

SECULAR VALUES AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS *

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After persistent efforts over centuries, science and technology have reached such a point of success and strength, but at the same time such potential for *sophistry* and *deceit*, that they can more easily lead humanity astray, leading us as if by “telecontrol”, in whatever direction we set for them.

If the ancient Sophists could easily render “a great argument small, and a small one great”, contemporary humanity, in an age of science and technology can in all areas render that which is true false and that which is false true. Indeed sometimes, such is the success of that which is false, that it becomes a measure of comparison for what is true. Thus, for example, when a child is perfect in stature and extremely attractive, we say that it is “like a doll”!

At any rate, what we can today say without exaggeration on the matter of values in general, irrespective of whether these are financial, moral or aesthetic, is that we are in an age of unprecedented *confusion*. One contemporary writer remarked: “Such is the confusion we experience today, that one has the impression that some guileful hand crept inside the shop window, took down the prices from the valuable goods and exchanged them with those of the inexpensive ones”.

Before this general instability and fluidity, it is very natural for all those of us who have the responsibility and the concern of guiding people correctly, whether as parents, teachers, counsellors, clergymen or friends, to examine continually each “value” that appears on the “stock exchange” of life. This is particularly important in the guidance of young people, who have a long road ahead of them, full of uncertainties.

Perhaps never before have the words of St. Paul “test everything; hold fast to what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21) had such great and universal timeliness as today when everything is *dared*, everything is *doubted* and everything is *risked*. In any case we have reached the limit of confusion, so that we give the same name to things entirely different and even opposite. Never have words lost their traditional meaning as they have today. We might say that even in dictionaries, which surely we can expect will contain a lasting codification of words, we no longer have the sense of stability and security that “sign” and “signified” are mutually balanced and corresponding.

A classic example of this incoherence of recent times is the term “democracy”. How many countries and how many politico-social systems of our world understand by this term precisely what was meant by those who established it, namely the ancient Greeks, as the ideal system of government which preserves the honour and dignity of each citizen to the same degree? Is there true “democracy” today, in its original sense, anywhere in the world? Knowing how many factors, visible and

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invisible, gather people into groups and finally subdue them, we must answer without any hesitation in the negative. For even if we think that our democracy has achieved great things, so that we may consider it especially developed, we have usually only advanced in essence to the level of anarchy, which is proved by the numerous social problems and the continual rise and spread of criminal behaviour. And we should not forget that if "dictatorship" is the high-handedness of the few well-known people at the top, "anarchy" is the high-handedness of all, namely of the whole anonymous and uncontrolled multitude.

If we are able sometimes to escape the dictatorship of the few, since in knowing them we can overthrow them, we are never able to escape the dictatorship of the anonymous multitude, because we cannot locate and isolate them. Nonetheless, in the contemporary world both extremes, namely "dictatorship" and "anarchy", continue to be described as "democracy". We could offer numerous examples, talking for hours about the deceit which occurs. Yet, this is not the purpose of our Conference, nor of this address. With the general theme that we chose for this Conference, our main purpose is to examine the quality of life's *values*, when one judges them according to the loose criteria of the world or the ultimate criterion of Christ. For there is no doubt that "Christ" and "world", after the fall of Adam, are two kingdoms that unfortunately lie in chaotic distance from, if not in diametrical contradiction to, one another.

According to the teaching of Scripture, since God created everything "out of nothing" and endowed the world with as many powers as His goodness desired, so that everything would be "very good", such a distance and difference would have been inconceivable. The only difference that would have been expected would be the fact that God is uncreated, while the world is created. The one is absolute, and the other finite and relative.

However, since humanity, created "in the image of God", abused its freedom, there ensued apostasy and the fall of Adam. Thus entered into the life of humanity disharmony and a sinful mentality, and the world and its goods were no longer seen according to the will of the creator God, but according to our personal desires and passions. This is the so-called "selfish love" (*philautia*), which makes one see oneself as the centre and supreme criterion of the whole world, and to measure everything according to the degree to which one's egotistical desires are met. Yet how can humanity be the criterion of a world not created by it but by another, greater force which created the human person itself? Is there greater foolishness than such selfish love?

