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The “Unbalanced” Power of Christianity

by ANDREA MONDA

With Fr. Julián Carrón, President of the Fraternity of Communion and Liberation, we broaden our reflections on the crisis facing today’s society and the role of the Church, on which we have focused in the pages of this paper in recent weeks, to include all of Europe.

Giuseppe De Rita, in reflecting in these pages about the current crisis of Italian and European society, made reference to the past and the fact that in medieval times, good governance of a community rested on two authorities—the civil authority that guaranteed security and the spiritual authority that spoke to citizens about the meaning of existence. These two authorities cannot be concentrated in a single person, but Europe often tends toward a concentration of power. In this context, what do you think the role of the Church, and therefore her responsibility, should be?

In reality, these two things are intimately connected. In the hearts of many people, you see the shadow of a great fear and a deep insecurity. But what exactly is it? How can we confront it? If people do not find a radical response to their fears, they will overwhelm them and produce disordered reactions. Having said this, it is still entirely evident that politics is not capable of responding and cannot respond to all our anxiety about security or all the bewilderment people have inside of them. This reveals the real issue. Society—with all its institutions, parties, unions, schools of every kind and at every level, the lived realities, communities, the Church—is facing a challenge: Who can respond to this need for security that appears alongside the fear? To face the question, you cannot put your faith in walls of any kind: when the most hostile attitudes are circulating in society, when it seems to be “dog eat dog,” when any person or thing is a potential enemy, you can never reduce the answer to “police” or “walls.”

Today, fear seems to be the most widespread sentiment despite the fact that, paradoxically, society has never been so secure. How can you explain that?

Exactly, because the question of fear is fully rooted in the question of meaning. The answer to insecurity cannot merely be a social response; it has to respond to the question of meaning because man can never be reduced to his material aspects. Ultimately, where does this fear come from? From the confusion that reigns deep within man. Material security is not sufficient to respond to the ultimate loss of the “I.” The fact you just mentioned demonstrates this: Western societies have never been so secure, healthy, and peaceful as they are today, yet their sense of insecurity and fear has increased. Man’s fear can only be won over by a presence. We see this in the elementary experience of a child. The only answer to his fear is the presence of his mother, for which he cries out with all his strength: he seeks nothing else, because nothing else is able to respond. The problem, then, is a deeper one. A few days ago in Paris, while presenting a book, I quoted the author [Michel] Houellebecq, who has almost come to be seen as the face of nihilism. Despite this, at the bottom of his apparent nihilism, a striking and irrepressible need for meaning emerges. In a public letter to Bernard-Henry Lévy, he writes, “More and more frequently, and it pains me to admit it, I felt a desire to be liked. On each occasion a little thought convinced me of the absurdity of this dream; life is limited and forgiveness impossible. But thought was powerless and the desire

persisted—and, I have to admit, persists to this day.” This desire is more deeply rooted than his thoughts. His reflection on the absurdity of the desire to be liked, of seeking a response to this thirst, concede to the persistence of this desire. You see, what we are facing, what we have to measure up to, is a problem of desire—the desire to be loved, to be fulfilled—which, not finding a response, is manifested in fear, anger, violence, or attempts to build walls, but at the root there is something that escapes us: human nature, which, despite this state of nihilism, confusion, and bewilderment remains irreducible. This is the level of the challenge we face.

Can the Church intervene at that level?

I believe that the Church, that Christians, have a unique task in this. The real question is in fact: Who can redeem our desire? What type of gaze do we need to receive to keep it from being reduced? In the classical world, an excess of desire was viewed with terror, as a dangerous kind of hubris. It was necessary, therefore, to impose certain boundaries to reduce that excess, to keep it constrained according to our measure. Then Christianity came along. The Gospels document the presence of a person who places Himself in front of all of human desire. Jesus appeals precisely to this desire and is capable of facing desire head on; He reveals it in its full weight. This is why He asks, “What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” (Mt 16:26). Often, we interpret that question in a moralistic sense and not as the ultimate expression of human nature, of our desire, of that thirst of which Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman, of the hunger and thirst revealed in the Beatitudes. Jesus could have focused on many other aspects of that “irregular” woman, with her five husbands, but instead he looks right at her thirst: He knows that only if He proposes something capable of answering her thirst for happiness will that woman be unable to look elsewhere, to things that cannot deliver fulfillment in her life. This is not just a personal issue, it is a social one. Houellebecq points out the public, social, cultural, and political relevance of the problem. If man does not find an answer that fits the nature of his desire, deep down he will always feel uneasy, seek solutions that are insufficient, and end up a victim of fear or violence. Christianity is able to face this desire, as Augustine reminds us, “You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You,” until, in other words, we encounter a presence proportionate to the depth of our desire. Whenever Christianity goes into crisis, that pagan spirit that would like to rein in desire reemerges, seeking to reduce it, to “bring it back within safe limits,” as Todorov says in his own way, because otherwise it becomes dangerous. Bergman, at the end of *Fanny and Alexander*, has one of his characters say, “We are not equipped for such excursions. We might just as well ignore the big things. We must live in the little, the little world. We shall be content with that,” with staying within our own limits. This is the “wisdom” of the world that cannot, however, eliminate that unquenchable thirst for meaning that burns within the human heart.

