

Papers:

REASON AND CHURCH SOCIAL DOCTRINE: BENEDICT XVI AND THE RENEWAL OF TRADITION (2005-2008)*

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I. THE CHURCH SOCIAL DOCTRINE: BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

IN FORMULATING the title of this paper, I have considered that passage from the first Encyclical letter by Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, in which the Pope underlined that “the Church’s social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being.”¹ Some have, worryingly, seen in this statement the symptom of a regressive aspect in Church social teaching, back to positions now considered fundamentally passé. Those

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¹ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, n. 28.

positions were typical of the time in which Church social teaching was treated as essentially a philosophical discipline – more precisely as a *social ethic*. It is important to remember that Pius XI considering, specifically, the doctrines formulated by Leo XIII in the Encyclical *Rerum novarum*, referred to a “new social philosophy”² and even to “Catholic principles on the social question.”³ Throughout recent decades, one could say, in relation to this attitude Church social doctrine eventually resolved the problem both of its nature and of its epistemological status by abandoning its traditional position – a position that Benedict XVI is now accused to have retrieved. More specifically, Benedict XVI is accused of bringing the Church’s social doctrine back to the field of philosophical ethics, to a purely ‘rational’ ethics centred on the notion of natural law and separated from theology that is now considered as a purely ‘supernatural’ or ‘revealed’ wisdom. The same attitude – as has been noted elsewhere⁴ – was still visible and organically theorized by John XXIII in the Encyclical letter *Mater et magistra* (15th May 1961), as well as in the coeval programme for the teaching of Church social doctrine formulated by the Congregation of Seminaries (25th May 1961). In 1975 Paul VI, with his *Evangelii nuntiandi* (the apostolic exhortation which followed the Synod of Bishops on the evangelisation of contemporary world), abandoned or, at least, went beyond that attitude. “The resolute text by Paul VI refused two extremist positions: the bourgeois one, which severs the evangelical message from social justice (denying any relationship between them); and the pro-third world one, which reduces the evangelical message to social justice. On the contrary it affirms the pertinence (in the sense of ‘belonging to’) of social justice to the evangelical message: in different words it considers social questions as placed in the sphere of Revelation.”⁵

The process of redefining the epistemological status of Church social doctrine comes to end with John Paul II’s Encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, where it is presented as “a theological reading of modern problems.” As such, “it therefore belongs to the field, not of ideology, but of theology and particularly of moral

² Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno*, n. 14.

³ *Ibid*, n. 21.

⁴ Cfr. Colombo, *Il compito della teologia*, 23-34.

⁵ *Ibid*, 31.

theology.”⁶ The Encyclical letter, published in 1987, refers controversially to that cultural context typical of the 1960s and 1970s (at that time already considered as almost historical) which was particularly hostile to Church social doctrine. Such hostility was encapsulated in the well known essay *La doctrine sociale de l'Église comme idéologie* published in 1979 by the pre-eminent intellectual Marie-Dominique Chenu. This essay is proof of the ‘bad press’ from which Church social doctrine suffered at end of the 1970s; not only within general public opinion, but also among many intellectuals and even among theologians (sometimes the expression *Church social doctrine* was even considered unpronounceable). Nowadays, however, Papal teaching explicitly recognizes that Church social doctrine belongs to the field of theology, and in particular to moral theology (as it was recognized, by many after the publication of *Sollicitudo rei socialis*). Therefore the long period in which Church social doctrine was considered rooted in philosophical ethics or social philosophy has definitely come to end. The attitude that found in the domain of pure reason and in the theory of natural rights its favourite theoretical reference is now viewed as running the fatal risk of embracing a pure rationalistic model and an ‘ideological’ reductionism.

