



RESPONSES TO THE 1997 QUESTIONNAIRE

Peter FLEETWOOD

My purpose is to explain what happened to the more than 200 replies to the October 1997 questionnaire which was designed to help the Dicastery prepare for this Plenary Assembly, and to offer an initial evaluation of all that has been read and studied over these two years.

First of all, I should point out that the present address is the first part of the document on the responses to the questionnaire which has been prepared for you. Without this, the second section, which summarises the content of the responses, could appear very strange. The third section is simply a list of all the responses we received. That section ought to be self-explanatory. The final section is simply a chart analysing the response from the various continents.

The first thing to mention is the style of the responses. This is because approaches varied widely. The majority of respondents followed the pattern of the three questions or fields into which the questionnaire was divided. At the other end of the scale, some institutions simply explained how they function, with no clear relation to the questionnaire, and there were all sorts of documents in between. Some responses were very substantial, more like books than replies to questionnaires, but mercifully they were few in number. Most were about three or four pages long, and a few were less than a page in length. Some were disappointingly uninformative, some said things which one would regard as common knowledge, and a few were brilliant, both in analysis of the current situation and in offering new ways forward. I think it ought to be stressed that most respondents were in some sense specialists, very often highly qualified intellectuals, so they are not exactly representative of the majority of people where they live and work. However, this in no way puts into question the quality of what they wrote; it simply colours the way they view things.

A psychologist once told me that he never tells his patients all the negative elements in his assessment of them, because they remember the negative things more easily than the positive ones, and work themselves into a terrible state. I mention that because some of the responses we have received and read are starkly honest about situations judged to be very difficult. This can be taken many ways. I am convinced that what they say should be taken as a challenge to responding boldly – *boldness* is, in fact, a concept which surfaced very often in the material I read. There is just no point in pretending that everything in the garden is rosy, or in being frozen into inactivity by things which are problematic, and presented as such. For example, a sister involved with lay people in the United States spoke of a certain frustration with the language of Church documents. She made it very clear that the group who expressed frustration want to evangelise their culture, but find it hard to understand the way these documents are written. In such cases, I am always reminded of the scholastic maxim *quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*. In other words, what I get out of listening to Sister's reflection is a challenge to the whole Church to communicate more effectively, not a rejection of what the documents are trying to say. It is interesting that the same point was made many times.

There are some healthy warnings in some responses. I shall mention just two. The first is about the distinction between institutionalised religion and spirituality; this is something very common in western societies, and it is pushed by the ideologues of New Age thought. The Bishops' Conference in my own country had a whole study week on this distinction, led by a professor of education who teaches religion teachers, but is highly respected in New Age circles. The man in question is often consulted by the bishops, precisely because he is an expert in culture, but I wonder why he is trusted so much. The second warning came from Father Cottier, and concerns ecology. Issues concerning the future of creation and the correct relationship with the environment surely merit the attention of theologians, and

they obviously strike a chord with many Christians, particularly young people. But it is quite correctly pointed out here that ecological consciousness does not come unaccompanied. One strange twist is the spread of what Father Cottier calls a kind of "vitalism", which honours life as such, while refusing to recognise the special place of man in creation; on a banal level, it means that animals have more rights than people in some cases, and one response even pointed out that it is safer in some countries to be a fox than a foetus these days. There are several other very subtle warnings scattered throughout the responses, and I think they are very valuable.

An idea which may cause Bishops' Conferences to groan because of their economic circumstances is that of patronage of the arts. Many respondents stressed the enormous value of patronage, which ought to be viewed as an investment for the future of the Church. There was some sound advice in a few responses, particularly the idea that it is useful to develop good relationships with industrial and charitable foundations, as well as the relevant offices in UNESCO and other organisations. These are all more than willing to fund or support projects, but are often in need of guidance. One of several original ideas was that of encouraging or sponsoring something which would raise awareness of the saints just as epic poetry made the heroes of old famous and remembered. An idea like this could be put into practice at all levels, from schools and parishes to university literature faculties and Catholic cultural centres. The idea of music, painting and literature competitions was something mentioned in several responses, many of which gave examples of local ones.

Much was said in the responses about the style with which the Church can best approach her task. The word "dialogue" is applied an amazing number of times to relationships within the Church, but the most eloquent one is from a priest working in a Muslim country, in a cultural centre which is visited almost exclusively by Muslims. For him everything depends on God's covenant relationship with humanity, and the relations within the Trinity. This means to him that dialogue is fundamental to divinity, and God's absoluteness, offered to us as a model, is never exclusive or competitive, but always inclusive and creative. He sees this as a model for relationships between communities and within communities, but I think it probably gives a good theological basis for evaluating what many responses said about the role of women in the Church, even if some see that as a predominantly western issue. Many of the things put forward as good approaches for the Church to use are the fruit of reflection on what is already happening. There is great praise for Catholic educational institutions and parishes, as well as those movements which successfully draw young people closer to Christ and bring many older people back to a Church they now experience as more hospitable and welcoming. It is worth noting that the Church needs to "cultivate", not to invent, a credible style of life. It would be churlish not to recognise that many responses acknowledge that many people are doing great things in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