The Pope, speaking to the Diocese of Rome on May 9, described the Beatitudes as the winner of the “Nobel Prize for imbalance,” and invited Christians to “maintain the imbalance,” to manage the upkeep of that imbalance, because otherwise we put up those boundaries that characterize Greek harmony, boundaries that diminish humanity. Is this not the risk Europe faces, having perhaps concentrated up to now on establishing bureaucratic boundaries and trying to manage security instead of responding to that ever-unsatisfied thirst that is so human?

This is exactly the point. All attempts at managing things, even good ones, fail in the end if they do not respond to this thirst. Europe has put forth enormous effort in order to respond to many needs.

None of the individual countries would have been able to reach the point of development that has been achieved on its own. At the same time, however, discontent and anxiety are growing. How can that be? The problem comes from not having understood the nature of the “disease.” I have always been struck by Leopardi’s genius in capturing this: “Everything is small and insignificant compared to the capacity of my soul.” Many people see this as a negative, as a curse, but this is what sets man apart and makes him great. If we lose sight of this comparison, this infinite desire we have, we understand nothing of what happens. If Europe does not come to see this, it cannot help but offer responses that fall short, while pretending they are enough. Let us be clear: on the one hand, Europe, as a political–economic reality, should not pretend to respond to our ultimate needs because that is not within its scope; but on the other, it must recognize the nature of the problem and give space for a response. Europe exists inasmuch as it creates and safeguards that space of freedom in which one can encounter the various responses to the need for meaning. This is because—I think this is something that was understood definitively after Vatican II—there is no way of accessing truth except through freedom. It is only if Europe remains and becomes more and more that space of freedom that we will be able to share the richness of life and offer it as a response to the needs and challenges we have in front of us. This space is one that, above all, makes sure it is possible to recognize that “something more” that constitutes man, that makes us all human, even though we are diverse and unique in our complexity. This is the biggest contribution that Christianity and the dimension of faith have to offer.

Yet it seems like people often pass from discontent and anxiety to the rancor and emotional reactions they generate. The phenomenon of sovereinism could be interpreted as an instance of this. If Europe does not meet my needs, I will shut myself off in my little personal or national bubble where I am sovereign. This seems more like an automatic reaction than a response.

It is a reaction that reveals that something is missing. A person who is content, in fact, feels no rancor and does not “react.” The reaction is instigated by a need that has still not found a response, and often has not even fully unfolded at a conscious level. This is a great opportunity—in my opinion—for Christianity. The nihilism we see in many things happening in our social, cultural, and literary life reveals the existence of an unanswered, disconcerting question about our own lives, a question that proves you cannot reduce our humanity. Who can respond? The Church is called into action; this is where she finds her task. Because of what we have received and continue to receive by grace, we Christians have a crucial task in this context. Man needs to be looked in a nonreductive way, to be embraced in the full “density of his humanity.” This was the way Jesus looked at Zacchaeus, who did not seem to be needy, since he was very rich. Jesus picked up on his true need: to be looked at without being reduced to merely social and material factors. Zacchaeus felt himself looked at in a way that moved him, set him into action, and he welcomed Jesus full of joy. The answer to that need, sometimes hidden or of which we are unaware, came to him from a person who did not reduce the humanity in him. Jesus knew how to pick up on this need in the poor people he met in the streets, in the sick and the wounded of His time (Zacchaeus was a wounded man), just as, today, the Pope has shown he knows how to do, in a one-on-one relationship, relating to others, and in acting as a witness of the contemporaneity of Jesus’s gaze on the present.

The phenomenon of globalization also seems to have broken its promises; it has weakened the mediating power of civil society and brought about the rebirth of an opposite sentiment: an inflated

conception of individualistic identity. The crisis of civil society and community organizations has generated an atmosphere of solitude, creating a crisis in our sense of belonging, which has now been replaced by a strong sense of merely individualistic identity. Here, too, Christians can offer a timely message.

