



“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2).

In a society in which everyone feels called to transform the world or the Church, this word of God breaks in inviting people to transform themselves: “Do not be conformed to this world.” After these words we would expect to hear, “but transform it!” Instead it tells us, **“Transform yourselves!” Transform the world, yes, but the world that is within you before thinking you can transform the world outside of you.**

This word of God, taken from the Letter to the Romans, introduces us to the spirit of Lent this year. As has been the case for some years now, we will dedicate this first meditation to a general introduction to Lent without entering into the special theme of this year, because of the absence of part of the habitual audience who are committed elsewhere for the Spiritual Exercises.

Christians and the World

Let us first take a look at how the ideal of detachment from the world was understood and lived out from the beginning till our day. It is always useful to take into account the experiences of the past if we want to understand the requirements for the present.

In the Synoptic Gospels the word “world” (kosmos) is almost always understood in a morally neutral sense. In its spatial meaning, “world” indicates the earth and the universe (“Go into all the world”). In its temporal meaning, it indicates the present time or “age” (aion). It is with Paul, and even more with John, that the word “world” takes on a moral dimension and most often signifies the world as it became after sin and fell under the dominion of Satan, “the god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4). This is the meaning of “world” in Paul’s exhortation that we began with and in the almost identical exhortation of John in his First Letter:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. (1 Jn 2:15-16)

Christians never lost sight of the fact that the world in itself, despite everything, is and remains God's good creation, a creation that he loves and came to save, not to judge: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

The attitude toward the world that Jesus proposes to his disciples is contained in two prepositions: to be in the world but not of the world. "Now I am no more in the world," he says, addressing the Father, "but they are in the world. . . . They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (Jn 17:11, 16).

In the first three centuries, the disciples were quite conscious of their unique position. The "Epistle to Diognetus," an anonymous writing at the end of the second century, describes the perception that Christians had of themselves in the world:

Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. . . . They follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign. And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them [to die]. They share their meals, but not their wives. They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh.[1]

Let us very briefly summarize what followed. When Christianity became a religion that was tolerated and soon after even protected and favored, the tension between Christianity and the world tended inevitably to subside since the world had become—or at least was considered to be—a "Christian world." Then we witness a double phenomenon. On the one hand, groups of people, desiring to remain the salt of the earth that did not lose its savor, fled from the world, even physically, and withdrew to the desert. Monasticism was born under the banner of a motto that goes back to the monk Arsenius: "Fuge, tace, quiesce," "Flee, be silent, be still." [2]

At the same time, the pastors of the Church and some of the more enlightened people sought to adapt the ideal of detachment from the world for all believers, proposing not a physical but a spiritual flight from the world. St. Basil in the East and St. Augustine in the West were familiar with Plato's thinking, especially in the ascetic form it had taken with

his disciple Plotinus. In this cultural atmosphere, the ideal of flight from the world was alive. It was related, however, to a flight that was vertical rather than horizontal, so to speak, a flight upward and not toward the desert. It consisted in raising oneself above the multiplicity of material things and human passions to unite oneself with what is divine, incorruptible, and eternal.

The Fathers of the Church, with the Cappadocians in the lead, proposed a Christian asceticism that responded to this religious need and adopted its language without, however, ever sacrificing the values of the gospel. To start with, the flight from the world that they recommended is a work of grace more than it is human effort. The fundamental step is not at the end of the road but at its beginning, in baptism. It is therefore not reserved to a few educated people but is open to all. St. Ambrose wrote a short treatise called “Flight from the World,” addressed to all the neophytes.[3] The separation from the world that he proposes is above all affective: “Flight,” he says, “is not to depart from the earth but to remain on earth, to hold to justice and temperance, to renounce the vices in material goods, not their use.”[4]

This ideal of detachment and flight from the world will, in diverse forms, accompany the whole history of Christian spirituality. A prayer in the liturgy summarizes this in the saying, “terrena despiciere et amare caelestia”: “to despise earthly things and to love heavenly things.” (The same prayer in modern liturgy says: “to use with wisdom earthly things, always oriented to the heavenly goods”)

The Crisis of the Ideal of “fuga mundi”

Things changed in the period prior to ours. With regard to the ideal of the separation from the world, we went through, a period in which that ideal was “criticized” and looked at with suspicion. This crisis has distant roots. It begins—at least on the theoretical level—with Renaissance humanism that revived interest and enthusiasm for worldly values, at times with a pagan cast. But the decisive factor of the crisis is seen in the phenomenon of the so-called “secularization” that began in the Enlightenment and reached its peak in the twentieth century.

