



## **Readings II in Faith & Science**

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### **The Church & Scientists: 1977 Synod of Bishops**

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## The Church & Scientists: 1977 Synod of Bishops

[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 an “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 must demonstrate to scientists its willingness to work with them in a partnership for the benefit of humanity. 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:

1. 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).

2. 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).

3. 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.

## **Commentary**

This document was presented to the Fifth Synod of Bishop of Bishops, held in Rome in 1977. It was presented to the Synod by the American Cardinals and Bishops present at the Synod. In many ways it represents a specification of the Pope's later message to the assembled scholars at the Study Week honoring the tercentenary of Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* in 1988. Here we see the problem of things coming down from "on high." These detailed items get lost in the shuffle and nobody does anything to put them into practice. A grassroots effort, from the bottom up, is more effective in "getting things done." While this document says all the right things, nothing ever really eventuated from it. It is historically important nonetheless.

In this paper, the present work of the faith/science is appropriately made: the recruitment of the laity to be apostles and evangelists of this important step forward. The principles of the faith must be learned and applied to the sciences in order for the dialogue to be truly productive in the Church. Theology can follow on but the urgent need is for the apostolate to be started and carried on.

## **Questions**

Back in the period around 1977, the world was alerted to in vitro fertilization, for example, by the birth of Louise Brown in England. How have the life sciences had a profound effect on the lives of people, even Christians? Can these be avoided or must they be somehow incorporated into Christian living? What can Christian scientists and technologists do to incorporate into the faith those things that are compatible with it? Is everything compatible with it? Is very little compatible? How can we know the difference?

Discuss some of the biological advances (transplants, genetic therapy, in vitro fertilization, artificial insemination, neuroscientific research, etc.). Have they contributed to the bettering of the human being or not? Discuss the advantages and/or disadvantages of this work.

<b>Readings II in Faith and Science</b>		
<b>ID</b>	<b>Article Title</b>	<b>Author</b>
BK023-001	Table of Contents	
BK023-002	Foreword	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-003	Campus Ministry Involvement	Father Vincent E. Krische
BK023-004	A History of Science and Faith	Father William A. Wallace, OP
BK023-005	Letter of Pope John Paul II	
BK023-006	The Church & Scientists: 1977 Synod of Bishops	
BK023-007	Religion and Science: Must There Be A Conflict?	Father William A. Wallace, OP
BK023-008	The Christian Notion of Freedom	Bishop John Sheets, SJ
BK023-009	The Worldview of Genesis 1-11	Reverend Hugh Beck
BK023-010	Contemporary Biotechnology in The Context of Conflicting Theological Perspectives	Donald Demarco, PhD
BK023-011	What is Science? What is Theology?	Sister Carla Mae Streeter, OP
BK023-012	Science/Religion Not on Speaking Terms in Today's World	David Byers, PhD
BK023-013	Neutrality or Alliance	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-014	Apostleship	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-015	Science Versus Religion: A Conflict of Ideas or a Clash of Wills	Richard Blackwell, PhD
BK023-016	Some Elements of the Faith/Science Apostolate	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-017	Some Historical Items	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-018	And I Will Make You Fishers of Men...	Evelyn Crump, PhD
BK023-019	The Spirituality of The Scientist	Evelyn Crump, PhD
BK023-020	An Intellectual Gap	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-021	Literalness	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-022	Praise	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-023	The Theological Task	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-024	History and Myth: The Inquisition	Robert P. Lockwood
BK023-025	Galileo and The Catholic Church	Robert P. Lockwood
BK023-026	When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and The Bible	Alvin Plantinga, PhD
BK023-027	Christianity and Modern Science	Rudolf Brun, PhD
BK023-028	Reflections on the Mission of a Catholic Scientist	Lucien Morren, PhD
BK023-029	Sociology	William Monahan, PhD
BK023-030	Truth for an Artist	Leonard Buckley
BK023-031	Issues of Concern	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-032	Environment and the Believer	Father Albert Fritsch, SJ
BK023-033	What Kind of Salvation?	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-034	Some Environmental Issues	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-035	The Freelands Project	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-036	Altered Perception	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-037	Theologians Visit the Environment	John Kinney, PE, DEE
BK023-038	Consumption of Natural Resources	Gregory Pouch, PhD
BK023-039	Reproductive Biology	Allyson Chavez Larkin, MD
BK023-040	Holistic Sexuality: A Proper Focus for the Scientist	Hanna Klaus, MD, FACOG
BK023-041	Sociobiology: The New Religion	Richard Blackwell, PhD
BK023-042	Animal Research	Father Robert Brungs, SJ

BK023-043	Patenting of Biological Materials	David Saliwanchik, Esq.
BK023-044	The Inner Environment	Robert Z. Greenley, PhD
BK023-045	What are the Possibilities of Human Cloning?	Robert Collier, PhD
BK023-046	Cloning	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-047	Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research Ethics in The Face Of Uncertainty	Father Kevin Fitzgerald, SJ
BK023-048	Time: The Falsest God Of All	Thomas Sheahen, PhD
BK023-049	Six Magic Numbers in Physics	Thomas Sheahen, PhD
BK023-050	On The Domestication Of Science	John Matschiner, PhD
BK023-051	Chance/Chaos Versus A Planned Design in The Universe: Pointers To God?	Robert Z. Greenley, PhD
BK023-052	Nuclear Waste	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-053	Seeming Discovery On Mars	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-054	The Information Superhighway	Bishop Mark Hurley
BK023-055	Is Secular Education Adequate for the Pursuit of Truth in Science?	Robert Z. Greenley, PhD