



Accipio Te in mea omnia Praebe mihi Cor Tuum, Maria

> Victimae Paschali laudes immolent christiani

I take you for my all. Give me your heart, Mary.

Christians, to the Paschal Victim Offer your thankful praises. 1. In this short cycle of thirteen catecheses, I would like to focus, together with all of you, *on the Areopagus of Athens*, referring to the event described in the Acts of the Apostles. The apostle Paul of Tarsus has recently crossed the border between Asia Minor and Macedonia, setting foot on the European continent for the first time. Arriving in Athens, he finds himself right in the center of the culture, philosophy, art, and religion of the ancient world. This place remains a symbol today, not only of a great past linked to Greece and Athens, but also a symbol of what has endured for centuries and generations. The entire *culture of Europe*, of Western civilization, *comes from there*: from Greek culture, from the Areopagus—as from a spring.

2. Therefore, this chapter from the Acts of the Apostles constitutes the ideal background for these catecheses addressed to the people of our time. Moreover, the person who speaks in this place—*Paul of Tarsus*—not only represents history but also is a symbol. He, a Pharisee who converted to Christ, who had previously persecuted the nascent Church, speaking at the Areopagus, testifies to *the encounter of the spiritual heritage of Israel with the heritage of Greece*. We come from this double heritage. So, deepening the theme of the catechesis cycle in progress, we will also have the opportunity to return to *our spiritual origins*.

3. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that Paul, having arrived in Athens, "was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). His indignation is understandable, given that he had grown up from childhood in a climate of rigorous monotheism. However, when he begins to speak standing in the middle of the Areopagus, he does not show indignation. On the contrary, he expresses appreciation to the Athenians for their belief: "I see how *extremely religious you are* in every way" (Acts 17:22). The apostle is prompted to begin with this expression not so much because he has seen all the signs of Athenian polytheism, but because in addition to the many places dedicated to the cults of various gods, he has also found an altar with the inscription "*To an unknown god*" (Acts 17:23).

4. Perhaps we, too, should stop in front of this altar. Certainly, it is the right place to reflect not only on the religion of ancient Greece, but also on the phenomenon and on the factor of religion in general. Here we let the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council speak; they addressed the subject of religion authoritatively, taking into particular consideration non-Christian religions. In the words of the Declaration Nostra Aetate: "Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what is sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?" (NA, 1).

5. Contemporary scholars who study the phenomenon of religion in its many aspects give great attention to *the value of the "sacred,*" which seems to constitute the core of religious experience. The words of Paul at the Areopagus, as well as the aforementioned text of the conciliar document, highlight above all the meaning of religion. *Religion is the search for answers to the fundamental questions about human existence.* These questions concern "border" problems, where human knowledge, based on sensory experience, finds itself facing unanswered questions. All these questions bring us closer to that Mystery which is "ultimate" and "inexpressible." The apostle Paul, speaking on the Areopagus, says: "so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him" (Acts 17:27).

6. And so the Athenian altar with the inscription "To an unknown god" is for the Apostle of Tarsus an expression of religion (and belief): *religion as a search for God*. In the council declaration we read: "From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples *a certain perception of that hidden power* which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense. Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language" (*NA*, 2).

At this point, the council mentions *Hinduism* and *Bud-dhism*, with a brief description of both religious systems. What is said about them applies to other religions, as all "try to counter *the restlessness of the human heart*, each in its own manner" (*NA*, 2). These words on the "restlessness of the heart" immediately recall the famous expression of Augustine of Hippo. He was particularly sensitive to these anxieties of the human heart that point to the "ultimate inexpressible Mystery" that is God.

The conciliar text to which we refer speaks of *religion as a dimension of human existence in the world*. In this dimension, religion is the expression of a search that goes beyond what is visible, toward an "unknown God," as the inscription on the Athenian altar demonstrates. For the apostle Paul, this inscription was the proof of the Athenians' religious belief more than all the statues of the gods he had seen on other altars. In this way, the ancient Greek tried to express his religious sense.

It is known that the religion of the Greeks of that time was *linked to a rich mythology with decidedly anthropomorphic features*. One can say that in this traditional religion of the people, humankind had created gods (idols) according to human imagination.

This is why Paul, as we read, "was deeply distressed" (Acts 17:16). Only the altar dedicated to an "unknown god" met his approval. He, *the apostle of that "unknown" God*, referred to this in the first words of his speech at the Areopagus: "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23).

Before continuing with our considerations, let us add again what we read in the declaration on non-Christian religions: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life . . . which . . . often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men" (*NA*, 2). The ancient Christian writers, in this regard, did not hesitate to speak of "seeds of the Word" (*semina Verbi*).¹

Notes

The monogram, **k**, is an ancient symbol of Jesus Christ that is made up of the first two Greek letters—*chi* and *rho*—of the word Χριςτος ("Christ") superimposed and was, along with AMDG and J+M, inscribed at the left corner of each handwritten page as a devotional practice; "*Accipio Te* . . ." is a continuation of the motto from St. Louis de Montfort; "*Victimae* . . ." here Archbishop Wojtyła begins inscribing the top of the handwritten pages with some lines from the text of the *Victimae Paschali laudes*, the traditional Gospel Sequence for Easter Sunday.

1. The expression *semina Verbi* is taken from St. Justin and St. Clement of Alexandria; it appears in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Praeparatio evangelica* and indicates the traces of Christ present in creation: the Christian faith teaches that the Father created the world in Christ through the Holy Spirit.