

Settimo Cielo

di Sandro Magister

21 dic

Two Popes, Two Agendas. For Benedict the Priority Is God, for Francis Man



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What is striking in the magisterium and in the main acts of this latest phase of Francis's pontificate is the eclipsing of that "overriding priority" which for his predecessor Benedict XVI is the "overriding priority" more than ever before, at a time "when in vast areas of the world the faith is in danger of dying out like a flame which no longer has fuel."

That is, the priority - as the pope had written in his March 10, 2009 **letter** to the bishops - "of making God present in this world and giving men access to God. Not to any sort of god, but to that God who spoke on Sinai, to that God whose face we recognize in love driven to the very end, in Jesus crucified and risen."

Christmas is approaching. But of the God who was born in Bethlehem there is only the slightest trace in Francis's latest encyclical, "**Brothers all**," to the point that an eminent philosopher like Salvatore Natoli has instead seen in it the image of a Jesus who is "nothing other than a man," whose noble mission was simply to show men that "in their mutual self-giving they have the possibility of becoming 'gods' in the manner of Spinoza: 'homo homini deus'."

Also startling is the complete silence on God in the **video message** with which Francis launched - and is now putting **into action** in conjunction with the United Nations - the "Global Compact on Education," an ambitious plan he has offered to "all public figures" engaged in the field of education worldwide, to whatever religion they may belong.

In the plan, the watchwords are wholly and solely secular. The dominant formula is "new humanism," with its trappings of "common home," "universal solidarity," "fraternity," "convergence," "welcome" ... Neither more nor less than for that other worldwide network of "Scholas Occurrentes" created by Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Argentina and then promoted by him, as pope, to a foundation of pontifical right based in Vatican City.

And the same thing is happening in that other pontifical initiative entitled "**Economy of Francesco**," in which the pope, putting on the habit of his homonymous saint of Assisi, proposes to the world nothing less than "a pact to change the current economy," and indeed to radically overthrow it in the wake of the "popular movements," only to select just afterward as partner in the initiative the "**Council for Inclusive Capitalism**," meaning the magnates of the Ford Foundation, Johnson & Johnson, Mastercard, Bank of America, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the like.

And God? Pope Bergoglio's critics can always be answered - as has been **written** - with the claim that "the whole traditional Trinitarian and Christological doctrine" is "presupposed" in him, and "does not necessarily have to be repeated verbatim and in full."

But this was certainly not the choice of Benedict XVI. Who also as pope emeritus, in his "**Notes**" offered to the reigning pope in the run-up to the summit on sexual abuse in February 2019, once again strongly affirmed that one must "put God first, not take him for granted."

As a matter of fact, in those "Notes" Joseph Ratzinger once again pointed to forgetfulness of God as the ultimate cause of the Church's current crisis, in the sphere of sex but not only there.

Bringing back up and commenting on this last capital text from Ratzinger - including his written response to the objections of the German theologian Birgit Aschmann - is a recently released multi-author book edited by Livio Melina, former president of the pontifical John Paul II institute on marriage and family, and Tracey Rowland, the Australian theologian awarded this year with the "Joseph Ratzinger" prize:

> AA.VV., "**Chiesa sotto accusa. Un commento agli 'Appunti' di Benedetto XVI, Edizioni Cantagalli, Siena, 2020.**

The following is a passage taken from the first chapter of the book, signed by Cardinal Camillo Ruini. It is a very appropriate reading as the birth of Jesus draws near. The subtitles are editorial.

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"DON'T PRESUPPOSE GOD, PRIORITIZE HIM"

The primacy of God in Joseph Ratzinger's theology

by Camillo Ruini

The key question that Joseph Ratzinger addresses in his theology is that of the truth of Christianity. We can summarize it like this: the ancient Church opted for the God of the philosophers - specifically of Greek philosophy - while distancing itself from the gods of the religions. This choice, already prepared in the Old Testament and particularly in its Greek translation referred to as of the "Seventy," highlighted the truth of Christianity, the truth that Greek philosophy was looking for, while the pagan religions appeared to be increasingly devoid of it. That is, Christianity presented itself as the true philosophy. As Tertullian masterfully stated, "Christ claimed to be the truth, not custom." This was a matter of a strongly missionary choice, which made the faith understandable to all.

At the same time the ancient Church kept intact the difference that distinguishes the biblical God from the God of the philosophers: the biblical God is the God who has a name, who can be approached and prayed to; he is therefore the eminently personal God with whom we can relate. He is the God who is not pure thought but is inseparably thought and love, the God who cares about each one of us, who goes in search of the lost sheep and rejoices over the sinner who repents; indeed, the God who takes our sins upon himself and thus saves us. Unlike the God of the philosophers who relates only to himself, he is the God who is absolute but at the same time is relationship, omnipotence that creates, sustains, and loves that which is distinct from him.