One could say that Benedict XVI, maintaining that the social doctrine of the Church is founded on the basis of reason and natural right, seems to be advocating a similar perspective. On the contrary; his proposal – and this is what I intend to show in what follows – is not simply to go back to the idea of Church social doctrine as an expression of a philosophical ethic or a “natural morality.” In opposition to this, I want to claim that Benedict XVI, in ‘rehabilitating’ the link between doctrine, on one side, and reason and natural right (understood as to what is adequate to the human nature) on the other, wants to provide Church social doctrine with a more solid basis as well as with a legitimacy beyond the boundaries of both the ecclesial community and the Christian world. This is crucial if the ‘sympathetic’ attitude towards Church social doctrine, now shared by many scholars, is not to be reduced to a contingent knee-jerk reaction to the collapse of contemporary ideologies – based as they were on the hope for an imminent advent of an entirely new and better world; in particular in response to the retreat of Marxism, the major historical and theoretical parable of the last

⁶ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 41.

century. Once it is recognized that 'this dream has disappeared' in *Deus caritas est* the Pope says: "In today's complex situation, not least because of the growth of a globalized economy, the Church's social doctrine has become a set of fundamental guidelines offering approaches that are valid even beyond the confines of the Church: in the face of ongoing development these guidelines need to be addressed in the context of dialogue with all those seriously concerned for humanity and for the world in which we live."⁷

In what follows, I would like to show how the concept of reason envisaged by Benedict XVI as starting point for the arguments proposed by Church social doctrine is not reason severed from faith and resistant to it; it is not a 'mutilated' reason but rather it is a reason capable of recognizing the essential contribution which comes from faith in order to enable the former to be authentic. "Faith by its specific nature is an encounter with the living God – says Benedict XVI – an encounter opening up new horizons extending beyond the sphere of reason. But it is also a purifying force for reason itself. From God's standpoint, faith liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself."⁸

2. TO FREE THE REASON FROM ITS BLINDNESS (AND THE FAITH FROM ITS IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS)

From what does reason need to be purified? What is the blindness from which it needs to be freed? The Pope formulates a synthesis in answer to these questions (typical of his literary style) which is profoundly articulated. Considering not only the lecture given at the University of Regensburg, but also many other crucial texts concerning similar topics (among them his address in Verona in 2006 and the one prepared – but never delivered – for his visit to the University *La Sapienza* in Rome), it seems to me appropriate to interpret "the blindness from which reason has to be freed" (and for which faith can give its contribution) in the following way.

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, n. 27.

⁸ *Ibid*, n. 28.

In the first place there is what we call the “positivist” or “scientistic blindness.” According to the perspective of positivist scientism the concept of rationality is confined to the sphere of what, on one side, can be calculated through processes of measurement and, on the other, to the sphere of “what can be proven through experiments.”⁹ When this concept, of a “self-limiting” reason, is used to investigate the natural world it is not only right, it is even necessary; and can lead to highly profitable and otherwise unobtainable results, as happened often during the modern era. “It is the new correlation of experiment and method – Benedict XVI says in his second Encyclical letter, *Spe salvi* – that enables man to arrive at an interpretation of nature in conformity with its laws and thus finally to achieve – and here the Pope quotes Francis Bacon – ‘the triumph of art over nature’ (*victoria cursus artis super naturam*).”¹⁰ However, it would be wrong to pretend, as the different kinds of positivism which characterize the contemporary culture tend to do, that technical and scientific rationality (which is a rationality reduced to what can be calculated and experienced) can stand in itself as the entirety of reason and provide the basis of a new kind of universalism capable of presenting itself as the philosophy of the future. As the Pope says, “[t]his philosophy does not express a fulfilled human reason, but only a part of it, and because of that mutilation it cannot be considered rational at all.”¹¹

More radically, however, (but not without a precise connection to what has just been emphasised), according to Benedict XVI the blindness from which reason suffers in our post-modern era is characterized by three aspects: firstly, a mistrust about the capacities of human reason to have access to the truth; secondly, by a mistrust nurtured by the fear that faith in truth necessarily involves intolerance and the use of violence and finally by a mistrust which can lead to the denial of the need for truth and of the will to reach it. Concerning the first aspect, the Pope says: “In fact, our faith is decisively opposed to the attitude of resignation that considers man incapable of truth – as if this were more than he could cope with. This attitude of resignation with regard to truth, I am convinced, lies at the heart of the crisis of the West, the crisis of Europe. If truth does not exist for man, then neither can he ultimately distinguish between good

⁹ Ratzinger, *L'Europa di Benedetto*, 36.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, n. 16.

