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**To Believe in a Changing World:  
A Catholic Perspective**

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“*There is an order in the universe; and at its peak [...] the evidence of God*”. Such is the image by which a known writer<sup>1</sup> explains his choice to become a believer, his free adherence to the faith. It is an expression that can help one, effectively, to grasp what it means to believe today in a world where change is constant; in a world that seems to be able to do without God.

By believing, the human person fully manifests the capacity to rise above the events that surround his daily existence, which characterize and orient him, to find, thus, his roots. The person is, in fact, aware of his/her limits, inability to stop events and change situations, while at the same time experiencing the power of his inner strength. The image evoked at the beginning — that is, the evidence of God placed at the center of the universe — shows that the person does not have the faculty to be, or to become, the supreme law unto self. Nevertheless, man has a great capacity to recognize God as the principle and the fulfilment of his existence, of his journey as a living being: “*Blessed are the men whose strength is in thee, in whose heart are the highways to Zion*” (Ps 84[83]:5), Scripture states. These words lead us back to the expression of God's love for every human being and confirm that the person, if a believer, can know and experience this love.

Such a reading leads us to conclude that to believe is certainly the fruit of human freedom, without thereby signifying that the person is free from all relationship with his Creator. Moreover, even if he does not believe, he too remains a recipient of the love that God has for all his creatures. In addition to being the recipient of God's love, the particularity of the believer lies in the fact that he requites this love and overcomes all forms of contempt or rejection of God: these two temptations are the most troubling of our time.

In the Teaching of the Catholic Church, the freedom to believe and atheism — but today, on a closer look, religious indifference — are, as noted by the Second Vatican Council, the object of attention. As regards man's freedom, the Vatican II asserts that this does not mean that the person may be, or may become, the supreme law of self, and feel independent of God.<sup>2</sup> With regard to atheism and religious indifference, the Catholic approach is to describe the different forms and modes of expression, as well as highlighting the limits, but still retaining the idea that “*the invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being*”.<sup>3</sup>

Then, for Christians, their deeper research in the religious field remains linked to a centuries-old path that coincides with the very beginning of the Church's own experience. Jesus Christ proposes the relationship between man and God in clear and unequivocal terms, namely as an *immediate* and *personal* relationship that must be realized in *truth* and structured in *love*. As clarified by the *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People* of the Second Vatican Council, it is precisely from truth and from love that behaviour free from all conditioning derives: upright, responsible behaviour that fully guarantees every believer's ability to act in accordance with the growth of faith, leading to personal fulfillment. Therefore, to believe also means that the person acquires greater self-confidence in keeping with his/her deeper communion with God,<sup>4</sup> in truth and love.

2. These elements pose a first question: how does the faith of the believer harmonize with his human dimension, a dimension that is also made up of reason and material aspects? The answer lies in the Word of God that calls Christians to be “*the salt of the earth ... the light of the world*” (Mt 5:13-14), cHECK that is to say to bear oneself in keeping with one’s inner disposition. It is here that *truth* and *love* emerge, since they are, in a way, the tools that enable the believer to manifest his faith. *Truth* enables one to evaluate the snares that appear with one’s choice of God, and to overcome the obstacles. By interpreting the word *love* in a practical way, the believer seeks to relieve the suffering of others, to be one with him, to go to him, to listen to his needs and to share in his suffering, as well as in his joy and his success. One of the passages in the Gospel that tests the Christian the most — which obliges him to question his conscience and his actions — is the Last Judgment. The scene shows that no one will be able to boast of his merits, but that everyone will all be judged on his/her actions or omissions: “*For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger, and you welcomed me; I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me!*” (Mt 25:35-36). At that time, the communion between God and the believer will be considered and evaluated in terms of the unity between faith and works, between the dimension of *belief* and that of *action*: “*Whenever you did it to one of my brothers, you did it to me*” (Mt 25:40). Thus, to believe means not to come to the Last Judgment unprepared: not according to the imperative ‘to have’, the thirst for power or command, but according to the precept of daily work according to that *golden rule* common to all religions: “*So whatever you want others to do for you, do it for them, you too*” (Mt 7:12).