Nonetheless, selfish love did lead humanity away from God. From the days of Cain to this day, selfish love has led human beings to revolution and to the slaying of one another. Selfish love led also to an impasse in human relations with the surrounding creation, leading to what we now call the *ecological problem*. Therefore all evils stem from self-love, which is the only thing served by the passions. Hence, there is no other way for human beings to recover the balance in their relations with God, their fellow human beings, the world and their own selves

than by each person exercising discipline and subjecting their individual will to the will of the common Creator and Father, who cares with the same justice and concern for all His creatures. Thus, no one will be done injustice, and no one will do injustice. On the contrary, there will then exist stable peace, whose necessary foundation is justice. And "peace", as the wonderful Greek term "eirene" (from "eirmos" = coherence, and "syneirmos" = association) tells us, signifies mutual *union and solidarity*.

However, it is clear that the human person after the Fall will either sense the turmoil wrought upon the pre-established order of God - which is none other than His divine justice - by his apostasy, or else will remain in the fallen state, considering it natural and by no means abnormal. In the first case, humanity repents (*metanoia*) and accepts the proclamation of salvation as this derives from divine Revelation; as has been continually commented on by the Church through the centuries. In the second case, humanity lives away from God, either by rejecting His existence in order not to feel judged or guilty, or else by constructing God intellectually according to human desires, so as to invoke Him only whenever it needs Him.

Essentially, then, in the distinction between "worldly" and "Christian" spirit, it is not only the particular *objective* values that are distinguished (and we shall examine some of these in brief summary below) but the very mystery of *personhood* and *existence* is at stake, that of God on the one hand and of humanity on the other. Thus the whole question and study of human values in this world - irrespective of whether it is a case of market goods or of cultural, social and spiritual values - ultimately has a purely moral and religious dimension, because these values are not unrelated to the overall destiny of the human person. It is precisely this human dimension that witnesses to and measures our proximity or distance from salvation in God. Now let us take some of the central values of life in turn, and examine how a secular person perceives and lives these, and how a Christian - indeed an Orthodox - does so.

a) Freedom

The much renowned good of freedom, for which so much blood has been and is still being shed, is almost synonymous with the concept of *person*. To deny someone's freedom is like denying their most basic human characteristic. In other words, what distinguishes the value of a person as such, as well as a person's actions and shortcomings, from the life and deeds of other members of the animal kingdom is the freedom to choose. That is to say, to act not according to blind *instinct* but according to *judgment* and *conscience*. This is why one's positive actions are called virtues, while the negative ones are called evils. Since the human person feels free at all times to determine its own dispositions, the person is also considered to be a *moral personality* created in the image of God, which means that it is not the accidental product of uncontrolled coincidences. Let us, however, examine more precisely,

and more particularly, this very characteristic human feature called freedom.

One who thinks in a secular way, understands freedom as *independence* from every form of authority. This ideal was expressed in recent times, as is well known, by the French Revolution, with its famous motto: "Freedom, equality and fraternity". Yet a careful observation persuades us that all three of these terms remain entirely abstract, doubtful, and perhaps even contradictory if beyond and before them there is no common purpose and normative factor which would give them meaning and sacredness. To be simply independent, without knowing what to do with this independence, is the most unbearable enslavement. To be equal to someone, who does not know who they are and what they want, could become the most painful procrustean mutilation. And to be brother or sister to someone, who does not share your convictions and ambitions, would be the most intolerable estrangement, the most bitter subjection.

All this leads us to the conclusion that it is not sufficient for one to be free *from* certain conditions, but one must at the same time know for what reason and *for what* one is freed. The most decisive element, then, of freedom is to know *towards what direction* we are led in freedom, rather than *from what* we are freed. The "from what" is the shell, the present, while the "towards what" is the vision, the mission, the thirst and the obligation, which constantly set the present afire in order to illumine the future.

Thus while the secular person struggles to *denounce* some yoke (liberation movement), the Christian is not satisfied with denunciation, but is ambitious to *renounce* their own spiritual powers to the point that they are considered as being worthy to reach "the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:3). It is not enough for Christians to have freedom in their own volition because, if this is not controlled by a superior and good force, it could degenerate into dangerous "high-handedness". So the freedom "of one's own volition" must always be accompanied by reverence and the good-will of "consciousness" and "conscientiousness" in order that one may not risk losing one's innate sacredness to the demonic labyrinth of hubris (*hybris*). Here we must of course recall the central role played in the moral life of the Ancient Greeks by *hybris*; the most sacrilegious attitude before the divine, and accordingly punished in exemplary manner by the gods. Even if our Ancient predecessors had taught us nothing else about religion, their sensitivity regarding hubris would have been sufficient for us to characterise them as one of the most religious people of the world. Consequently, we could say that, if the limits of social freedom are exhausted where those of one's fellow human beings and of society as a whole begin, then the limits of *metaphysical* freedom end where hubris - or *sin*, as we say in the language of the Gospel - commences.