¹¹ Ratzinger, *L'Europa di Benedetto*, 52.

and evil. And then the great and wonderful discoveries of science become double-edged: they can open up significant possibilities for good, for the benefit of mankind, but also, as we see only too clearly, they can pose a terrible threat, involving the destruction of man and the world."¹² As for the second aspect, Benedict XVI recognizes that, if it is true that "we need truth", it is equally indubitable that "in the light of our history we are fearful that faith in the truth might entail intolerance." At the same time the Pope does not hesitate to say that even if faith has sometimes degenerated into intolerance, this is not attributable to that God who is "the same Truth", "the living God", "the God who has shown us his face and opened his heart to us: Jesus Christ", but to "the ideological constrictions" of faith caused by human beings or to "abuse of religion and reason for imperialistic purposes."¹³ Whenever we are afraid of affirming the existence and the possibility of knowing that ultimate truth because it is seen as implying intolerance,

it is time to look towards Jesus as we see him in the shrine at Mariazell – the Pope said during his apostolic journey in Austria –. We see him here in two images: as the child in his Mother's arms, and above the high altar of the Basilica as the Crucified. These two images in the Basilica tell us this: truth prevails not through external force, but it is humble and it yields itself to man only via the inner force of its veracity. Truth proves itself in love. It is never our property, never our product, just as love can never be produced, but only received and handed on as a gift. We need this inner force of truth. As Christians we trust this force of truth. We are its witnesses. We must hand it on as a gift in the same way as we have received it, as it has given itself to us.¹⁴

It emerges from these statements that the Pope invites us to look not only at the capacity, typical of the human reason, to recognize the truth against the constrictions of a modern understanding of reason, but also at the liberation of faith from an attitude characterized by voluntarism, irrationalism and fideism; which – separating truth from love – have sometimes promoted the degeneration of faith into violent imposition or hegemonic demands. Only the living witness of an "enlarged" use of reason, capable of truth, and of a faith which is "a friend of intelligence" can reawaken the need for truth (which is

¹² Benedict XVI, *Apostolic journey to Austria, Eucharistic Celebration, Homily*.

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Apostolic journey to Austria, Meeting with the authorities and the diplomatic corps*.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Apostolic journey to Austria, Eucharistic Celebration, Homily*.

proved by love) and for all essential human needs, needs which tend to be dissolved by the nihilism permeating our contemporary culture.

In front of a world in which sometimes the human heart seems to have suspended its search and human reason seems to have set aside the need for truth through which it is constituted, the Pope underlines the fact that “the awakening of the Christian faith, the dawning of the Church of Jesus Christ was made possible, because there were people in Israel whose hearts were searching – people who did not rest content with custom, but who looked further ahead, in search of something greater [...]; expectant people who were not satisfied by what everyone around them was doing and thinking, but who were seeking the star which could show them the way towards Truth itself, towards the living God.” “We too need an open and restless heart like theirs” – Benedict XVI says – in order to be able to face the future with confidence: in fact, “yet the earth will be deprived of a future only when the forces of the human heart and of reason illuminated by the heart are extinguished – when the face of God no longer shines upon the earth.”¹⁵

It seems to me that Benedict XVI's fundamental thought on the relationship between reason, truth and faith has been expressed most emblematically in his visit in Austria, especially during a meeting with the authorities and the diplomatic corps. There he stated that beyond the kinds of reductionism, exclusivism, and one-sided perspectives that have characterized the modern understanding of reason (and of faith), “another part of the European heritage is a tradition of thought which considers as essential a substantial correspondence between faith, truth and reason.”¹⁶ Thus reason is not only and first of all the human capacities to know the truth (as considered from the perspective of gnoseology), but the essence of everything when seen from the vantage point of ontology. When considering a series of references pertaining to this topic, made explicit in Regensburg (but not only there), this constitutes the possibility for Christianity to be “re-Hellenized.” Specifically, the Pope wants to clarify that

¹⁵ *Ibidem*. The same concern is the basis of Benedict's interest towards education, considered by him as a real ‘emergency’. The authentic educator is the one who is able to reawaken great questions, such as the human need for love, and the desire for truth among human beings (cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to the participants at the Ecclesial convention of the Diocese of Rome*).