#### CHECK AGAIN

Faith, therefore, gives a new meaning to human existence and defines a different way of working in the sphere in which each person is called to act. But how is faith born? For Christians, it is a call, a personal encounter with Jesus met on the way. There are many episodes in the Gospels that recount how Jesus called people to follow him, without any distinction between those who were already believers or those who were not. His meeting with Zacchaeus is particularly striking in this respect: Zacchaeus, a public figure, who was certainly not popular in his environment — was a tax collector in the name of the occupying military forces. Impelled by curiosity and due to his small stature, Zacchaeus climbed a tree in order to see Jesus. Their eyes met for a moment and Jesus said: “*Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today*” (Lk 19:5). Zacchaeus was but one in the crowd, but it was immediately evident that the Lord’s act of love was his call to faith: “*so he made haste and came down and received him [Jesus] joyfully*” (Lk 19:6).

To be believers, therefore, means to accept the love of God, the one Father, and co-operate in his plan for humanity, history and the world. However, this co-operation encounters obstacles daily when the believer is called to evince, painstakingly through his actions, good and evil, to be the leaven and the salt of his entourage, that is to say to put into practice the love and mercy of God. It does not mean to flee the world, the present and daily routine, but to flee the illusion that the world offers, always keeping lit the light of the faith which impels us, nevertheless, to do good.

Faith gives the person something more than hope; it confers mercy and solidarity to others, as well as the necessary confidence to read events. To have faith is not only an abstract skill to understand the meaning of pain or the joy of success, but it gives us the strength to tackle the big and small social issues: employment, education, health, the environment, peace and security, development and the protection of the fundamental rights of individuals and peoples. It could be said that faith gives this capacity — that today’s training programmes boast — that is needed to read events, the “*signs of the times*” that often appear in an unexpected way.

Thus, the Christian lives in contact with history; this means, especially today, to be open to exchange views, debate, dialogue: not only within the Christian community, but with all men. The Second Vatican Council was very clear on this point when it addressed the question of understanding faith’s action in the Church, and by the Church, in which consideration for peoples’ cultural and critical views is not extraneous today. “*There is no question, then, of the Christian message inhibiting men from building up the world or making them disinterested in the good of*

*their fellows: on the contrary it is an incentive to do these very things*”./ We find here an essential aspect for the life of the believer today: the obligation to take an interest of one’s neighbour which is not limited to philanthropy, but it is an element of love towards one’s brother because “*the social nature of man shows that there is an inter-dependence between personal betterment and the improvement of society*”./

Love of neighbour commits the believer to act for the benefit of all humanity and opens the way to universal solidarity, which is not a theory, but the fruit of communion between people and a guide to understanding the true sense of the Creator's love for his creatures./ All this, while bearing in mind the distinction between work in the world and the believing being: “*for man’s horizons are not bounded only by the temporal order; living on the level of human history he preserves the integrity of his eternal destiny*”./ A distinction that in the Catholic perspective is summed up in an invitation that Catholic doctrine precisely defines: “*Because of the very economy of salvation the faithful should learn to distinguish carefully between the rights and duties which they have as belonging to the Church and those which fall to them as members of human society. They will strive to unite the two harmoniously, remembering that in every temporal affair they are to be guided by a Christian conscience, since not even in temporal business may any human activity be withdrawn from God’s dominion*”./

Through his/her own faith, the Christian is free to judge what is happening in the world, although — in the words of Pope Francis — “*in order to judge we must really know what is happening around us*”. But “*how can one do this — what the Church calls ‘knowing the signs of the times’?*”./ The Pope invites us to understand that times change and that if Christian wisdom is really expected to recognize these changes, such discernment, certainly necessary, “*is not easy*”. Above all, it is not enough to just read or listen to what people say, because in this way “*we conform, we calm down*”; **CHECK** whereas we should rather ask ourselves, “**CHECK** *What is the truth? What is the message that God the Lord wants to give me by this sign of the times?* /Pope Francis then dealt with the practical aspect and suggested using *silence* as a tool to understand the changes in the world: “*First and foremost*” he said, “*silence is necessary: to be quiet, to watch and observe. And afterwards to think within ourselves. For example: why are there so many wars now? Why did this happen? And to pray*”. Now, in a world in daily transformation the believer is increasingly called to silence, to reflect and pray, while maintaining his/her simplicity. Pope Francis also said: “*Look at the farmers, at the humble: in their simplicity they understand that when rain comes, the grass grows; they are able to distinguish wheat from weeds*”. As a result, “*that simplicity — if accompanied by silence, reflection and prayer — will enable us to understand the signs of the times*”./

3. A second consideration concerns the exact conception of the believing being. Faith cannot be considered as a private right to set truth and error on the same plane and, therefore, to hold that all beliefs or forms of religiosity (or those claiming to be such) are equal. In fact, in so doing, religion might risk becoming no more than the equivalent of tolerance, as applied to the so-called forms of “new spirituality” (*new age*), even when confronted with forms of behaviour that are flagrant violations of rights and freedoms.