The option for the God of the philosophers, while not reducing him to this God, allowed Christianity to overcome the divorce between rationality and religion that plagued the ancient world. In fact the God of reason is now a God who can be the object of prayer, the God of the philosophers is now the savior God that man needs. In Ratzinger's view, the option for the God of philosophers, together with the reconciliation between rationality and religion, is at the basis of Christianity's victory in the ancient world.

REASON, FAITH, AND LIFE IN ANCIENT CHRISTIANITY

A second reason, of equal importance, for this victory consisted in the moral validity of Christianity. What God demands of men coincides with that which is good by nature and which every man carries written in his heart, so that when it is presented to him he recognizes it as a good, according to the words of the apostle Paul about the pagans who, while not having the Law, "by nature act according to the Law" (Rom 2:14-15).

In this way the fundamental critical unity with philosophical rationality present in the Christian concept of God is confirmed and embodied in the critical unity with philosophical morality, specifically Stoic. But also, just as Christianity went beyond the limits of the philosophical concept of God, so also did ethical theory turn into a community moral practice lived and put to work, thanks in particular to the concentration of all morality in the twofold commandment of love of God and love of neighbor.

We can therefore say that Christianity was convincing by virtue of the bond of faith with reason and the orientation of action towards "caritas," loving care for the suffering, the poor, and the weak, beyond any difference in social condition. In other words, the force that transformed Christianity into a world religion consisted in the synthesis between reason, faith, and life, a synthesis that is condensed in the expression "religio vera." [...]

THE RUPTURE OF THE MODERN AGE

The synthesis between reason, faith, and life that decreed the victory of Christianity long remained alive and effective in the changing historical situations. In recent centuries, however, this synthesis has gradually weakened and is no longer convincing. In today's Europe rationality and Christianity are often regarded as contradictory and mutually exclusive. Thus Christianity has come to find itself in a profound crisis, based on the crisis of its claim to truth. Ratzinger wonders why this has happened and what specifically has changed, both in Christianity and in rationality.

As far as Christianity is concerned, the answer is that contrary to its nature it had become tradition and state religion, while the voice of reason had been excessively domesticated. It is the merit of the modern Enlightenment to have re-proposed some of the original values of Christianity and to have given reason back its own voice. Vatican Council II highlighted anew the profound correspondence between Christianity and the Enlightenment, seeking to arrive at a true reconciliation between the Church and modernity, which is the great heritage to be safeguarded on both sides.

However, the main and decisive change came from the side of rationality. The relational unity between reason and faith, to which Thomas Aquinas had given a systematic form, has been increasingly torn apart through the main stages of modern thought, up to today's cultural situation, characterized by the primacy of science and technology: there is a widespread claim that the only truly valid knowledge is that of science. In this context, the theory of evolution has come to take on the role of a sort of worldview or "first philosophy," which on the one hand would be rigorously scientific and on the other would constitute, at least potentially, a universal explanation or theory of all reality, beyond which further questions about the origin and nature of things would no longer be necessary or even legitimate. The statement "In the beginning was the Logos" is therefore overturned, setting up as the origin of all matter-energy chance and necessity. The final outcome is therefore atheism.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE TRUTH

In today's culture such positions are contested from various directions because they disregard the intrinsic limits of scientific knowledge. But Ratzinger observes that, due to that great change on account of which, from Kant onwards, our reason is no longer considered capable of knowing reality in itself, and above all transcendent reality, the alternative to scientism with the most cultural support today is not the primacy of the Logos, but the idea that "latet omne verum," all truth is hidden, that is, that the true reality of God remains completely inaccessible and unknowable to us: in this case the final outcome is agnosticism. This restores citizenship in the Western world to the approach to the divine typical of the great Eastern religions or worldviews, similar to that which, in the first centuries of the Christian era, Neoplatonism had tried to propose as an alternative to Christianity.

On the other hand, just as the Christian faith is embodied in a precise form of life and ethics, similarly the forms of rationality that tend to replace Christianity are expressed in concrete ethical guidelines. If "all truth is hidden," on a practical level the fundamental value becomes that of tolerance. If, on the other hand, the theory that explains everything is evolutionism, the basis of ethics will be natural selection, the struggle for survival and the victory of the strongest.

FOR A COMEBACK OF REASON

For Ratzinger, the true objective of this analysis is naturally to seek the avenues of a new agreement of reason and freedom with Christianity, which means proposing the saving truth of the God of Jesus Christ to the reason of our time.

To this end it is first of all necessary to "widen the scope of rationality." The limitation of reason to what can be experienced and calculated is right and necessary in the context of the natural sciences and constitutes the key to their unceasing development, but if it is universalized and absolutized it becomes unsustainable, inhuman, and ultimately contradictory. In fact, man could no longer rationally inquire into the essential realities of his life, its origin and destiny, moral good and evil, but would have to leave these decisive problems to a sentiment detached from reason. Thus, fatally, the human subject is reduced to a product of nature, as such not free: there is therefore a complete overturning of the point of departure of modern culture, which consisted in the vindication of man and his freedom.

