The term globalization refers not only to the opening up of economies to the world market, but also to the processes of rolling back frontiers and developing crossborder traffic, which are transforming our planet into a single, integrated, interconnected universe. How might Roman Catholicism fit into this increasingly interrelated and unified world? In attempting to answer this question, we shall take as a starting point the following paradox. On the one hand Roman Catholicism presents itself as a *world institution*: it is established in the most far-flung corners of the earth and organized on a scale that reflects its worldwide mission. On the other hand, globalization is producing a culture of autonomous units—against which the Roman system has fought unrelentingly for two centuries—which is increasingly removed from the integrated universe envisaged by Catholicism.

**Roman Catholicism, a “Religious World” at Loggerheads with the Ideals of the Modern World**

At the theological level, the Catholic vision for the world is rooted in the universalist project, which is common to all Christian denominations and central to Christianity itself. Implicit in the founding principle of Christianity, namely that the possibility of salvation is extended to all mankind, irrespective of gender, race, nationality or social standing, is the utopian vision that the religious community will spread worldwide, as mankind heeds the call to conversion. To take the Gospel to the ends of the earth and make disciples of all men is the supreme missionary imperative and Christian duty. Baptism makes every believer responsible for passing on the good news he himself has received and this spiritual mission is inseparable from the witness required of the community into which he has been baptised. The quality of a community’s religious life is revealed both by the rectitude of its beliefs and practice and to
an even greater extent by its capacity to expand. Indeed its missionary
commitment is the quintessential mark of its Christian character.

Throughout history different Christian denominations have under-
stood and acted upon this missionary imperative in different ways. As
the classic typology drawn up by Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch shows,
the action taken depends on the prevailing conception of the way in
which new converts are to be incorporated into the community. In the
case of the “sect”, proselytizing measures are directed towards adult
individuals who are capable of responding personally to its teaching
by converting and committing themselves to a full Christian life. The
missionary perspective of the “church” on the other hand calls for
the extension of the community. The church seeks the greatest pos-
sible inclusion of groups, families and generations, who are gradually
educated in the faith within its fold.

These two expansion strategies correspond to different ecclesiologies
which reflect different conceptions of the relationship between Christian
institutions and their cultural and political environment. Whereas the
“sect” prefers retirement, avoids contact with the surrounding world and
manifestly refuses to come to terms with profane values, the “church”
chooses to enter into a relationship with worldly culture and to connect
(in various ways) with the civil authorities.

With its two distinctive features: a particular sense of mission and a
(sometimes controversial) relationship with worldly culture and politics,
Roman Catholicism may be regarded as an almost perfect embodi-
ment of the “church” type. It should moreover be borne in mind that
the establishment in this world of an ecclesiastical empire, in which
the mission to place all peoples under Christ’s law can be fully real-
ized, has been a perennial ambition of the Roman Church. It is not
without paradox and conflict, given that the church must abide by
the evangelical imperative to distinguish between the spiritual and the
political spheres.

This is where the church enters into an intractable conflict with the
founding logic of modernity, which fundamentally questions the fitness
of religion to serve as a common frame of reference worldwide. For
more than two centuries this quarrel has been the essential feature of
the relationship between Catholicism and the modern world. It pits
two irreconcilable worlds against each other: on the one side there is
a universe governed by scientific and technical rationality, in which
the assertion of individual and institutional autonomy undermines
the theological and political foundations of the social order and leads
inexorably to the consignment of religion to the private sphere; on the