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IS IT STILL REASONABLE TO BELIEVE IN GOD?

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By now, "Tonalestate" has become a summer event: during which one pauses to reflect! I thank you for asking me to take part in this exercise, which also gives me personally much joy and spiritual in-put.

This year the theme proposed for reflection is *reason*, a theme that current events make particularly timely. In fact, the news we read in the daily newspapers or watch on television, challenges us. We live in a violent world that divides and kills. A precarious world where anything can happen, just think of the danger terrorism represents.

It is difficult to foresee how the twenty-first century will evolve. Many political leaders are looking for ideas and many of our fellow human beings are wondering if there is a control room.

One wonders if the States will be able to guarantee society safety and safeguard creation.

In this context such questions arise as: can we believe in God in this world? Can one believe in man? I should like to address these questions.

In reality, we are in a totally paradoxical situation. This technological world, which believes solely in terms of utility, is also a world in which cultural and religious pluralism, the privatization of religion, and the failure to transmit values and models, has seen both a come-back of the "sacred dimension" and a certain transcendence. One should also take into account the presence and activism of an often uninhibited Islam.

Even though religious practice, at least in Western societies, is declining, it is increasingly clear that one cannot understand today's world without the religions.

Christians belong to this world, this world that God loves, in which God placed them and in which they must flourish. They recognize themselves primarily as creatures and therefore dependent on an Other. A creature called to see God: "The glory of God is the living man, but the life of man is the vision of God" (Saint Irenaeus). Man is a finite creature, inhabited by an infinite vocation. Or, as we say in the "Third Eucharistic Prayer": "Our eyes will see the face of God and we will be like Him".

Here we have two visions of man and the world that can lead to comparison and dialogue. Indeed, some people wonder if in today's world "it is reasonable to believe in God the Father of all and who wants to sanctify us".

The followers of other religions too, seek to situate themselves in this "liquid" /fluctuating ? society. It is noteworthy that it was the Muslim religion to favour the return of God to the stage, years ago, by asking for respect for believers, public areas for rituals and the construction of mosques.

Because of the precariousness that threatens our lives — just think of the wars being waged, large and small, pollution, the financial crisis following the breakdown of the great economic systems of the last century — men and women of this generation are once again asking themselves the fundamental questions about the meaning of life and death.

Many are perturbed at what the amazing current scientific breakthroughs might result in, if poorly oriented and poorly controlled. Perhaps we have forgotten that the human person is the only creature who asks questions and interrogates him/herself, and is aware that he/she must die. Un-

fortunately, the human being is also capable of perpetrating the worst atrocities in the world — think for example of the barbarity taking place in the Middle East — actions animals do not do. It is conscience — the faculty to reflect on one's own destiny, on the meaning of life and death — that distinguishes man from the vegetable and animal kingdoms. Man is able to access Pascal's three well-known categories: the order of the body, the order of spirits, based on the power of reason, and the order of charity, based on faith and the heart. Religion, which is not a particular moment in history but appertains to the nature of man, can shed light and help answer Immanuel Kant's three fundamental questions: "What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope?"

It is interesting to recall that, the Second Vatican Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate* on interreligious dialogue, already identified man's state in the preamble thus: "Men look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence. The problems that weigh heavily on the hearts of men are the same today as in the ages past. What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is upright behaviour, and what is sinful? Where does suffering originate, and what end does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found? What happens at death" (n. 1).

We cannot forget that, starting from the eighteenth century, at least in Europe, the conviction arose that faith and human reason were incompatible. This current of thought was to produce the philosophy of the Enlightenment, according to which reason can gain access to the truth on its own. Natural morality, tolerance, deism, for some even atheism, suggest that man is self-sufficient.

