

# CULTURE E FEDE



CULTURES AND FAITH

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## Editorial

### From words to the Word

Rome is a city of many monuments but one of its lesser known memorials is to be found at Via Frattina, 52. The rather humble commemorative plaque I have in mind marks the fact that James Joyce lived at that address for 6 months in 1906. The inscription celebrates Joyce's masterpiece *Ulysses* and his achievement in "making of his Dublin our universe" (*facendo della sua Dublino il nostro universo*). It invokes Joyce's own acknowledgement that "I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal".

In this number of "Cultures and Faith", we are celebrating the capacity of literature to reveal the universal that is to be found in diverse particular locations, cultures and contexts. The best writers move us to look at the particular with more attention, to go beneath the surface, to open ourselves to deeper truths. They often introduce to us to existential settings that are very far from our immediate experience and to characters who are very different to us and, yet, capturing our imaginations they let these remote situations and unlikely personalities come alive and speak to us. Such literature witnesses to a shared humanity which enables us to feel with and for others, John Paul II said of art, it "is by its nature a kind of appeal to the mystery".

The horizon of mystery looms large in the Diaries and Letters of Ety Hillesum, which are the focus of Cardinal Tolentino de Mondonca's contribution, "Trovare Dio tra il filo spinato", which offers us an introduction to the life and writings of this most remarkable person. While her world was becoming increasingly restricted and the circumstances more difficult, she continued to find a purpose in life and an interior freedom which no prison could deny her. Her testimony to this is to be found in her words but above all in her "new language" of service to others – she asks God to give her words and strength. In his review of the "Dizionario Biblico della Letteratura Italiana", Cardinal Ravasi celebrates that volume's achievement in documenting the extraordinarily persistent influence of the Bible on Italian Literature and the complex forms in which this influence is expressed. While acknowledging the Bible's enduring status as a cultural point of reference, he insists that the Bible retains a relevance primarily because the existential themes of which it speaks, and especially the figure of Christ and the drama of his life and death, continue to fascinate writers. In his essay, "La Bibbia in Shakespeare", Professor Boitani offers us an initial sketch of the presence of biblical quotations and illusions in the work of Shakespeare. His attention is focussed not on a chronology or a listing of the references but on a number of thematic considerations; the conflict between Jewish and Christian interpretations of the scriptures and the marked resonances – albeit implicit – of biblical paradigms and motifs in the later writings of the Bard. From Shakespeare, we move to another of the greats in the person of

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Dante. Professor Boyagoda, who is both an academic and a novelist, has provided us with an excerpt from his forthcoming novel, "Dante's Indiana", which is a celebration of some of the universal themes of the Divine Comedy reimagined in the rather unpromising particularity of theme parks in rust belt America. Reading this extract reminds us that in approaching contemporary writing, we must learn to negotiate the language of humour, especially that of irony, and the coarseness of reported speech if we are to find the richer vein of meaning. An overly earnest or puritanical approach to literature may blind us to the ultimate seriousness of much contemporary writing which somewhat paradoxically pretends not to take itself seriously. From the Mid-West, we are transported to the Nigeria of the late colonial period in Professor Dominica Dipio's article "God is One: The Way of Dialogue in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*". In this piece, she offers us a guided re-reading of a book that now enjoys the status of a classic. Her presentation reveals the continuing relevance and significance of the issues explored in the novel including themes relating to inter-cultural dynamics in a context of political and social transformation, dialogue and evangelization, and the understanding of masculinity. Professor Nicla Bettazzi highlights the importance of children's literature, the stories and the fairy-tales we introduce to them, in forming their imaginations and shaping their understanding of the world. She presents examples of recently published books for children that consciously seek to be more inclusive in terms of the people and themes of which they treat. This intentional giving of visibility to characters who are differently-abled, and the celebration of their strengths and gifts, cannot but reinforce the sense of our shared humanity. Paul Elie of Georgetown University gives us an account of said University's Faith and Culture Conversations series which features exchanges with writers exploring questions of faith and belief.

In conclusion, I would like to return to Via Frattina, 52 and the day on which the plaque was unveiled (2<sup>nd</sup> February 1982 – the centenary of Joyce's birth). The event was organized by the Irish Embassy to Italy and a summons went out to the Irish community to support the occasion. I still remember the then Ambassador's delight in highlighting the irony of the fact that the crowd of about 100 was constituted almost exclusively by priests, religious sisters and seminarians. He was convinced that Joyce would have been amused and pleased by this perhaps accidental clerical and ecclesial tribute. I am persuaded, however, that, no matter how accidental, the tribute was appropriate and perhaps providential. The Church needs artists! And artists should always feel welcome among people of faith and be assured that their work is taken seriously.

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