The great question, however, is: does a secular person today believe in hubris and sin? Unfortunately, we must admit that, even in Christian societies of East and West, our spiritual perception has been dangerously blurred. The so-called *humanism* that prevailed as the

supreme ideal of freedom after the Renaissance identified freedom with absolute independence. It is not by chance that in all declarations of recent times on "human rights", the human person is perceived as a *self-subsistent* and autonomous value, but not as an *image* of God, namely a copy, whose value depends on how faithful it is to the original. This is why the value of the human person is defined one-sidedly, namely only by *rights*, but not by corresponding duties and analogous obligations. Yet such a sense of partial and purely worldly freedom easily degenerates into tyranny and enslavement. For nothing does the human person idolise or divinise more easily than itself. And it is then that one is totally blinded by the passion of *selfish love*, unable any longer to see anything beyond or above one's *ego*, neither God nor one's fellow human beings.

Christian researchers of the contemporary spiritual life have begun to fear that perhaps sociologists are right when they claim that we should already speak of a post-Christian era in Christian societies. Nonetheless, the true Christian ideal of freedom has fortunately not totally disappeared among Christians. It is particularly preserved in a distinctive way in Orthodox monasticism, which is, significantly, blooming today; for monasticism essentially constitutes an exemplary *resignation* of rights, and a transcendence of the possessive thirst which has beset humanity since the Fall. In monasticism, the degree of freedom, as an internal achievement, depends on the degree of voluntary self-humiliation and obedience. Obedience to rules of life and to an Abbot testifies to a two-fold human freedom. Firstly, that one is not prevented from seeing and appreciating something better and superior outside of oneself. And secondly, that one does not find it difficult to subject oneself to this recognised and confessed superior.

The absolute obedience of the monk bears witness to the most liberated and most dynamic human type. For it is clear that to be able to place your will, entirely and unreservedly, in the hands of another person in the name of God means that you have conquered and absolutely mastered your personal will, and so you are "master of yourself". Thus we arrive at the classical definition of Orthodox monasticism given already in the fourth century by Evagrius of Pontus, that "the monk is one who is separated from all, and yet united to all".

However, this does not mean that for a Christian to experience freedom in its essential fullness, one is necessarily required to become a *monk*. Nor are we saying this to move our Christian youth to turn collectively towards monasticism. Not at all. The message is for each of us to move outside the prison of selfish love, of egoism and of sickly loneliness, in order to see and love others, and only then will we have been liberated to receive the word of God, by communing with Him, and at the same time to know authentically, and be enriched essentially, by our fellow human beings. In any case, marriage too, as the mystery of communion *par excellence* between two persons, is a most profound obedience of one person to another, which, the more freely it is practised between spouses, the greater fulfilment it brings them as persons.

Consequently, true freedom is not absolute independence, but liberation from our personal will to such a degree that we subject and bind it to every honest struggle that promises self-transcendence, just as athletes in all sports willingly deprive themselves and train harshly, becoming slaves of a particular programme, in order to achieve greater freedom of movement and thus higher records in their contests.

b) Property

The second good that the free person directly struggles to achieve is property of every kind, namely the legal right to control certain goods - material, cultural or spiritual. Let us remember that there is, especially in recent times, a very developed concept of spiritual property, namely the right of what we call "copyright" of artistic and spiritual creators in their works of art or wisdom.

First of all, property, as a legal and inalienable bond of a human being with toil, comes also as a moral reward for this toil. This is precisely why property is not exhausted in covering one's personal needs, but also appears as a permanent incentive and enticement of another form of "self-transcendence". In any case, we must say that deeper culture commences from the moment we feel the need for the superfluous. It is not by chance that, in societies in which the right of individual property was forcefully abolished - as in the utopian paradises of Communism, which has already been internationally bankrupted - life was sooner or later led to moral indifference, inaction and decay. In spite of this, the dangers of property are great. If life is led to a swamp by communist *levelling*, it is more quickly led to mutual destruction by capitalist *hunger*.