Exploring the topic, Ratzinger observes that the real alternative we are facing is whether reason is an accidental and secondary product of the irrational, or is instead at the origin of everything. The intelligibility of nature, which is the presupposition of scientific knowledge itself, requires the existence of a creative intelligence and thus demonstrates that the fundamental conviction of the Christian faith remains valid even today, "In principio erat Verbum."

As regards agnosticism in particular, we must ask ourselves whether this is concretely achievable. The question of God is not in fact purely theoretical but eminently practical, it has consequences in all areas of our life. Even if in theory I adhere to agnosticism, in practice I am still forced to choose between two alternatives: either to live as if God does not exist, practically adopting an atheist position, or to live as if God exists and is the decisive reality of my existence, adopting a de facto position of belief. The question of God is therefore unavoidable and agnosticism turns out to be unattainable. Attempts to do without God are therefore doomed to failure, both theoretically and practically: only by according God the first place can our reason recover its expansiveness. [...]

IN A "STRANGE SEMI-DARKNESS," THE ADVENT OF GOD

But the appreciation of reason in Ratzinger's theology is by no means of a rationalistic type. On the contrary, he maintains that neo-scholasticism's attempt to demonstrate the truth of the premises of faith - the "praeambula fidei" - through a reasoning independent of faith itself has failed, and that any similar attempts are doomed to fail. In fact, especially in the current cultural climate, man remains a prisoner of a "strange semi-darkness" that weighs on the question of the eternal realities: in order for a true relationship with God to arise, God himself must take the initiative to seek man out and address him.

Reason alone is therefore not enough, it is not self-sufficient. Just as faith needs reason, so also reason needs faith in order to be healed as reason and to be brought back to itself, in order to see clearly again.

Building a new relationship between faith and reason is the great task that lies ahead of us. A task that, despite all the current difficulties, we can face with confidence because "only the God who has made himself finite in order to tear through our finiteness and lead it to the expansiveness of his infinity is capable of meeting the demands of our being." Once again the primacy of God and of the salvific initiative undertaken by him in Jesus Christ is all of a piece with the vindication of the truth of Christianity.

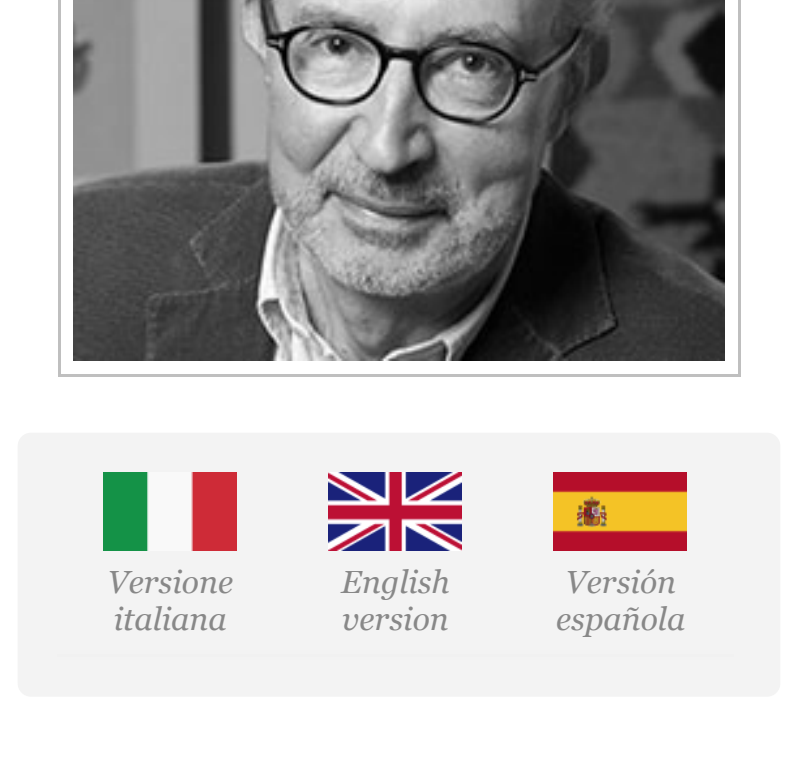
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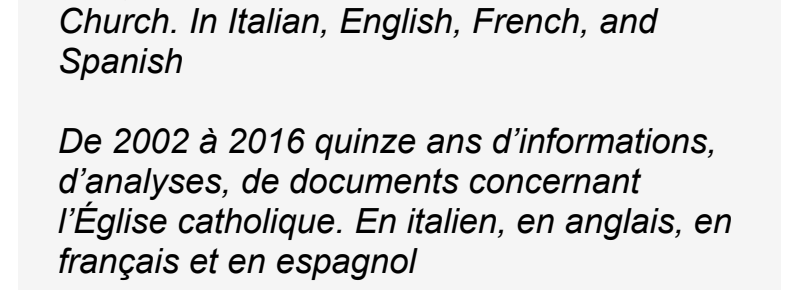
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