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*Leszek Szewczyk*

## **The Specific Content of Preaching the Word of God in a Secularized Environment**

### *Specifična vsebina pridiganja o Božji besedi v sekulariziranem okolju*

*Abstract:* The proclamation of the word of God must always consider the unchanging Gospel and the present life of the Church and theology, which constitute the correct interpretation of the revealed word of God. The content of preaching the word of God is the good news about Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour, and, more broadly, God's revelation and human existential problems. Therefore, the proclamation of the word of God draws its content from the Bible and observation of the world in which contemporary man lives and creates. This study aims to indicate the specific content of preaching the word of God in a secularized environment. This proclamation should lead to faith as a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and show the true God and Jesus Christ – man's only Saviour. At the same time, it should try to answer people's questions and desires.

*Keywords:* the content of preaching, preacher, secularized environments, preaching to those who seek God.

*Povzetek:* Oznanjevanje božje besede mora vselej upoštevati nespremenljivi evangelij in sedanje življenje Cerkve in teologije, to pa naredi interpretacijo razode-te božje besede ustrezno. Vsebina pridiganja o njej je vesela ali dobra novica o Jezusu Kristusu, Gospodu in Odrešeniku, a tudi širše: o božjem razodetju in o človeških eksistencialnih težavah. Oznanjevanje božje besede tako utemeljuje svojo vsebino na podlagi Svetega pisma in opazovanja sveta, v katerem sodobni človek živi in deluje. Cilj te študije je, pokazati na specifično vsebino pridiganja o božji besedi v sekulariziranem okolju. To oznanjevanje naj vodi k veri kot osebni srečanju z Jezusom Kristusom in kaže na pravega Boga in Jezusa Kristusa, edinega človekovega odrešenika. Obenem pa naj poskuša odgovarjati na vprašanja in hotenja ljudi.

*Ključne besede:* vsebina pridiganja, pridigar, sekularizirana okolja, pridiganje iskalcem Boga

Preaching the word of God to today's listeners is not preaching new content. The essence of the Gospel remains unchanged because it is still the good news communicated by God. Therefore, in preaching the word of God, one should always consider the unchanged Gospel and the current life of the Church and theology, which is an adequate interpretation of the revealed word of God. The content of preaching the word of God is the good news about Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour, and, more broadly, God's revelation and human existential problems. Therefore, the proclamation of the word of God draws its content from the Bible and observation of the world in which contemporary man lives and creates. At the same time, Pope Francis confirms the principle that the secondary subject of preaching is the existential problems of contemporary people and the world's affairs. For the Pope, a preacher is a person who listens to people and understands their problems, a person who contemplates Christ and also contemplates the people (EG 154).

The pastoral problem in secularized environments is not only the loss of the monopoly on religion by the Church. Knowledge of the fundamental truths of faith is almost completely lost. It has also become fashionable to question the central message of the Gospel (Herbst 2010, 210–212). Therefore, a secularized environment requires a modification of what is accentuated in the content of the preaching (Pevc Rozman 2017, 291).

This study aims to indicate the specific content of preaching the word of God in a secularized environment. Without giving up the traditional content, the preacher should lead to faith understood as a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. In a secularized environment, the proclamation of the word of God must show the true God and Jesus Christ – man's only Saviour. At the same time, the preacher should try to answer people's questions and desires.

## **1. Leading to Faith as a Personal Encounter with Christ**

The purpose of preaching the word of God is faith and living by faith, and, ultimately, to glorify God and the salvation of people. The Catechism attempted to define the faith of the Catholic Church: »faith is, first of all, a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed. As personal adherence to God and assent to his truth, Christian faith differs from our faith in any human person. It is right and just to entrust oneself wholly to God and to believe absolutely what he says. It would be futile and false to place such faith in a creature.« (CCC 150) The Christian faith is not only about accepting dogmas but above all about accepting Christ and being spiritually united with Him. The enrichment of faith in the objective, topical sense (the content of faith) is also the enrichment of the faith in the subjective and existential sense (the attitude of faith). Benedict XVI says that it is vital to know the content of faith. Knowing the content of faith helps, with reason and will, agree to what the Church proposes. The knowledge of faith brings the fullness of

the salvific mystery revealed by God. Benedict XVI also notes: »When, instead, man lacks faith in God, the essential collapses because a man loses his profound dignity and what makes his humanity great enough to withstand any form of reductionism.« (Benedict XVI 2012)