In order to understand how little "ours" are those things which we manage to achieve, even with our "honest sweat", it is sufficient to consider the following very simple and self-evident, but fundamental, truths: that neither the *primary materials* nor the *powers* with which we work are ours. The primary materials are by nature *granted* not only to the person in business or commerce, or the natural scientist, but also the most ingenious poet, composer, artist or thinker has received from predecessors the alphabet, sounds, colours, methods etc.

Furthermore, even one's personal genius (the word "*genius*" signifies that we have been endowed with this capacity from birth), together with one's skillfulness and any other talents, comes not as a reward for former efforts but as *incentives* for honourable work, so as to multiply the endowed treasure. Even our health, which is necessary to be able to cultivate our "given talents" unimpededly and beneficially, is a further unforeseen gift from above, which is only slightly influenced by our own efforts. If all this is true of the goods which we acquire through our own honest sweat, it is surely still more true of whatever others bequeath to us which is already prepared. For all these apparent, but also for many other deeper and less obvious reasons, the great German poet Goethe had proverbially stated: "**Mine** is a word which **stinks**". This means that we do not have the right to monopolise anything, nor

to isolate anything, because then life rots, or rather what is cut off rots away.

From what has been said thus far about property, the simple conclusion arises that the goods which are given to us to enjoy in this life are not there to *separate* us from God and other people, but on the contrary to *unite* us with them. The Apostle Paul epigrammatically writes: "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you have received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Cor. 4:7). Therefore, gratitude to God, who grants all goods, will be translated into love for one another and charity through which the various goods become direct means that unite us more profoundly with the common Creator God and our fellow human beings. However, if the means become an end, then we idolise relative values as absolute, rendering them self-sufficient. Thus we are no longer disposed to sharing them with others, but on the contrary we betray both God and humanity for the sake of their corruptible values. This two-fold betrayal is particularly evident and shameful in our days, because we no longer simply have the traditional distinction between people in terms of *wealthy* and *poor*, which still allowed everyone a calm co-existence, even communion, since each person easily found a place within the social structures. Today the distinction is mainly between "consumers" and "sharers", and the boundaries are fluid, even invisible. Thus this new distinction shows more clearly what a dangerous trap property can be, when one allows oneself to be swept away by advertising and by the fever of contemporary marketing.

For your soul to be enslaved today, there is no longer any need for huge treasures and sudden wealth from unforeseen good fortune to enchant you, as in the case of that "foolish rich man" in the Gospel (Luke 12: 13-21). Today, industrial products are multiplied and exchanged so rapidly, continually creating new irritations for contemporary people of all ages, that one can much more readily lose one's peace and balance of soul, beginning from a child's toy or a tie or a mere perfume, and reaching to a car or private plane. The whole of contemporary society, in so-called developed countries, is called "consumerist" because the continual thirst for buying new goods - beyond the basic needs of life - is general, and therefore all-powerful, thereby creating "fashion". Thus, however, everyone cares egocentrically only for themselves, or at most for their own, and instead of gradually becoming more charitable and "social", sharing the joy of their goods even with unknown people if necessary, they become all the more individualistic and competitive. In any case, this is the main reason that today's societies rarely display any longer "great" benefactors of society as a whole, as we knew these people in the past. For, from *consumers* in attitude and action, it is difficult to create *sharers* and servants from the multitude.

In spite of this we cannot complain or be ungrateful about the general social welfare and sensitivity that has gradually developed in numerous civilised countries of today, where the balance to social injustice created by the consumer spirit is assumed by institutions,

organisations and state programmes that train the contemporary person to think and act socially.

c) Health

The third crucial good that we try to retain during our earthly life is health, bodily and spiritual. The ancient Greeks had formulated the ideal secular rule of health, when they spoke of "a healthy mind in a healthy body". This principle of the ancient Greeks is the "secular" rule of health, because we shall see below that such a view of life testifies to an almost militaristic, and entirely naive, optimism regarding this world. Of course in this principle of health, the first thing that we ascertain is the correct understanding that bodily and spiritual elements in the human person constitute one single reality, and therefore are directly interrelated. However, despite this balanced understanding of the human person, such a rule of health is by no means... "democratic", we would ironically say.