This is a crucial issue in current debate, based on a different interpretation of terms such as “religion” and “belief”. Such an interpretation requires deeper reflection when, for example, the juridical safeguards of religion, internal and international, assimilate/equate traditional religions with the new forms of spirituality. This amounts to assimilating theistic religions to non-theistic ones that affirm a spirituality without God. Therefore further reflection is necessary if one forgets that the choice to believe in God, whether individual or in collective religious practice, constitutes an essential part of the dignity of the human person and certainly cannot be confused with a concession or an authorization to believe.

Today, however, the expression “freedom of belief”/freedom of conviction would seem to wish to replace the idea of belief, by clearly indicating the idea that there is not only the right to

profess no religion — traditional atheism — but that everyone is allowed to confess a personal and independent *Creed*. Are these merely signs of growing *secularization*? Rather, is it not the sign of a cultural trend which moves/displaces the religious tendency of spirituality, as far as the generic category of elements considered as “sacred”? Moreover, does it not come down to redefining a cultural context — with the ensuing debate — that identifies the religious phenomenon as a pragmatic element of a veritable *way of life*, with vaguely spiritual “religious-type” practices, meanings and values, completely freed from any traditional religious faith or affiliation. This is borne out by the phenomenon of *individual believers* which claims attention and countenances behaviour far removed from religious practice and, at the same time, far from the institutional dimension proper to religion. Indeed, an identical — a parallel — reflection concerning the dimension of the belief, adherence to a particular religious denomination or respect for ethical behaviour based on religions and religiously founded beliefs, could be drawn.

In fact, it should be noted that it is no longer a question of **guaranteeing** someone who has no religion or is indifferent, but of reducing religion to a private dimension, thus creating a new typology of believer, belonging to no religious confession and therefore with no formal relationship to this or that faith community: *belief without belonging*.

At the same time, the religious component, which acts as a determining factor in questions of “conflict”, and derives from a politico-logical vision and reading inspired by the theory of the *clash of civilizations*, carries with it a negative view of religion and believers./ However, the aim of safeguarding religion from other forms of intolerance, leads to a negative vision of the religious phenomenon and of believers. This orientation seems to be the result of the situations in the context of the international relations of the last period, that is to say considering religion to be a negative factor, or more explicitly, a cause of conflict./ The fact it soon became a crucial motive of debate, shows that the intention to retain the freedom of belief (or even just freedom of religious expression) was to prevent discrimination rather than to preserve that freedom as such. Basically that trend of thought has sacrificed the “positive” approach which encouraged the choice of faith and, consequently, the fundamental right of every believer.

This exclusively negative view of the religious phenomenon has been proposed as a criterion in interpreting the legal provisions of States and international norms concerning human rights. In the long term, the consequence of this trend could entail the denial of freedom of worship, teaching, use of religious symbols, protection of places of worship, and of all those who are content with a “positive” religious dimension.

4. If the proposed reflections are carefully evaluated, they lead to a single conclusion: the believer runs the risk of losing his real value and meaning, transforming faith into a purely formal element. One thus ignores the basic relationship the believer experiences: the relationship between the Creator and the creature.FROM HERE

It then becomes important to repeat the basic content of a concept that seemed to be well established in theory and in practice: the religious choice appears to be a right of each person to practice his/her religion, according to the demands of one’s conscience. The Catholic vision presents it as the right to establish relations with God in the intimacy of the conscience, and specifies the form — both individual and collective — and protects it from any constraint that might intervene from the outside or might retain the power do so. Here we return to the basic question, which is the public dimension of faith. To state that the choice of religion is a fundamental right consists in upholding the autonomy of the person not in relation to religion, but in relation to all those who seek to limit the scope of the person’s religious feeling. Consequently, the protection of the religious dimension guarantees the relationship between the person and God, relations which, if seen as a legal relationship, indicate “duties” and “rights”. Duties and rights which the Law of the State, as well as international norms, are called to guarantee according to the idea that religion contributes to the common good of the human family and cannot be considered as an extraneous element.