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Apostolic journey to Austria, Meeting with authorities and the diplomatic corps*.

“here the issue is clearly whether or not reason stands at the beginning and foundation of all things. The issue is whether reality originates by chance and necessity, and thus whether reason is merely a chance by-product of the irrational and, in an ocean of irrationality, it too, in the end, is meaningless, or whether instead the underlying conviction of Christian faith remains true: *In principio erat Verbum* – in the beginning was the Word; at the origin of everything is the creative reason of God who decided to make himself known to us human beings.”¹⁷

3. STATE AND POLITICS, JUSTICE AND RIGHTS

Above, I have analysed the fundamental idea of reason as shaped by the teaching of Benedict XVI and in particular the point at which reason is called to combine itself with faith and faith is called to meet reason. Reason needs faith – as we have considered – in order to be authentic, to keep and recover its primal broadness – its capacity for truth – and in order to exercise it fruitfully. Faith, in turn, needs reason, to avoid the always present risk of ideological constrictions and abuses operated for sectarian interests or desire of power. In the third and final section of this contribution I would like to present a synthetic (but as much as possible inclusive) reflection on the renewal of the tradition of Church social doctrine as it has been envisaged by Benedict XVI. Pope Benedict wants to focus on the contribution offered by Church social doctrine in order to re-define the nature and the tasks of the State and of politics, as he states: “justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics. Politics is more than a mere mechanism for defining the rules of public life: its origin and its goal are found in justice.”¹⁸ The question of how justice can be achieved here and now – a question that the State always has to face and to answer – presupposes “an even more radical question: what is justice? The problem is one of practical reason – the Pope says –; but if reason is to be exercised properly, it must undergo constant purification, since it can never be completely free of the danger of a certain ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, n. 28, from the other quotations in this paragraph also come.

interests.” “Here politics and faith meet” – Benedict XVI says, suggesting – in order to face the problem of the right order of society and State – once again the dynamic of reciprocal implication between reason and faith, as we have considered above. According to the Pope, it is exactly where political reason (intended as that reason capable of enlightening the origin, the need, and the criteria of good politics) and faith meet each other that “Catholic social doctrine has its place.” The latter – as I have said at the beginning of this paper – “argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being.” The concept of reason and of human nature that I am now considering, however, does not involve a reason folded in on itself, reduced and identified with just one of its dimensions, but a concept of reason which – in order to be fully itself – is aware of its need for the purifying and releasing power of faith. If this is the ‘statute’ of Church social doctrine – which is a doctrine of reason and faith, philosophical and theological knowledge – what are the most fundamental directions suggested by Benedict XVI for “the actual human and cultural context” which derive from such an original understanding of the traditional structure of Church social doctrine? First of all, it requires a renewed consideration of the tasks of the Church and the Christians in the sphere of politics. The Church recognizes the autonomy of the political sphere: she is aware of the fact that a direct political involvement is not her proper mission. Instead of replacing the State in its effort to realize justice she entrust “the lay faithful” with the immediate task to “take part in public life in a personal capacity.” The Church offers to politics a contribution which is not immediately political, but it has more to do with a capacity to understand politics properly and to act according to an enlarged use of reason. This is a contribution which enables people to recognize – and therefore to realize – the proper sense of politics, that is justice; it is a “help [...] to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just”; and “to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest.”