The most evident change concerns precisely the concepts of “world” and “age.” In all of the history of Christian spirituality, the word “saeculum” has had a connotation that tended to be negative, or at least ambiguous. It meant the present age that is subject to

sin, as opposed to the future age or eternity. Within a few decades, its meaning underwent a transformation until it took on a decidedly positive significance in the 1960s and 1970s. Some titles themselves of the books that emerged during those years, like *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* by Paul van Buren and *The Secular City* by Harvey Cox, highlighted this new optimistic meaning of “saeculum” and “secular.” A “theology of secularization” was born.

All of this contributed, however, to fuel an exaggerated optimism about the world for some people that does sufficiently not take into account its other face—the one which is “under the evil one” and is opposed to the spirit of Christ (see Jn 14:17). At a certain moment the traditional idea of flight “from” the world was substituted in the minds of many (including clergy and religious) with the ideal of a flight “toward” the world, that is, worldliness.

In this context some of the most absurd and delusional things that have ever come under the name of “theology” have been written. The first is the idea that God himself becomes secular and worldly when he lays aside his Godhead to become man. This is the so-called “Theology of the Death of God.” There also still exists a balanced theology of secularization in which secularization is not seen as something opposed to the gospel but rather as its product. However, that is not the theology we are talking about.

Someone has commented that the “theologies of secularization” referred to above were nothing but apologetic attempts meant “to furnish an ideological justification for the religious indifference in modern man”; they also fit with “the ideology that the Churches needed to justify their growing marginalization.”[5] It soon became clear that this was a blind alley. In a few years almost no one was talking about the theology of secularization, and some of its very promoters distanced themselves from it.

As always, to reach the bottom of a crisis becomes an occasion for going back to the “living and eternal” word of God. Let us listen to Paul’s exhortation again: “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

We already know from the New Testament which world not to be conformed to: it is not

the world created and loved by God and not the people in the world whom we must always go out to meet, especially the poor, the downtrodden, and the suffering. “Blending in” with this suffering and marginalized world is, paradoxically, the best way of “separating” ourselves from the world because it means going in the direction from which the world flees as much as possible. It means separating ourselves from the very principle that rules the world, self-centeredness.

Let us focus for a bit on the significance of what follows: being transformed in the deep recesses of our minds. Everything in us begins in the mind, with thoughts. There is a wise maxim that says,

Watch over your thoughts because they become words.

Watch over your words because they become actions.

Watch over your actions because they become habits.

Watch over your habits because they become your character.

Watch over your character because it becomes your destiny.

Prior to our works, change must come, then, in our way of thinking, that is, in our faith. There are many causes at the origin of worldliness, but the principle one is the crisis of faith. In this sense the apostle’s exhortation is only repeating Christ’s exhortation at the beginning of his preaching: “Repent and believe”; repent, that is, believe! Change your way of thinking; stop thinking according to the “human way of thinking,” and start thinking according to “God’s way of thinking” (see Mt 16:23). St. Thomas Aquinas was right to say, “The first conversion consists in believing (*prima conversio fit per fidem*).”[6]

Faith is the primary battleground between the Christian and the world. It is through faith that the Christian is no longer “of” the world. When I read the conclusions that unbelieving scientists draw from their observations of the universe and I see the vision of the world that writers and filmmakers offer us—in which God is at best reduced to a vague and subjective sense of mystery and Jesus Christ is not even taken into consideration—I feel, thanks to faith, that I belong to another world. I experience the truth of these words from Jesus: “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see!” And I remain amazed in observing how Jesus foresaw this situation and gave us the explanation ahead of time: “You have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes” (Lk 10:23, 21).

The “world,” understood in its moral sense, are by definition those who refuse to believe. The sin that Jesus says the Paraclete will “convince the world” of is the sin of not having believed in him (see Jn 16:8-9). John writes, “This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith” (1 Jn 5:4). In the Letter to the Ephesians we read,

You he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience (Eph 2:1-2).

The exegete Heinrich Schlier has done a penetrating analysis of this “spirit of the world” whom Paul considers the direct antagonist to the “Spirit of God” (1 Cor 2:12). It plays a decisive role in public opinion..., and today it is literally the spirit “of the air” because it spreads itself electronically through the air. Schlier defines “the general spirit of the world” as

the spirit of a particular period, attitude, nation or locality. . . . Indeed, it is so intense and powerful that no individual can escape it. It serves as a norm and is taken for granted. To act, think or speak against this spirit is regarded as non-sensical or even as wrong and criminal. It is “in” this spirit that men encounter the world and affairs, which means they accept the world as this spirit presents it to them It is their [spirits’] nature to interpret the universe and human existence in their own way.[7]

This describes what we call an “accommodation to the spirit of the age.” That spirit

operates like the legendary vampire. The vampire attacks people who are sleeping, and while he is sucking out their blood he simultaneously injects a sleep-inducing liquid into them that makes their sleep sweeter, so that they always sink into deeper sleep and he can suck out all the blood he wants. The world, however, is worse than the vampire because the vampire cannot make his prey fall asleep and can only approach those who are already asleep. The world, on the other hand, first puts people to sleep and then sucks out all their spiritual energy, injecting them with a kind of sleep-inducing liquid that makes them find sleep even sweeter.