As a result of secularization, faith and the Church are reduced to the private and internal spheres, ethical deformation increases, the sense of personal and social sin weakens, and moral relativism gradually increases. The information society provides contemporary people with selective data, which leads to superficial presentation of moral issues. Therefore, proper education is essential, enabling people to think critically and choose the correct values (EG 64). In preaching the word of God to secularized people, the preacher should emphasize that faith in human life is not a trifle but a particular form of hope. Experiencing the presence and love of God, man perceives the meaning of his existence and the goal he is heading toward (Šegula 2018, 459). The awareness of God's presence helps a person heal from excessive self-concern and selfishness. On the other hand, unbelief can lead to loss, weakening of the human spirit, and various kinds of enslavement (Schönborn 2001, 53).

Preaching the word of God regarding faith as a personal encounter with Jesus Christ refers to the mind, free will, and the sphere of sensations and emotional experiences of the listeners. The human mind first gets acquainted with the Christian truth it has heard, then tries to understand it, and finally accepts it or rejects it, or remains indifferent and sceptical to it. The preaching should help the listener rationally accept God's existence and provide them with rational reasons for the existence of God. The preacher of the word of God is responsible for leading people to God. This guidance must be a companionship that will lead both the preacher and the audience to engage in reason to respond positively to God's voice. At the same time, the preacher should be aware that, in the process of transmitting the word of God and accepting it by human reason, God's grace plays an essential role, as it acts mysteriously and incomprehensibly for the speaker and the listener. The preacher's task of God's message is, above all, to bear witness to the Gospel through life and personal faith.

Proclamation of the word of God concerning faith also refers to the free will of man and aims to make this will perform acts of faith and live by faith. The listener should be shown faith as good and a value worthy of acceptance. The proclamation of the word of God also refers to human feelings that can support or weaken reason and will in the act of faith. The preacher should evoke positive feelings because they help to support and enliven the act of faith. The personal involvement of the preacher of the word of God and the manifestation of kindness helps to touch the hearts of the listeners and is an indispensable element of proclaiming the word of God. Joachim Wanke points out that »religious faith is not the result of a raw, purely rational choice from several options, one of which I choose for myself. Rather, religious beliefs arise through the experience of a state of fascination, uncanniness.« (Wanke 2012)

## 2. Preaching the True God

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The Catechism of the Catholic Church, presenting the truth about God the Father, from whom everything comes, presents Him as the Creator of the world, the source of all kinds of life, the Father of »the poor, orphans and widows who are under His loving protection« (Wanke 2012). Catechism emphasizes God's paternal concern, goodness and kindness, while God's providence is realized by keeping the world in existence and preserving it.

Atheism or de-Christianization is based on »sometimes a false image of God. It is about the hypertrophy of some features attributed to God, thus the distortion of God's very idea and image. Sometimes atheism is not a negation of the true God, but a negation of an idol that man has created, a negation of false ideas about God.« (Palumbieri 1998, 152) The Christian image of God the Father is a product of four generally overlapping planes: the biblical, philosophical, and theological approaches and the view resulting from daily piety permeated by life experience. In the human view of God, the Father, the prevailing emphasis results from the perspective that dominates a particular person. God can be seen as perfect, distant, stranger, indifferent, harsh, and punishing; or as a close, merciful, caring, compassionate God who seeks and remembers man. Difficulties in faith and a relationship with God often result from a false vision of God. A distorted image of God makes a healthy, loving relationship between man and God impossible (Thomas 2012, 133–135).