The State, in turn, cannot pretend to transform itself in a kind of Church, “The State may not impose religion, yet it must guarantee religious freedom and harmony between the followers of different religions.” “For her part, the Church,

as the social expression of Christian faith, has a proper independence and is structured on the basis of her faith as a community which the State must recognize": this involves State's capacity of respecting and valuating not only freedom of worship and the teaching of that doctrine, but also the social works (cultural, educative, welfare practices) realized by the Church, as well as by any other social "living force." "We do not need a State which regulates and controls everything, but a State which, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, generously acknowledges and supports initiatives arising from the different social forces and combines spontaneity with closeness to those in need."¹⁹

Let us now focus our attention, in particular, on what Benedict XVI indicates as the specific task of a concept of reason "purified" by faith in front of a permanently changing scenario of society and politics; that is to help to understand "what is right" so that it can be realized. The Pope does not present an organic reflection on the topic of justice and he is not even interested in formulating definitions of this term. On the contrary, in his lecture prepared for the University *La Sapienza*²⁰ (and which prepares what I consider the ground for one of his most interesting contributions on Church social doctrine) he investigates "how is it possible to identify criteria of justice that make shared freedom possible" – as "human freedom" is always "freedom within reciprocal communion" and not an isolated and individual freedom – in order to "help man to be good" and to realize a little more "the good life" as described by Aristotle. In more concrete terms the Pope says it is the question of "how can a juridical body of norms be established that serves as an ordering of freedom, of human dignity and human rights." Here, the Pope calls to mind a non-believer, the thinker Jürgen Habermas, declaring to agree with him in identifying the two criteria which make legitimate the State's juridical body of fundamental norms, that is its constitution: 1) "the equal participation of all citizens" and 2) "the reasonable manner in which political disputes are resolved." Such "reasonable manners" required in the overcoming of the inevitable (and sometimes even

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, nn. 28-29, from which the other quotations in this paragraph also come.

²⁰ Benedict XVI, *Lecture at the University of Rome "La Sapienza"*, 17th January 2008, from which also the other quotations of this paragraph come.

necessary) conflicts which characterize the life of a democratic State are not reducible to a mere “fight for arithmetical majorities”, but – Benedict XVI says, using the same words of Habermas – it is rather characterized by a “process of argumentation sensitive to the truth.”

The Pope does not deny the difficulty of a concrete transformation of this model into political practice: the kind of mentality which describes “political parties as responsible of political will” is usually intended to reach the highest possible consensus, even satisfying disparate interests of individuals and groups very distant from the authentic good of the city. Benedict XVI is a realist, and – at the same time – he is able to recognize the “meaningful” fact that even an intellectual like Habermas, one of the thinkers most representative of contemporary lay philosophy, “speaks of sensibility to the truth as a necessary element in the process of political argument, thereby reintroducing the concept of truth into philosophical and political debate.” But this necessarily means that in the search for true justice, true freedom, just cohabitation, “we have to listen to claims other than those of parties and interest groups.” In particular, we have to listen to those forms of wisdom and to those disciplines (i.e. philosophy and theology) whose “permanent purpose” consists in “safeguarding sensibility to the truth.” However it is necessary to conceive the same disciplines according to their authentic nature and vocation: the Pope, calling to mind the great example of Aquinas, maintains that they can be neither confused nor totally separated from each other.²¹

²¹ It is worthy, concluding my contribution, to quote this entire passage from the lecture never pronounced by Benedict XVI at the University La Sapienza in Rome: “I would say that Saint Thomas’s idea concerning the relationship between philosophy and theology could be expressed using the formula that the Council of Chalcedon adopted for Christology: philosophy and theology must be interrelated ‘without confusion and without separation’. ‘Without confusion’ means that each of the two must preserve its own identity. Philosophy must truly remain a quest conducted by reason with freedom and responsibility; it must recognize its limits and likewise its greatness and immensity. Theology must continue to draw upon a treasury of knowledge that it did not invent, that always surpasses it, the depths of which can never be fully plumbed through reflection, and which for that reason constantly gives rise to new thinking. Balancing ‘without confusion’, there is always ‘without separation’: philosophy does not start again from zero with every thinking subject in total isolation, but takes its place within the great dialogue of historical wisdom, which it continually accepts and develops in a manner both critical and docile. It must not exclude what religions, and the Christian faith in particular, have received and have given to humanity as signposts for the journey. Various things said by theologians in the course of history, or even adopted in