Of course, such a principle does not yet lead directly to the inhumane and blindly militaristic measures of the ancient Spartans, who killed in the Kaias valley the physically disabled children, since they considered them useless for the city-state. Yet it is surely the theoretical, even if unconscious, condition for such barbarity. For at this point one should pose the simple question: If for the mind to be healthy one must have a healthy body, may we thereby conclude that all minds that do not dwell in robust and healthy bodies are unhealthy minds? Is this not an intolerable "racism", a sacrilegious naturalism, which counts and respects only the flesh? How many times has humanity known brilliant people of science and art who lived with sickly bodies, and often handicapped from birth, yet not only did this not prevent their spiritual development but perhaps even became the secret incentive for them to excel, thus balancing this injustice of nature!

But in addition to this, the great question to be asked by the thinking person, and especially the Christian, is the following: What place in life do sickness and pain have? What in the final analysis is the deeper meaning of this world? Is this life a wild festival, or are we disciplined and matured through joys and sorrows for another life, more permanent and of another order? The motto of the ancient Epicurean philosophers "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die", which is perpetuated to this day and always will be in the future by all materialistic and atheistic systems, is unacceptable not only for Christianity but even for the most simple humanitarian world view. Any common thinking person, from what is personally experienced in the course of life and not just from what others teach, daily ascertains that nothing in this world is entirely accidental, namely without some significance. Thus both pain and illness must have a place in the whole programme and are, we would say, "part of life". Indeed illness and pain are not only our unpleasant experience of natural deficiencies in this life - in order to seek after and believe in the future life - but are sometimes "the wages of sin", as St. Paul states (Rom. 6:23). However, just as health is

not always a prerequisite for salvation, so also illness does not always mean disaster, because it may become a means of discipline, struggle, and ultimately a means of definitive salvation.

Bodily and spiritual health, what we call the “well-being” of our constitution, as well as beauty, physical strength and any other talents and gifts, such as intellectual and artistic capabilities, are *means* and not *ends*. “Means” signify, as the word itself denotes, something that mediates between the person on the one hand, and their *destiny* on the other. If our destiny is *perfection* in God, the means ought to assist and not hinder us in this goal. And, unfortunately, we must admit that most goods which constitute our psychosomatic health easily become hindrances for our salvation, because rarely can we endure too much strength, too much health or too much joy. When we have all these, instead of expressing gratitude to God who gave them - not because we deserve them or He owes them to us, in order to test our endurance - we think we have these privileges freely and rightfully, and forget God, if we are not also audacious before His loving magnitude by using them irresponsibly and prodigally.

The wise Psalmist was sincere and humble to confess that what in this life made him feel wealthier was not joy, but sorrow. This is why he admits in gratitude to God “in my sorrow you have broadened me” (Ps. 4:1). And St Paul confirms this truth, which is strange for secular people, not however in the words of a person broadened by sorrow, but in those of God who has condescended to our sorrows and who stated to Paul himself: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (II Cor. 12:8). We see then that even health, bodily or spiritual, is not a good with a single meaning. It is simply a means, itself also temporary and corruptible, as all others, whose use or abuse determine the success or otherwise of our perfection in God.

d) Education

With this general term, we do not simply mean school education with a stable programme, but our every endeavour to develop the various natural human qualifications into additional, acquired knowledge and skills which not only improve our character but also assist us to practice beneficially a particular profession among our fellow human beings. This means that each profession necessarily presupposes some *education*, but every education does not naturally conclude in some *profession*. If we analyse these two basic terms, as they appear at least in the Greek language, the deeper content of each, as well as their interrelationship, become more easily understood.

The Greek word “education” (*paideia*), as is well known, comes from the Greek word for child (*paidi*). Basic qualities of a child are *simplicity*, that allows it to feel before all situations of life, interest, curiosity, ecstasy, wonder, admiration, optimism, trust, sincerity, feelings normally expressed as unreserved and unfeigned *joy*. When one takes into account the boundless spiritual wealth presupposed by all these “child-like” feelings, then one understands that the whole proce-

ture of education must look not so much to the teaching of this or that useful knowledge, but primarily to the preservation in the maturing person, as much as this is possible, as it comes from God's hands. This is why the term "education" in the Greek language signifies the endeavour to preserve all the existing, or restore all the lost, irreplaceable elements of the child's soul, which were pointed out above, so as to consolidate the virginal vision of life in the human person.