In the practice of preaching the word of God, one can see the phenomenon of the so-called pastoral deism. Although preachers do not deny the existence of God, they do not sufficiently emphasize His constant presence and actions in human life. Taking up the subject of God's providence in proclaiming God's message is practised today much less frequently than in previous centuries. Today's man appeals to his strength and skills rather than God's will. The God of modern preaching is a colourless God, not someone to be feared or loved; He is someone no one fears or loves anymore (Bitter 1987, 17). Joachim Wanke diagnoses the morbid condition of the Church's preaching and notes that today we are threatened with »Christianity without God«. Therefore, the greatest challenge for the Church is not the problem of the Church but the problem of God (Wanke 2001, 15). Stefan Oster notes that the exhortation expressed with the slogan »Good News instead of Threatening News« contributed to the downgrading of Christian teaching to a kind of humanism level.

»Sin is no longer mentioned, there is no need to convert, Hell is out of the question! It doesn't fit in with contemporary times anymore. And it somehow doesn't fit in with the Church today. According to this way of thinking, the message of the Gospel is a nice program of action/behaviour charged a bit by ethics that encourages and calls us to be good to each other, good first of all to other minorities and the poor, good to the world, good to refugees and neighbours. And whoever does this at least to some

extent is already a Christian, or some kind of Christian, someone who claims to know what the Church teaches and somehow participates in it himself.« (Oster 2015)

Although the modern proclamation of the word of God in a secularized environment cannot fail to exhibit courage in exposing all manifestations of idolatry and a false image of God, preachers should emphasize the positive message of saving and liberating love of the Creator for man. It is a mistake to concentrate on apologetics that tries to justify the idea of God and His actual image only on the level of natural proof.

According to the authors of the document *Lettera ai cercatori di Dio*, prepared by the Italian Bishops' Conference, people in search of God do not believe in some private and uncertain life project or in something that gives only a certain sense of security, but in someone who should become the only love of their life. Moreover, discovering God consists of finding a place of silence »in which, by hearing God's word, true hope springs from the coming of God into the human heart« (LcD 2,6).

Preaching to the secularised should refer to the anthropological method, i.e. the description of human experience, the failure of human searches and solutions, and the solution to the problem by opening up to Christian revelation. Such preaching of the word of God aims at making the listeners long for God. The preacher should make their listeners aware that the discovery of the true God helps understand the actual image of man, and the caricatured images of God are a real obstacle to the full development of humanity.

According to Joachim Wanke, »Talking about God is not an instructive expression or indoctrination, but it is discovering the pre-existing, conscious or unconscious relationship of every human being with God« (2012). God is sometimes too quickly reduced to just a formula that explains everything. In principle, in this way, all biblical and old Christian statements about God's transcendence, about His otherness, are not taken seriously enough. You cannot pray to the formula; you cannot cry in front of it; you cannot even curse it. At most, it can be considered false, denied or redundant. Ordinary Christian piety is still far from the radicalism of the Old Testament psalmist, who complained about God, protested against Him, and sometimes doubted Him as well (Wanke 2012). God is not an abstract principle or a precursor who turned his back on the world. He is the writer of salvation, the God of covenant and life. The preacher should deliver the message that the infinitely sublime God makes a covenant with people and makes them his allies and associates (Zollitsch 2016, 270–272). Although God does not fit into the orderly grammatical definition, the preachers of the word of God must convey the critical truth about the mystery of God as a living God who wants to give every human being everlasting life. This message should be one of the central preaching themes (Richardson and Lovel 2011, 206).

### 3. Jesus Christ – the Only Saviour of Man

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The object of the Christian faith is Jesus Christ, who became man for the salvation of people. At the beginning of being a Christian, there is an encounter with the event, with the person who gives life a new perspective and thus a decisive direction. The specificity of Christianity is related to the fact that God is the author of the idea of ‚getting closer‘ to man. The centre of Christian doctrine lies in the fact that the direction of the salvific initiative is top-down: God becomes ever closer to man, and thus, man becomes ever closer to God. This fact distinguishes Christianity from most of the great religions in which there are so-called grassroots movements where people are trying to enter the sphere of the sacred.

Christoph Theobald points to the need for a renewed interest in Jesus. He justifies it with three principal reasons. First of all, thanks to the figure of Jesus, history gains an eschatological and holistic aspect. Second, on the way of Jesus to death and resurrection, man gains the opportunity to understand his mortal existence. Finally, modern man lives in the age of the universal experience of death, which is interpreted in various ways; he lives in the age of paradox (Theobald 2002, 435–400).