Furthermore, with the considerable progress of the sciences, the great geographical discoveries and the development of travel and missions, the unresolved social crises ..., all this made many think that Christianity, with its dogmas and its moral code, did not contribute to progress. For many it was enough to think that all men belonged to the same humanity, were endowed with reason and, therefore, could easily follow a natural religion without dogmas, without fanaticism. Therefore there was no need to turn to the religions to ask for an explanation of the origin of the cosmos and of man, nor was it necessary to expect an afterlife beyond that on the Earth: "man is self-sufficient and is at the center of the universe. The supernatural is no longer needed". **CHECK**

On the level of ideas this view was to lead to Scientism (everything that human reason does not justify does not exist). On the level of concrete achievements it led to the French Revolution (to organize society *without God*). Then, in the twentieth century, two totalitarian regimes (Marxism-Leninism and Nazi ideology) followed each other, which aimed to organize society *against God*. Obviously the Church rejected such ideologies and argued that to exclude religion from reason is equivalent to amputating man created in the image of God.

I should like to mention what Pope Benedict XVI said on the occasion of his visit to the German Federal Parliament on 22 September 2011: "Where positivist reason considers itself as the only sufficient culture and banishes all other cultural realities to the status of subcultures, it diminishes man, indeed it threatens his humanity".

In the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, Saint John Paul II said rightly: "In God there lies the origin of all things, in him is found the fullness of the mystery, and in this his glory consists; to men and women there falls the task of exploring truth with their reason, and in this their nobility consists" (n. 17).

Faith and Reason were for that Pope "... like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth — in a word, to know himself" (n. 1, 14 September 1998).

Perhaps it would be good to specify what faith is and what reason. Faith is the fact of believing in God or believing in a dogma with deep conviction of mind and heart that it generates certainty. Reason, on the other hand, is the faculty of thinking and judging reality correctly. The relationship between these two words, reason and faith, can be interpreted as agreement between them or as opposition. There are two possible sources of human knowledge: reason and faith, but they are two distinct realities. Man with his intelligence is able to know God as Creator

(Constitution *Dei Filius* of Vatican I; On the Nature of the Church, 3 April 1870), whereas faith provides another way of knowledge, that is, to welcome revelation. It is God who reveals himself, not man who seeks God. This is why Christianity is not a religion, but a revelation.

Faith is therefore a source of knowledge, but in a different way. It is a meeting and a message, which provide a possible conceptual explanation. Faith is not born from a discussion among people. Faith belongs to an order of specific knowledge. Faith proposes that we believe in the mysteries hidden in God that surpass human intelligence. Although it must be situated above reason, there can be no disagreement between faith and reason, since it is the same God who reveals the mysteries and communicates the faith, and also infuses the light of reason into the human spirit. The Gospel of John reminds us: “No one has seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (Jn 1:18).

Thus, it cannot be argued that science is fundamentally opposed to reason. We could say that faith, which is at the same time an encounter and a message, reaches man who is naturally open to God. But there are two excesses to be avoided: the first is fideism, that is, a religion based on the emotions; and the second, rationalism, which asserts that only scientifically rational and demonstrable realities are credible.

We can say that God is not the result of an equation, because in that case we would be forced to believe, nor is it irrational; it is trans-rational and I would even say that it is coherent. Newman writes: “A thousand difficulties do not make a doubt”, and Pascal underlines that: “in faith there is enough light for those who want to believe, and enough obscurity to blind those who don’t” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*). This is the problem of man's freedom before God in a nutshell.

The technological world, in which we live, has detached man from his spiritual dimension. Man feels powerful. Indeed he is trying to achieve self-creation. Efficiency and profit have replaced the search for the truth. Now let us remember that the West owes its superiority to two things:

- 1) the invention of the sciences;
- 2) Christianity.

Detached from Christianity, science could become a lethal gift because it can be used for purposes that do not coincide with the true good to humanity.

We must be proud of our faith, because it gives humanity a future, and I am pleased to recall here what Saint John Paul II says in the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*: “In the Incarnation of the Son of God we see forged the enduring and definitive synthesis which the human mind of itself could not even have imagined: the Eternal enters time, the Whole lies hidden in the part, God takes on a human face” (n. 12).