It is a decisive message because Christianity is a response to solitude, the solitude of the heart, which is generated by an unsatisfied and irreducible need for meaning, and to which only an exceptional presence—the presence of Christ robed in the flesh of a human encounter—can respond. Just think of a person facing an illness or death. Christianity is not just a discourse, it is an incarnate message. The Word becomes flesh so that every person can experience this presence in his or her life, in the places where that radical solitude is felt most sharply, where it explodes, often ending up in disappointment. The Word became flesh, a presence, to share all of life with each of us, without censoring anything, from the most basic and concrete aspects of life to the most radical solitude. The Church is by definition a community, a mediating body that places an individual in relationship with life's ultimate meaning, with the Mystery: the Church is the continuation of the great mediator Christ. Christ places concrete, historical men and women in relationship with the infinite. There is no such thing as a “private” Christian; it is in the nature of a Christian that he always ends up generating communities, places where we can face that total solitude, true solitude, together.

Pope Francis proposed a theme, or rather a method, of synodality; is that the sign of the social generativity proper to Christianity?

I think this is a fundamental point—when you follow a path in life, you do it together. The question is how each of us, together with others, makes available the richness we have gained in our experience to everyone in common? This walking together to find the way, in a kind of sharing that always means taking initiative and correcting what goes wrong, in which each person is truly a protagonist, can progress only if we are always ready to change, to begin again. Reality's provocations are always there waiting for us and are part of our human journey, which is sustained by the contributions of the last people to arrive, who remind us of what we take for granted, offering us help from the least expected people. You have to be constantly attentive to let yourself be enriched by everything the Mystery does to respond to our needs. The question is whether we are willing to acknowledge every crumb of truth and every true initiative or impetus that appears in the life of the Church. In *Christus Vivit*, I was very struck at seeing how a desire to embrace and encourage every initiative was underlined. When this happens in the Church, we embrace all the gifts that God, in His total freedom, has bestowed on us. Everything, then, contributes to the good of the Church, which, as the Pope says, is polyhedral. The shape of a polyhedron reminds us that life is not about rigid harmony and that it cannot be reduced to merely logical frameworks. As Benedict XVI wrote in *Spe Salvi*, “Incremental progress is possible only in the material sphere,” but where freedom is in the mix there is always a new beginning; this is because freedom “presupposes that in fundamental decisions, every person and every generation is a new beginning.” This means that it is hard to implement programs and make predictions. Goethe put it well: “What you have inherited from your fathers, earn over again for yourselves or it will not be yours.” What our ancestors perceived as a good, joining together after the dramatic time of World War II—beginning with a step so concrete as an agreement about coal and steel—seems unimportant to us now that we have developed something much bigger, but for them it was the concrete beginning of a path that

blossomed. Anything can be corrected, but what is important is not to undermine the achievements and progress obtained over many years. Yes, necessary corrections should be introduced, just as in any kind of work. Human beings can always be perfected, as can everything they build.

The voice of the Pope is one that catches many ears, but is also an isolated one in a world that seems to be going in a different, if not completely opposite, direction. Is now the time for Christians to be the “creative minorities” Benedict XVI spoke about?

Many people from different experiences recognize an originality and authority in the Pope. Precisely because now he seems isolated, it is easier to recognize the difference in him. Even though Christians may in some moments be numerically less significant, this recognition is a sign of the fact that their contributions are not for that reason any less relevant. At times, we have connected our ability to make an impact to numbers alone. Even today, many are afraid that if we do not occupy certain positions or maintain certain numbers, our presence will be irrelevant. Relevance, however, which is the historical impact of a presence, does not depend on numbers, but on the difference it represents. The Pope is a witness of this: in his apparent powerlessness, he makes an infinitely greater impact than any other power. A work of art is not determined by its dimensions, but by the beauty it manifests, the difference it carries within and communicates. This is what Christ brought, a difference that seems like a paradox to us. That God decided to go out to meet our fallen humanity by stripping Himself of His divinity seems absurd to us. It is the opposite of what we would have done. God is constantly forcing us to shift. But we can certainly say Christ contributed something to changing the world by stripping Himself of His divinity! This is the “unbalanced” power of Christianity, of the presence of Christians. Wherever it is authentically lived, it generates new life, even from within its apparent poverty or insignificance. The Church is something beautiful within the world that continually makes all things new. This is the great contribution—precisely now when our numbers are what they are—that Christians are called to make. For us, this is a new beginning; for the Church, it is an old story, as the *Epistle to Diognetus* testifies. This letter documents the true witness Christians, even in their apparent irrelevance, offered during the first centuries. We are still called to this witness today.