The remedy for this situation is for someone to shout in the sleeper's ear, "Wake up!" That is what the word of God does on so many occasions and what the liturgy of the Church makes us hear again precisely at the beginning of Lent: "Awake, O sleeper" (Eph 5:14); "it is full time now for you to wake from sleep" (Rom 13:11).

The Form of This World Is Passing Away

But let us ask ourselves the reason that a Christian should not be conformed to the world. The reason is not ontological but eschatological. We do not need to distance ourselves from the world because matter is intrinsically evil and is an enemy of the spirit, as the Platonists and some Christians writers influenced by them thought. The reason is that, as Scripture says, "the form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31); "the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever" (1 Jn 2:17).

All we need to do is stop for a minute and look around to be aware of the truth of these words.

Life is similar to what happens on the tv screen: programs, the so-called viewing lineup, follow each other rapidly, and each one cancels out the previous one. The screen remains the same, but the programs and the images change. It is the same with us: the world remains, but we leave one after the other. Of all the names, faces, and the news that fill newspapers and news broadcasts today, what will remain of them—of all of us—in a few years or decades? Nothing at all.

Let us think about what is left of the legends from 40 years ago and what will remain in 40 years from now of today's legends and celebrities. We read in Isaiah that it will be "As when a hungry man dreams he is eating and awakes with his hunger not satisfied, or as when a thirsty man dreams he is drinking and awakes faint, with his thirst not quenched" (Is 29:8). What are riches, tributes, and glory if not a dream that vanishes at daybreak? St. Augustine describes a beggar who had a very lovely dream one night. He dreamed that a substantial inheritance fell into his lap. In the dream he is clothed in beautiful robes; he is surrounded by gold and silver and is the owner of fields and vineyards. In his pride he scorns his own father and pretends not to know him. . . . But he wakes up in the morning and finds that he had been asleep.[8]

Job says, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return" (Job 1:21). The same thing will happen to today's multimillionaires with their money and to the powerful who make the world tremble at their power. A human being, outside of the context of faith, is nothing but a shape created by a wave on the shore of the sea that the next wave will cancel.

Today there is a new arena in which it is especially necessary not to conform ourselves to this world: images. The ancients coined this motto: "Fast from the world (nesteuein tou kosmou)."[9] We could apply that today as fasting from the images of the world. At one time fasting from food and drink was considered the most effective and required fast. That is no longer the case. Today people do such fasts for many other motives, especially to maintain a good figure. Scripture says no food is in itself unclean (cf. Mk 7:19), but many images are. They have become one of the favorite vehicles through which the world spread its anti-gospel. A hymn for Lent exhorts us,

Utamur ergo parcius

Let us use sparingly

Verbis, cibis et potibus

words, food and drink,

Somno, iocis et arctius

sleep and amusements.

Perstemus in custodia.
senses.[10]

May we be more alert in the custody of our

To this list of things that we should use sparingly—words, food, drink, and sleep—we need to add images. Among the things that come from the world and not from the Father, St. John significantly adds, along with the lust of the flesh and the pride of life, “the lust of the eyes” (1 Jn 2:16). Let us recall how King David fell What happened to him as he looked down on the terrace of the house next door often happens today in opening up certain sites on the Internet.

If sometimes we are feeling troubled by impure images, either because of our own imprudence or because of the intrusiveness of the world that forcefully thrusts its images before our eyes, let us imitate what the Israelites did in the desert when they were bitten by snakes. Instead of wasting time on fruitless regrets or trying to find excuses in our loneliness and the incomprehension of others, let us look at a crucifix and go before the Holy One. **“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn 3: 14-15). May the remedy enter where the poison entered, that is, our eyes.**

With these proposals suggested by Paul’s word to the Romans, and above all with the grace of God, let us begin, Venerable Fathers, brothers, and sisters, our preparation for Holy Easter. To celebrate Easter, St. Augustine said, means “to pass from this world to the Father” (Jn 13:1), that is, passing over to what does not pass away! It is necessary to pass out of the world so as not to pass away with the world. Have a Happy and Holy Lent!