Jesus Christ is at the heart of ecclesial preaching. Those who believe in Him testify of Him. By proclaiming the Gospel, the Church leads to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. This knowledge is possible only in an environment of faith. This, in turn, does not equate with the intellectual knowledge about the incarnate Son of God but consists in adhering to Him with love and confirming communion with Him with our life. It is an existential faith that shapes the whole life of the followers of the Crucified and Risen Lord. The teaching content is the mystery of Christ and everything else to the extent that it is related to this mystery.

In the apostolic exhortation on proclaiming the Gospel in the modern world, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis emphasizes that the centre of the proclamation of the word of God and its essence are always the same: »the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ.« (EG 11) At the same time, Pope Francis affirms that »there can be no authentic evangelization without explicitly proclaiming that Jesus is Lord« and that Jesus Christ is the basis for proclaiming the word of God in all evangelization activities. The main priority of the Church’s activity should be »the joyful, patient and gradual proclamation of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ« (110).

In the constitutions of the Second Vatican Council, there are two basic methods of presenting Jesus Christ. In the dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, *Dei verbum*, the dogmatic constitution on the Church’s *Lumen gentium* and the constitution on the sacred liturgy, the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, one can see the deductive-theological method of presenting Jesus Christ. In contrast, in the pastoral constitution of the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et spes*, the inductive-anthropological method dominates. Thus, in *Dei verbum*, Jesus Christ is shown as the chief Revelator of God; in *Lumen Gentium*, the ecclesiological image of Christ dominates; and in the *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the perception of the mystical

Christ, present and active in the liturgy, comes to the fore. A slightly different image of Jesus Christ is dominant in *Gaudium et spes*. This constitution, addressed not only to believers, presents Christ as help in solving man's existential problems. This man can be understood, and he can understand himself only in the mystery of the incarnate word. The method of proclaiming Christ used in *Gaudium et spes* should be an inspiration for those who preach the word of God in an environment of non-believers and secularized people. Proclaiming Christ in a secularized environment, according to Pope Francis, consists of showing that »to believe in and to follow Him is not only something right and proper but also something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendour and profound joy, even amid difficulties« (167).

For many contemporary listeners, both unbelievers and weak believers, Christ is a respectable friend of the poor and the oppressed, a great master of the spiritual life, and even the founder of a religion. At the same time, he is rejected as God, who must be trusted and whose teaching one should surrender. The preacher who preaches the word of God in a secularized environment should encourage their listeners not only to accept the truth about Christ but above all to accept the very person of Christ. The recipient of the proclamation should hear the truth that Christianity has a different salvific value than other religions and that Jesus is not only one of the founders of the religion, but above all, He is the only Saviour of man.

#### **4. Answering Human Desires and Questions**

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The drawback, still noticeable in contemporary preaching, is clothing the truth of God in precise verbal formulas and dogmatic definitions and teaching faith by mastering catechismal truths (Halik 2009, 130). Instead of focusing on the answers, the preacher should teach to ask questions. According to Paul Michael Zulehner, preachers often »answer questions that no one asks, while on topics that people are really bothered by, they say nothing« (2006, 5).

Understanding the existential and spiritual needs of people living today allows us to find the concept of preaching the word of God that is most adequate for today's conditions. The preacher of the word of God must make an effort to get to know another person and take into account human existence and refer to frequent human experiences in their preaching. The Letter to those who seek God reminds us of the truth that the Christian community is the place where special attention is paid to the most subjective and personal aspects of human existence. The Christian community emphasizes the meaning of human life discovered thanks to answers to the most fundamental questions, including the ones about joy, suffering, love, the value of work, and celebration (LcD 1,5). One of the fundamental tasks of today's preachers of the word of God is to try to answer these questions.

When proclaiming God's message in a secularized environment, the preacher should refer to the content of the Christian message that meets today's cultural situation and contemporary man's search. The preacher of the word of God should

arouse in their listeners the need for self-determination and personal development. In the Christian sense, this development means creating an atmosphere of freedom and participation. Christ is a model of responsible and fruitful use of the gift of freedom. In times of moral relativism and uncertainty, pointing to this pattern in preaching is a real help in making important life decisions. True freedom allows one to achieve happiness and helps one to know the goodness and turn towards it.