We Christians have been loved and forgiven and we cannot keep the light that enlightens us just for ourselves. We have the duty to propose it to everyone, and in particular to people who live without hope. This is why we must be spiritually prepared and this is *the second requirement* as I see it: knowing how to give an account of one's faith, after *the first one* which is: feeling pride in being Christian, welcoming the greatness of the Mystery.

Now, in the pluralistic societies in which we live, interreligious dialogue, which always begins with the profession of one's own faith, has become a necessity; avoiding any form of syncretism. This supposes that we possess a religious culture that allows us to dialogue in truth. We must go beyond the Catechism of our childhood. Indeed, it is surprising to note, when conversing with the great leaders of educated and cultured human societies, how unprepared they are from a religious point of view, often retaining a childish faith. It would be unforgivable were we not to gather inspiration and light from the impressive magisterium of Benedict XVI, a true Doctor of the Church.

*A third requirement* is to live the Church as communion. The scandals, the betrayals of Christians can never conceal the strength of charity. Just think of the admirable work done by the sisters in the Third and Fourth World countries.

As you can see this is not the time to complain, but to devote oneself to the mission.

We must not impose but propose the God in whom we believe, who has bestowed two magnificent gifts on us: an intelligence to understand and a heart love.

We do not think that God does not interest the men of today. One cannot avoid Jesus Christ. Christ is met through the Church. The search for God and the readiness to listen to him are still today the foundation of true and authentic culture.

The century which has begun received the previous era's legacy: like the 1900s, our time is still dominated by the economy, inequality and war. It is true that our contemporaries are more aware than previously of their responsibility to manage the natural resources well and know how to put the wonderful scientific discoveries to good use. But we feel perturbed when we see that now, after having dominated physical realities man is attempting to dominate the living? I am obviously thinking of all the problems of bioethics.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century — exactly on 25 August 1900, — Friedrich Nietzsche, by then insane, died in Weimar. A few weeks earlier, he had written a kind of biography, "*Ecce homo*", in which he asked: "Where is God?". And he replied: "God is dead. God remains dead and we have killed him". We have seen, or rather experienced what a world without God is like: hell. Whether believers or non-believers, men seek someone or something that gives meaning to the human adventure, which saves their lives from banality and the abyss. It was Dostoevsky who observed: "Man cannot live without kneeling.... If he rejects God, he kneels before an idol of wood or of gold or an imaginary one...". Yes, the desire to believe is so strong in man that after having expelled God, he will kneel before an idol. We are more inclined to idolatry than to atheism.

What will be our contribution to the world of tomorrow? Will we be inspirational or simply accompany others? It is difficult to answer, but personally I feel convinced that Christianity, which has never been as universal as it is today, will be able to take advantage of globalization — which is in itself a positive thing — to offer with novel and unique words and initiatives the singularity of Christianity. Christianity is not a thought, but a fact: God became man. The Church will continue to make the "distracted" man of this century reflect, on his vocation and on the need to promote a world in which justice and peace hold sway. We have a role to play. I am thinking in particular of the young people, who all too often are "heirs without inheritance" and "builders without a scheme".

We Christians will do this with the Church, in the Church. This Church seems at times to have withered, but always sprouts anew to generate capable and daring apostles so that this earth may never lack hope and love. I am thinking in particular of the very many Christian brothers and sisters who are the object of barbaric persecution in the Middle East: they are the pride of the Church.

Joan of Arc told her judges: it seems to me that Jesus Christ and the Church are one and the same thing.

A question that is often asked: Is Christianity going to die? Personally, I ask myself a different question: when will Christianity begin to exist?

What is both magnificent and dramatic is that God lets us be free: we have the power to answer 'no' to God, to save ourselves or to lose ourselves. This caused Friedrich Hölderlin, the great contemporary German poet of Goethe, to say:

"God created man the way the sea created the continents: through withdrawal".

[I borrow his conclusion to end].

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