



Settimo Cielo



di Sandro Magister

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Gnosticism, an Ancient Heresy. But Here's How It's Reappearing Today

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The language of Pope Francis has already been the object of numerous analyses, which converge in recognizing his great communicative efficacy. But there are two epithets that he often applies to his adversaries within the Church, and yet are incomprehensible to most: "Gnostic" and "Pelagian."

Not only that. Even the few who understand the ordinary significance of these two epithets find that many times Jorge Mario Bergoglio uses them contrary to their meaning.

It is breathtaking, for example, that he - in the book-length interview with the French sociologist Dominique Wolton - should apply the term "Pelagian" to none other than the mathematician, philosopher, and man of faith of the seventeenth century **Blaise Pascal**, who was the polar opposite of this and wrote that masterpiece which is "Les Provinciales" precisely in order to unmask the Pelagianism, the real thing, of many Jesuits of his time.

In the agenda-setting document of his pontificate, the exhortation "**Evangelii Gaudium**," Francis dedicated an entire paragraph, 94, to what these two epithets mean to him.

But since then he has always used them in such an offhanded and interchangeable way as to induce even the congregation for the doctrine of the faith - in the recent letter to the bishops "**Placuit Deo**" - to bring a bit of order to the matter, stating in what really consist the two "deviations" now present in the Church "that resemble certain aspects of two ancient heresies, Pelagianism and Gnosticism."

But once again without any appreciable effect on the elocution of Bergoglio, who never names the targets of his invective but lets everyone imagine who it may be, for example in the person of Cardinal **Robert Sarah**, he too covertly accused by the pope of "Gnosticism" and another time of "Pelagianism," in the same way - entirely undeserved and improper - as a Pascal.

The following commentary is an attempt to bring clarity to the use of one of the two terms - "Gnosticism" - by an American theologian already known to the readers of Settimo Cielo, who had the opportunity to appreciate the **open letter** that he wrote to Pope Francis last summer: Thomas G. Weinandy, a member of the international theological commission consolidated into the Vatican congregation for the doctrine of the faith.

Fr. Weinandy shows how the dispute over "neo-Gnosticism" is not at all marginal, because it affects the transition underway in the Catholic Church, a transition set in motion by Pope Francis and feared and criticized by some, and by others eagerly pursued.

The commentary appeared on June 7 on the American website "**The Catholic Thing**" and is reproduced here in its entirety.

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GNOSTICISM TODAY

by **Thomas G. Weinandy, OFM, Cap.**

There is much discussion today concerning the presence of a new Gnosticism within the Catholic Church. Some of what has been written is helpful, but much of what has been described as a revival of this heresy has little to do with its ancient antecedent. Moreover, attributions of this ancient heresy to various factions within contemporary Catholicism are generally misdirected. To bring some clarity to this discussion of neo-Gnosticism first demands a clear understanding of the old form.

Ancient Gnosticism came in various forms and expressions, often quite convoluted, but some essential principles are discernible:

- First, Gnosticism holds a radical dualism: "matter" is the source of all evil, and "spirit" is the divine origin of all that is good.

- Second, human beings are composed of both matter (the body) and spirit (which provides access to the divine).

- Third, "salvation" consists in obtaining true knowledge ("gnosis"), an enlightenment that allows progress from the material world of evil to the spiritual realm, and ultimately communion with the immaterial supreme deity.

- Fourth, diverse "Gnostic Redeemers" were proposed, each claiming to possess such knowledge, and to provide access to this "salvific" enlightenment.

In light of the above, human beings fall into three categories:

1) the "sarkic" or "fleshly" people, are so imprisoned in the material or bodily world of evil that they are incapable of receiving "salvific knowledge";

2) the "psychic" or "soulish", are partially confined to the "fleshly" realm and partially initiated into the spiritual domain. (Within "Christian Gnosticism," these are the ones who live by mere "faith," for they do not possess the fullness of divine knowledge. They are not fully enlightened and so must rely on what they "believe.");

3) finally, there are people capable of full enlightenment, the "Gnostics", for they possess the fullness of divine knowledge. By means of their saving knowledge, they can completely extricate themselves from the evil material world and ascend to the divine.