The issue of love is fundamental in every environment of proclaiming the word of God. Nowadays, there is an excellent risk of falsifying the accurate and complete concept of love because it is easy to go to extremes in defining it. As part of a rationalist attitude, the true meaning of love is underestimated because man is judged only in terms of his technical and rational abilities. Meanwhile, man needs unconditional love to survive all competitions and only be given by God, who loved man immeasurably. That is why it is necessary to proclaim to modern man the love that has its source in God, the love most fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Discovering true love leads to the question of its source, about God.

Another issue that should be the preaching content in a secularized environment is the problem of the meaning of life. Man »remains a being that is incomprehensible to himself. His life is meaningless if love is not revealed to him. Therefore, Christ the Redeemer »fully reveals man to man himself« /.../ In Him man finds his true greatness, dignity and value of his humanity« (John Paul II 1979, 10). Finding the meaning of life allows a person to gain inner peace and, consequently, happiness. The preacher's task is to open the listeners to the Good News, to Christ, who reveals to each person the truth about themselves and their condition and frees them from uncertainty and a sense of nonsense (Lucas 1998, 12).

Another human desire, which should also be the subject of preaching, is happiness. This desire is vividly present in everyday human life. For the believer, Jesus Christ is authentic and genuine happiness. The life of a Christian is that of a happy person who experiences communion with the Crucified and Risen One. Human experience also includes experiencing illness and suffering. The Christian faith helps the suffering person entrust this experience – not entirely understandable to the incomprehensible God. For believers know: »I have someone to whom I can shout my helplessness. The cross is not just an object that aches, but it is an object to which I can look up.« (Zollitsch 2016, 272) On the one hand, the experience of sickness and suffering may result in the verification of the current view on one's own life and openness to the influence of the Gospel, and on the other hand, rejection of suffering and rebellion leads to breaking the relationship with God. In this case, the proclamation of the word of God aims to show Jesus as the first physician able to heal the body and the soul (Busch 2009, 42–43).

In his speech to the Roman Curia delivered on December 21<sup>st</sup> 2009, Pope Benedict XVI stated:

»I think that today the Church too should open a sort of 'Court of the Gentiles' in which people may in some way latch on to God, without

knowing Him and before gaining access to His mystery, at whose service the inner life of the Church stands. Today, in addition to interreligious dialogue, there should be a dialogue with those to whom religion is something foreign, to whom God is unknown, and who nevertheless do not want to be left merely Godless, but rather to draw near to Him, albeit as the Unknown.« (Benedict XVI 2009)

In response to this appeal, the Pontifical Council for Culture created a special structure called the 'Courts of the Gentiles'. This initiative aims to create meetings between believers and non-believers and engage in dialogue on common problems of humanity, such as the meaning of life, good and evil, the role of love, the meaning of suffering, and human rights and justice. It was found that the best platform for the dialogue between believers and non-believers is the three transcendentals: truth, goodness, and beauty. They are universal human values, and every human being is looking for them, no matter what they believe or do not believe. One of the initiatives preceding the so-called 'Court of the Gentiles' was the meetings of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini under the auspices of 'The Chair of the Non-Believers' (Martini 2015).

Pope Francis also draws attention to the necessity of proclaiming these values in preaching. He observes that the preacher should base each homily on truth, beauty and goodness, using images to encourage listeners to works of love in everyday life (EG 142; 146). The above issues should be the content of the preaching message addressed to secularized listeners.

Objective truth about the world and man, including the issues of the origin and existence of the world and man and his desires and aspirations, is this proclamation's actual content. Anthropological issues, such as a strong desire to feel that life is meaningful and happy, and the need to fight evil and suffering in the world, are additional components of this content. Dialogue conducted within the 'Court of the Gentiles' also covers the universal problem of good, understood most often as helping and being in solidarity with the needy, and caring about peace and social justice. This subject should be taken up by preachers of the word of God in a secularized environment. These preachers should also refer in the content of their preaching to the third universal value taken up in the 'Court of the Gentiles', which is beauty and its importance for people prejudiced against the Church. Secularized people experiencing a crisis of faith have the right to learn about God seeking man. The preacher's task is to create the so-called foreground of faith, a space of sensitization to values leading to God, such as good, truth, beauty, silence, nature, art, and the culture of the word.