What are the most threatening challenges that human society has now to face and what are the directions given by Church social doctrine? This is the last topic that I would like to consider and here the Pope seems to derive from its "treasure" "things new and old." First of all there are the "great challenges that endanger vast portions of the human family: war and terrorism, hunger and thirst, some terrible epidemics."²² In numerous occasions the Pope has proposed the position assumed by the Church and her social doctrine on each of these topics; formulating "principles of reflections, criteria of judgment and the directives for action."²³ During the early years of his pontificate, Benedict XVI focussed his attention not only on the epistemic status of the Church social doctrine, but also on an aspect – capable of reformulating the Church social doctrine – which is probably one of the most original features of his thought.

Since the beginning of his pontificate the Pope has dedicated a consistent part of his studies to analysing the plurality of cultures and religions, their specific differences, their peculiarities and correlatively their relationship with common human nature – the unity and universality which constitute human beings. Hegemonic culture tends to stress the first aspect, considering the plurality of cultures and the specific difference between each culture as something inevitable. As long as such a way of thinking exercises an undisputed dominion, the strife among civilizations – nowadays at the centre of the interest of public opinion – can become a real danger says the Pope. How is it possible to face such a danger? Is there anything capable of "keeping the world united?"²⁴ Is there

practice by ecclesiastical authorities, have been shown by history to be false, and today make us feel ashamed. Yet at the same time it has to be acknowledged that the history of the saints, the history of the humanism that has grown out of the Christian faith, demonstrates the truth of this faith in its essential nucleus, thereby giving it a claim upon public reason. Of course, much of the content of theology and faith can only be appropriated within the context of faith, and therefore cannot be demanded of those to whom this faith remains inaccessible. Yet at the same time it is true that the message of the Christian faith is never solely a 'comprehensive religious doctrine' in Rawls' sense, but is a purifying force for reason, helping it to be more fully itself. On the basis of its origin, the Christian message should always be an encouragement towards truth, and thus a force against the pressure exerted by power and interests" (Benedict XVI, *Lecture at the University of Rome "La Sapienza"*).

²² Benedict XVI, *Address to the participants in the convention*.

²³ Card. R. Martino, President of the Pontifical Councils for Justice and Peace and for Migrants and Travellers, *Address on the laity in Singapore*, 25th June 2006.

²⁴ Cfr. Ratzinger, *Ciò che tiene unito il mondo*, 41-57.

anything common to the *proprium* of each culture, which emerges through the differences and particularities of individual human beings or peoples? Is there anything which eventually would enable us to talk about a common good and which could provide the basis for a real inter-religious and intercultural dialogue?

In his address to the members of the general assembly of the United Nations Organization, Benedict XVI, recalling the Universal declaration of human rights, noticed that “this document was the outcome of a convergence of different religious and cultural traditions, all of them motivated by the common desire to place the human person at the heart of institutions, laws and the workings of society, and to consider the human person essential for the world of culture, religion and science.” Below he considers that

it is evident, though, that the rights recognized and expounded in the *Declaration* apply to everyone by virtue of the common origin of the person, who remains the high-point of God’s creative design for the world and for history. They are based on the natural law inscribed on human hearts and present in different cultures and civilizations. Removing human rights from this context would mean restricting their range and yielding to a relativistic conception, according to which the meaning and interpretation of rights could vary and their universality would be denied in the name of different cultural, political, social and even religious outlooks. This great variety of viewpoints must not be allowed to obscure the fact that not only rights are universal, but so too is the human person, the subject of those rights.²⁵

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²⁵ Benedict XVI, *Address to the members of the general assembly of the United Nations Organization*, 18th April 2008.

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