They live and are saved not by "faith" but by "knowledge."

Compared to ancient Gnosticism, what is now being proposed as neo-Gnosticism within contemporary Catholicism appears confused and ambiguous, as well as misdirected. Some Catholics are accused of neo-Gnosticism because they allegedly believe that they are saved because they adhere to inflexible and lifeless "doctrines" and strictly observe a rigid and merciless "moral code." They claim to "know" the truth and, thus, demand that it must be held and, most importantly, obeyed. These "neo-Gnostic Catholics" are supposedly not open to the fresh movement of the Spirit within the contemporary Church. The latter is often referred to as "the new paradigm."

Admittedly, we all know Catholics who act superior to others, who flaunt their fuller understanding of dogmatic or moral theology to accuse others of laxity. There is nothing new about such righteous judgmentalism. This sinful superiority, however, falls squarely under the category of pride and is not in itself a form of Gnosticism.

It would be right to call this neo-Gnosticism only if those so accused were proposing a "new salvific knowledge," a new enlightenment that differs from Scripture as traditionally understood, and from what is authentically taught by the living magisterial tradition.

Such a claim cannot be made against "doctrines" that, far from being lifeless and abstract truths, are the marvelous expressions of the central realities of Catholic faith - the Trinity, Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, the real substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Jesus' law of love for God and neighbor reflected in the Ten Commandments, etc. These "doctrines" define what the Church was, is, and always will be. They are the doctrines that make her one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

Moreover, these doctrines and commandments are not some esoteric way of life that enslaves one to irrational and merciless laws, imposed from without by a tyrannical authority. Rather, these very "commandments" were given by God, in his merciful love, to humankind in order to ensure a holy god-like life.

Jesus, the Father's incarnate Son, has further revealed to us the manner of life we are to live in expectation of his kingdom. When God tells us what we must never do, he is protecting us from evil, the evil that can destroy our human lives - lives he created in his image and likeness.

Jesus saved us from the devastation of sin through his passion, death, and resurrection, and he poured out his Holy Spirit precisely to empower us to live genuinely human lives. To promote this way of life is not to propose a new salvific knowledge. In ancient Gnosticism, people of faith - bishops, priests, theologians, and laity - would be called psychics. Gnostics would look down upon them precisely because they cannot claim any unique or esoteric "knowledge." They are forced to live by faith in God's revelation as understood and faithfully transmitted by the Church.

Those who mistakenly accuse others of neo-Gnosticism propose - when confronted with the nitty-gritty of real-life doctrinal and moral issues - the need to seek out what God would have them do, personally. People are encouraged to discern, on their own, the best course of action, given the moral dilemma they face in their own existential context - what they are capable of doing at this moment in time. In this way, the individual's own conscience, his or her personal communion with the divine, determines what the moral requirements are in the individual's personal circumstances. What Scripture teaches, what Jesus stated, what the Church conveys through her living magisterial tradition are superseded by a higher "knowledge," an advanced "illumination."

If there is any new Gnostic paradigm in the Church today, it would seem to be found here. To propose this new paradigm is to claim to be truly "in-the-know," to have special access to what God is saying to us as individuals here and now even if it goes beyond and may even contradict what He has revealed to everyone else in Scripture and tradition.

At the very least, no one claiming this knowledge should ridicule as neo-Gnostics those who live merely by "faith" in God's revelation as brought forward by the Church's tradition.

I hope that all this brings some clarity to the present ecclesial discussion over contemporary "Catholic" Gnosticism by placing it within the proper historical context. Gnosticism cannot be used as an epithet against those "unenlightened" faithful who merely seek to act, with the help of God's grace, as the Church's divinely inspired teaching calls them to act.

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