



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Christian response to modern atheism

1. Man's religious orientation stems from his nature as a creature, which spurs him to long for God who created him in his own image and likeness (cf. Gn 1:26). The Second Vatican Council has taught that "the dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. The invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being. For if man exists, it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence. He cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and entrusts himself to his Creator" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 19).

The way that leads human beings to knowledge of God the Father is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, who comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit. As I emphasized in our previous catecheses, this knowledge is authentic and complete if it is not reduced to a mere intellectual achievement but vitally involves the whole human person. The latter must give a response of faith and love to the Father, in the awareness that before knowing him, we were already known and loved by him (cf. Gal 4:9; 1 Cor 13:12; 1 Jn 4:19).

Unfortunately, this intimate and vital relationship with God, weakened by the sin of our first parents from the beginning of history, is lived by man in a fragile and contradictory way, beset by doubt and often broken by sin. The contemporary era has known particularly devastating forms of "theoretical" and "practical" atheism (cf. Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*, nn. 46-47). *Secularism* proves particularly ruinous with its indifference to ultimate questions and to faith: it in fact expresses a model of man lacking all reference to the transcendent. "Practical" atheism is thus a bitter and concrete reality. While it is true that it primarily appears in economically and

technologically more advanced civilizations, its effects also extend to those situations and cultures which are in the process of development.

2. We must be guided by the Word of God in order to interpret this situation in the contemporary world and to answer the serious questions it raises.

Starting with Sacred Scripture, we immediately note that there is no mention of "theoretical" atheism, while there is a concern to reject "practical" atheism. The psalmist calls foolish anyone who says in his heart: "There is no God" (Ps 14:1), and behaves accordingly: "They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none that does good" (ibid.). Another psalm condemns the wicked man who "boasts, 'He will not avenge it'; 'There is no God'" (Ps 10:4).

Rather than atheism, the Bible speaks of *wickedness and idolatry*. Whoever prefers a series of human products, falsely considered divine, living and active, to the true God is wicked and idolatrous. Lengthy prophetic reproaches are devoted to the impotence of idols and likewise of those who make them. With dialectical vehemence, the emptiness and worthlessness of man-made idols is countered with the power of God, the Creator and Wonderworker (cf. Is 44:9-20; Jer 10:1-16).

This doctrine is most fully developed in the Book of Wisdom (cf. Wis 13-15) which presents the way, to be recalled later by St Paul (cf. Rom 1:18-23), to the knowledge of God based on created things. Being an "atheist", then, means not knowing the true nature of created reality but absolutizing it, and therefore "idolizing" it, instead of considering it a mark of the Creator and the path that leads to him.

3. Atheism can even become a kind of intolerant ideology, as history shows. The last two centuries have known currents of theoretical atheism which denied God in order to assert the absolute autonomy of man, nature or science. This is what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* emphasizes: "Atheism is often based on a false conception of human autonomy, exaggerated to the point of refusing any dependence on God" (n. 2126).

This systematic atheism has been widespread for decades, giving the illusion that by eliminating God, man would be freer, both psychologically and socially. The principal objections raised, especially about God the Father, are based on the idea that religion has a compensatory value for people. Having repressed the image of the earthly father, adults are said to project onto God the need for a greater father from whom they must free themselves because he hinders the growth process of human beings.

What is the Church's attitude to these forms of atheism and their ideological justifications? The Church does not scorn serious study of the psychological and sociological elements of the religious phenomenon, but firmly rejects the interpretation of religiosity as a projection of the

human psyche or the result of sociological conditioning. In fact, authentic religious experience is not an expression of immaturity but a mature and noble attitude of acceptance of God, which in turn gives meaning to life and implies a responsibility to work for a better world.

4. The Council recognized that, by not always showing the true face of God, believers may have contributed to the rise of atheism (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 19; CCC, n. 2125). In this regard, it is bearing witness to the real face of God that gives the most convincing response to atheism.

This obviously does not exclude, but rather demands a correct presentation of the rational reasons that lead to the recognition of God. Unfortunately, these reasons are often obscured by the influence of sin and of many cultural circumstances. The Gospel message, confirmed by the witness of a sensible charity (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 21), is thus the most effective way for people to understand something of God's goodness and gradually to recognize his merciful face.

I extend a special welcome to Cardinal William Keeler and to the American Catholic and Jewish leaders involved in the *Interreligious Information Center* in Baltimore. Upon all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims, especially those from England, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Sri Lanka, India, the Philippines, Japan and the United States of America, I invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Saviour.