Human desire and questions also touch the essential area, which is God. These questions are asked by both believers experiencing crises of faith and non-believers. Benedict XVI simultaneously addressed both of these groups:

»Those of you who are non-believers challenge believers in a particular way to live in a way consistent with the faith they profess and by your

rejection of any distortion of religion that would make it unworthy of man. Those of you who are believers long to tell your friends that the treasure dwelling within you is meant to be shared, it raises questions, it calls for reflection. The question of God is not a menace to society, it does not threaten a truly human life! The question of God must not be absent from the other great questions of our time.« ( 2011)

The question of God's existence, the possibility of establishing contact with Him, and the possible influence of God on human life have been bothering people for centuries. This is a characteristic trait of a man who asks about the other side of his life. Also, a secularized society asks about the sources from which visions of humanity, mutual trust, social ties and interpersonal relations are derived (Wanke 2012). The question of the presence of God in human life, in history, and the world takes time to discover the supernatural dimension of human existence. People who seek God are not looking for an undefined life project and a sense of security, but someone who can become the greatest love of their life (LcD 1,5). For God is not only an easy answer to human needs but a response to the desire to meet the eternal Other who helps us understand ourselves.

Joachim Wanke points to an example of an interest in God in eastern Germany:

»This can also be observed in our country: where we cut off from religious traditions, we long for continuity and being at home. When happiness in this life becomes fragile and barren, a new question arises as to what it is that actually satisfies. Where an ideologically tired society plunges into distrust and envy, there is a longing for honesty, for successful interpersonal contacts, for someone who can be trusted, for total devotion and adoration. Shadow can only be found in the presence of light. Hunger and thirst are especially troublesome when one senses the possibility of satisfying them /.../ Here is an outline of what it would essentially mean today to proclaim God in a society that is sometimes lost in doubt, suspicion and distrust: not a threat or intimidation, but an invitation to accept life and trust. This is the only way to overcome fear in life and ingrained distrust. Often, personal faith is more of a longing than a desire to understand and explain everything at all costs!« (2012)

Preaching the word of God to secularized people should begin with arousing a longing for God. An attempt should be made to reach a person's most profound questions and desires and define them precisely. Life without God is characterized by an existence »without a spiritual background«, »a kind of fear of the future«, which often makes »the image of tomorrow colourless and uncertain«, and causes fear rather than a desire for the future (John Paul II 2003, 7). Modern listeners of the word of God often experience dramatic fear and anxiety and the expectation of something or someone different. This expectation is realized in Christ, who gives meaning to human life and satisfies the deepest desires (Douglas J. Davies and Michael J. Thate 2017, 102).

Andreas Wollbold states that »speaking to listeners without delving deeper into and understanding their problems is the fastest-acting poison to a sermon. Therefore, every sermon should remain completely related to the listeners themselves and the specific situation, and it cannot disappear hastily and irretrievably in the theological clouds after a beautiful, but detached-from-life introduction.« (2017, 222) The homiletic literature points to five expectations of the modern listener of the word of God: rescue, especially in difficult life situations; opening to the future, that is, helping to see the way of life and indicating possible steps; critical time signal, ability to recognize the signs of the times; explanation of the situation in which the man found himself based on the biblical message; solidarity, that is, the accompaniment and compassion of a person and a Christian who does not have simple answers ready, but is aware of complex life situations. »Answering questions that no one asks, or catching the listeners' expectations and directing the conversation to the Gospel – it is between these alternatives that the success of the sermon is found and results from them.« (222)

Meeting the above expectations enables contemporary preachers to reach audiences living in a secularized environment. The preacher should lead the audience to a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and answer man's most fundamental questions and desires.

## Abbreviations

**CCC** – *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2012.

**EG** – Francis 2013 [Evangeli Gaudium].

**LcD** – Commissione Episcopale per la Dottrina della Fede 2009 [Lettera ai cercatori di Dio].

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