As far as "profession" is concerned, it must again be recalled that this very expressive word in the Greek language (*epaggelma*), originally connoted "promise" (*epaggelia*). Thus the term "profession" seeks to declare that professionals through their particular vocations give a practical promise to society as a whole that their desire is not only to benefit themselves, but to serve in a sincere and honest way certain specific needs of their fellow human beings. At any rate the same *social dimension* of each profession is also expressed, even if not as precisely, by the Latin term *professio*, which again signifies etymologically that the professional task is carried out before and for (*pro-fessio*) one's fellow human beings.

Thus we see that *education* and *profession* constitute two significant values whose use or abuse, once again, clearly mark the difference between secular and Christian spirit. For there is no doubt that both education and profession may decisively contribute to our taming, refining and salvation, or else to our abasement and corruption.

e) Interpersonal and Social Relations

The values described so far - freedom, property, health, and education - at first sight give the impression in a way of constituting an interrelated closed treasure or armour, referring directly to the human person as such, and only indirectly to its social environment. Thus, one might think that these values are in some manner gained independently of society as a whole, and that they are practised within the framework of the so-called interpersonal and social relations without any organic relationship with these. However, things are not quite so. For interpersonal and social relations are in themselves an additional and crucial value, as we shall see below. We could even say that up to a point these relations are perhaps the root and womb that gives birth to all other values mentioned.

If we consider the fact that from one personal acquaintance our way of thinking and living can change, we understand how crucial interpersonal and social relations are for each of us. A teacher, a spiritual counsellor or friend, an emotional bond or marriage, a professional co-worker or partner, a political, social or world environment, may be fateful and decisive in the formation of our further development, and may confirm or, on the contrary, invalidate all the values in which we formerly believed. Thus the various relations with one or many persons also constitute in themselves a distinct value which we honour or dishonour according to the spirit in which we face these relations, namely the spirit of egoistic self-interest or of noble social disinterestedness.

Having thus completed in summary the outline of the most central values in this life, around which we consume our whole activity, we are obliged to pose the following fundamental question: do all Christians understand these values in the same way, so that we may talk of an *undivided Christian ethic*, which is clearly distinguished - and often clearly different - from a secular ethic? Here we must admit that, at least in theory, namely in teaching, the Christian ethic is one and unchanging, for those educated and uneducated, for clergy and laity, for monks and those married, for men and women. However, its experience and practice depends on the personal inner cultivation and sensitivity of each Christian. This is why there exist visible, and especially invisible, gradations which only the omniscient God knows precisely, for He alone "searches the mind and the heart" (Jer. 17:10).

There are Christians - and unfortunately these are not few in our wicked days - who sometimes appreciate all the above mentioned values, as well as parallel and derived values, in a more secular way than the most secular people, or even than unbelievers, either taking advantage of or else idolising them.

There is a second, more numerous category of Christians who, based on civil social manner, enjoy these values with joy and pride, as gifts certainly of God, believing that they deserved to achieve them as a result of their virtue and effort.

A third category of Christians comprises those who in humility believe that all goods of this world are gifts of the absolute and unsearchable love of God, and must therefore be enjoyed in boundless gratitude and in measure, together with our fellow human beings, knowing that no matter how much we strive for them we never deserve them, since in the very best circumstance the words of the Gospel apply: "we are useless servants, and we simply did what we ought to have done" (Luke 17:10).

A final and supreme class of moral perfection is of course presented in Christianity by the monks, in the first instance; namely those who renounce the world entirely in order to be joined entirely to Christ, and especially in the extreme case of the so-called "fools for Christ". The latter, as soon as they ascertained that the various goods of this world, even the spiritual ones, were in danger of becoming a temptation or hindrance in their final salvation, ridiculed them in self-sarcasm and mockery in order to avoid the praise of others for their ultimate freedom.

In conclusion, we can affirm that the axiomatic question of Christ has everlasting validity: "What will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your life? Indeed, what can you give in return for your life?" (Mark 8:36-37).