The Social Doctrine of the Church presents such a perspective when proclaiming freedom of faith, not only affirming that the believer has obligations arising from religion, but also maintaining that the freedom of the believer is violated if faith is reduced to a purely private dimension. All this is rooted in a strong motivation for the mission of the Church, that of its dimension of “People of God”, in turn anchored in the divine commandment to take the Good News to all nations: “*Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation*” (Mk 16:15). Indeed, action to achieve this goal is the duty of all Christians, who are called to spread the Gospel message to the whole human family. It is a way of recognizing the rights of which each one — and those to whom the Christian is called to proclaim the “Good News” — is the bearer, custodian, and beneficiary: rights, which include arriving at knowledge of the truth and of love and to adhere freely to it.

This takes us back to the reference of faith as a free choice asserted in one’s conscience. This choice, that of God, cannot be hindered by requirements dictated by the idea of progress or by new cultural visions. This is what the Second Vatican Council expounded in *Dignitatis Humanae* when it indicates the ways and means for the dissemination of the “Good News”, stating that in all forms of the apostolate or work to spread the Christian message, believers must never resort to means of coercion. Indeed, they are called to ensure that every person created in the image of God, discovers his faith and fully manifests free consent, therefore respectful of his dignity and freedom. Faith: “*which stirs the human mind to ceaseless effort; indeed, it impels reason continually to extend the range of its knowledge until it senses that it has done all in its power, leaving no stone unturned*” (n. 14). In this sense faith does not limit or crystallise human thought by forcing it into rigid schemes; on the contrary, it aims to broaden the scope of man’s reason.

If the Catholic perspective of religious choice brings this doctrinal and methodical argument to the attention of those who are in the Church, an obvious consequence emerges. The believer, since it is a matter of a fundamental right, must be recognized by everyone and by all human beings, above all, must not encounter obstacles or alternatives other than those imposed by religion itself. In fact, the believer does not expect indifference on the part of the public authorities, but expects conduct respectful of the personal dimension of the faith and in the community dimension of religious practice. In short, the limits cannot go beyond the «*just requirements of public order*»./ For institutions, this means the obligation *to do something*, starting with recognition of worship in religious communities, but also of a power of self-organization to be realised in the autonomous choice of religious leaders, priests, teachers, in seminaries and religious schools or for religious formation, the preparation and circulation of religious texts and publications, of the freedom to disseminate a religion, as well as the possibility for believers to **concourir**/compete on the basis of their religious vision in the social dimension and in the national and international order./ All this, without having to obtain a special autorisation other than those which normally depend on international norms concerning human rights in terms of *security, public order, health, morality and rights*»./

In the Catholic approach, the justification of this interest, translates into a practical engagement, is that each one is held to organise his/her own relationship with God with respect for the law established by God himself, «*deep within his conscience, man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey*»./ For this reason, the person also has the duty to learn every more clearly God’s law, by using the appropriate means of information and, as a Christian, by following the teaching of the Church to conforme ver better to the will and planvolonté of God. The will and plan of the voice of conscience must for these reasons, be free of hinderance of different opinions or ridiculed because held to be out-dated compared to modernity. It is the exact opposite of the attitudes which aim at discrimination under all its forms and intolerance for the faith and the believer, especially odious and offensive for the human person: man cannot be deprived of following the exigences of his conscience’ supreme and sacred injunctions, even if in good faith he falls into error. The conscience «*is man’s most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths*». It is the loadstone of comparison and infranchissable limit of all action that the believer disposes of.

If the fundamental religious foundation is absent, which, for Christians, is also the hope of eternal life at the end of our journey on earth, human dignity would be gravely bafouée, as all too often happens in our day. Thus, the difference between good and evil, like the great misteries of life and death, suffering and pain, remain empty words. This often leads the human being to despair and the inability to identify the difficulties in a lucid way and eventually to the inability to overcome them.

The believer knows that his faith is in harmony with the innermost aspirations of his heart and mind, and that nothing can be done without it. By believing, each person is aware of being a creature and realizes his relationship with God the Creator as the great Father of the Church, Augustine of Hippo, reminds us: “*You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you*”.

(Reference: *Pro Dialogo*, January/ December 2017, pp. 137-146)

(A translation of this article can be found on the SEDOS Website.)