kesel, but is certainly a contestable thesis.

The concept of modernity set forth in the *Lectio* is also unconvincing. Indeed, the philosophical principles of modernity that structurally prevent one from thinking of God are not grasped, namely the emergence in modernity of an essentially irreligious and atheistic culture. This is why the distinction between secularisation and secularism proposed by the cardinal is fictitious. There is no secularisation that does not emanate, in one form or another, a secularism, i.e. a rejection of the supernatural. Secularity is not a neutral situation with respect to God, a world without God is not a neutral world, it is a world without God. Every form of naturalism, to which even the cardinal's vision of secularism is assimilated, is a denial of the supernatural because it identifies nature and grace. Which, all things considered, Cardinal de Kesel also does when he claims that the Church is only present in the world, therefore absent and useless as Church. Only once did he speak of the salvation of the world as the task of the Church, to deny it in the form indicated by tradition.

The conception of 'world' used by the Belgian cardinal suffers from a defect constantly present in that theological current, despite the authority of those who have pointed out its inconsistency. Of the three biblical meanings of the word world - as the creation that God saw to be a good thing, as the dimension of responsibility entrusted to mankind and as the kingdom of the evil one for which Jesus refused to pray - only the first is used. This is certainly a dangerous reductionism that it is time to abandon.

Faced with the lesson we are commenting on, one is engrossed by the question of how much Protestantism there is in it. Luther separated nature and grace, and therefore history and metaphysics, freeing earthly existence from any relationship with God, he too maintained that it is not the Church that gives salvation but God alone, and he abandoned culture and knowledge to themselves, no longer in need of being 'saved'.