A striking thing was how many of the responses to the 1997 questionnaire spoke of the Church's relationship to the poor. This may well be an example of something which is already being addressed adequately in some parts of the world more than in others. It is certainly a feature of many surveys in northern Europe that the group which is least touched by the Catholic Church these days is the one referred to as "the urban poor", so mention of the poor as a high priority reflects a very strong concern that the same care for them be exercised everywhere, and it surely must not be taken to imply that the situation is uniform throughout the world. It probably also highlights an awareness of questions relating to international methods of tackling poverty, which are very much in the spotlight as the Jubilee year approaches.

A great deal was also said on dialogue with non-believers. The most frequently made point was the idea that it is essential to begin from commonly held values. It is clear from contributions from various parts of the world that many political and civic institutions really do appreciate it when the Church takes an active part in debate and in deciding public policy. Here again, it was stressed that the Church demonstrates great self-confidence and responsibility by being involved in issues which really exercise people. Many of the

values which are prominent in contemporary culture coincide with Christian concerns, like solidarity, working for the common good and issues concerning human rights. Many of the people who could be referred to as non-believers today have never really heard the Word of God, so, as several responses suggested, there are often no longer any controversial questions. These people are not against Christ or his Church, but simply do not know them. So the power of witness is something which was emphasised in many responses. There is an openness to being convinced, and in the Jubilee celebration of the Incarnation there is a renewed invitation for the Church to show in all sorts of ways how much she shares the *gaudium et spes, luctus et angor* of every man and woman. Several responses pointed to the clear need for sanctity at every level of the Church.

One difficult but fascinating area is that of understanding culture itself. Some of the responses expressed gratitude and admiration for Pope John Paul II's inspiration in constantly urging Christians to conduct a lively dialogue with culture, his insistence that this is especially fertile ground for pastoral initiatives and for dialogue with those who do not believe in Christ. However, many responses recognise different sorts of difficulties, sometimes with quite creative responses. One acute analysis suggests that one culture may contain many *universes*, and this would demand a differentiated approach for a genuine evangelisation of culture or for an effective inculturation of the Gospel. The Church may need to expand the already rich variety of ways in which she is present in the world, to reflect the fact that every culture is complex, and closeness to the people will require recognition and then penetration of its various subcultures. Not only that, but with the speed and complexity of cultural change, effective evangelisers have to update their cultural map quite frequently. This is particularly important because of the false image people are often given of religion in general and of the Catholic Church in particular. A few responses appealed for sensitivity to cultural variations within a region. For example, the Conference of Major Religious Superiors in Aotearoa New Zealand sent three replies, precisely because the three major cultural groups (Pakeha or white Europeans, Maori and Pacific Islanders) wanted their voices to be heard separately.

As one would expect, much was said in different responses about young people. So many responses put so much faith – or really hope – in the generations to whom the future belongs, with some very helpful and sensitive suggestions about approaching their cultural zone. Even if a critical distance between some young people and the institutional Church can be noted in the summary of the responses, a great deal is unsaid, both there and in the responses themselves, about very large numbers of young people trying their best to live the Gospel, and expressing very high hopes in their Church. Perhaps one of the most important of all the remarks made in all the responses is Archbishop Doré's call to take note of what he calls "the genius of children", whose keen awareness of the hollowness of materialism can call people to a deeper quality of life.

This questionnaire has produced a rich vein of information, which gives a hopeful picture of the future of the Church. If it reflects the real life of Catholics around the world, an amazing amount of energy and thought and prayer is going into living the Christian life. One of the positive elements is the realism of many who responded and their refusal to hide from difficulties; there are many examples of individuals and organisations within the Church who are not afraid of the hindrances that sometimes come their way, but carry on courageously and often quietly. One of them advised against being satisfied with a negative analysis of the world, because the truth beyond is much more hopeful. My last duty is to thank those who responded, some of whom have not yet had an official reply to their efforts, and to say a special word of thanks to those of my colleagues here who have helped me cope with a mountain of paper, especially as we had four months less than we had hoped to work on it.

A breakdown of responses by region of origin

Africa

America

Asia

Europe

Oceania

Rome

Vatican

International

members

1

1

1

3

2

consultors

2

2

5

1

2

1

nuncios

4

1

1

bishops & conferences

3

4

4

7

1

religious

5

10

2

10

3

15

secular institutes

1

9

2

17

4

universities

10

2

18

6

seminaries

2

1

others

4

13

2

14

8

totals

16

49

15

79

5

22

4

14

Total: 204

A breakdown of responses by original language

English

50

French

45

Spanish

42

Italian

29

German

16

Portuguese

16

Polish

4

Croatian

1

Slovak

1

Total: 204