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“MAN CANNOT BE FULLY UNDERSTOOD WITHOUT CHRIST”

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I would like to recall an event which was the deepest expression of the collective spirit in which I have ever participated. I mean here the applause, enthusiastic and unbelievably long-lasting – over five minutes – with which the people gathered together on the 2 June 1979 on the *Plac Zwycięstwa* (Victory Square) in Warsaw, reacted to the following words of John Paul II:

To Poland, the Church brought Christ, the key to understanding that great and fundamental reality that is man. For man cannot be fully understood without Christ. Or rather, man is incapable of understanding himself fully without Christ. He cannot understand who he is, nor what his true dignity is, nor what his vocation is, nor what is his final end. He cannot understand any of this without Christ.

I remember as if it were only yesterday (for the recollections of such deep experiences do not grow old), that in these words I heard much more than what they unequivocally meant. I heard in them an open claim for the right of this society to Christ. During the years of Communist rule, Christ was regarded in public life *per non est*, and efforts were made to lock Him up tightly in our private beliefs. The Pope’s words made us aware of the abnormality of this situation. The people noticed the hidden accusation against the social order, from which Christ was to be deliberately excluded. The unique, enthusiastic reaction to this statement shows their intuitive understanding that the degradation of our human dignity suffered under the Communist rule resulted from the eradication of Christ from our public life.

From the point of view of the text, the Pope did not say anything new. He only repeated the thought of Pascal, renewed by the Second Vatican Council, a thought he then widely popularized. Let us look closer at the thought that

“man cannot be fully understood without Christ” as it was understood before proclamation on the *Plac Zwycięstwa* (Victory Square) in Warsaw.

Pascal was the first Christian thinker to make a conscious effort to stop the process of de-Christianisation that had remained almost unnoticed in his time. He understood the significance of the reduction of faith to the level of *Weltanschauung* (outlook on the world; though Pascal didn't know the expression *Weltanschauung*) as the source of de-Christianization. Therefore, in the apologetic work, which he only managed to write in the form of draft notes (posthumously published as *Pensées*), he intended to present the Christian faith as the truth powerful enough to overwhelm the whole of man and to actually transform his life.

Pascal's remark on man that interests us is a kind of gloss to the words of Christ from Mt 11 : 27 (Lk 10 : 22): “Not only do we know God by Jesus Christ alone, but we know ourselves only by Jesus Christ. We know life and death only through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ we do not know what is our life, nor our death, nor God, nor ourselves” (*Pensées*, No. 547, p. 147).¹

Obviously, it is not the philosophical genius of Christ our Lord that reveals to us the truth about ourselves, but His redeeming power. Pascal has no doubt that if we do not know ourselves, then this results from our sinfulness rather than from deficiency in our intelligence: “True nature being lost, everything becomes its nature; as the true good being lost, everything becomes its own true good” (*Pensées*, No. 426, p. 114). Thus in pre-Christian times man could have at most guessed the truth about himself – he could not have known it (*Pensées*, No. 432, p. 119). Only thanks to Christ are we able to really know our sin and to receive his absolution (*Pensées*, No. 545-546, p. 176) – and in this way to learn who man is, or I myself really am.

Pascal saw the danger of de-Christianization, but never personally faced a de-Christianized society. Certainly, he was unaware of the fact that the society which rejected Christ would be essentially different in its conception of God and man from the one that did not know Christ at all. Today, we already know that the atheism which was formed on the ruins of Christian faith has no counterparts beyond the circle of Christian culture. After a certain amount of reflection, we also begin to understand that despair about God is unavoidably followed by despair about man.

Sometimes even the very form of the statements proclaiming this despair about man includes the suggestion that it results from the renunciation of the Christian faith. The famous sentence of Max Scheler from his posthumously published article *Man and History* is clearly related to the above-quoted statement by Pascal. It is as if Scheler wanted to tell us: it finally became clear that even Christ could not help us to understand who we are! But let us ourselves

¹ B. P a s c a l, *Pensées*, transl. W. H. Trotter, London, New York 1940.

judge this irrevocably pessimistic diagnosis of anthropological consciousness in the post-Christian era:

In approximately ten centuries of history, this is the first in which man finds himself completely and utterly “problematic,” in which he no longer knows what he is and simultaneously *knows* that he does not have the answer.²

The two World Wars and two terrible totalitarian systems witnessed by the twentieth century are the most spectacular confirmation of this identity crisis in contemporary man.

This, however, began with the slogans calling for the bringing to light of human dignity, and telling man to become more deeply rooted in this world, since faith in eternal life allegedly makes him abandon so-called real life. In addition, it seemed to many people of good will that concord in society and mutual tolerance would be easier to establish and strengthen if public life were freed of any relationship with religion.

But when the postulate of the neutrality of popular *Weltanschauung* began to be put into practice, it was permitted to judge these changes only positively: as the liberation from the burdensome ballast of the requirements of religion, as the opportunity to organize public life exclusively according to the principles of common sense. People did not realize then that if social morality had been shaped by religious principles, “neutral common sense” would have postulated something completely different from the present case, in which even the moral commandments of the Decalogue had been called to question. Only today do we begin to understand that agnosticism is anything but an attitude beyond a specific *Weltanschauung*, that is but one like all the rest, and that the imposition of the irreligious behaviour following from it, like any other forced imposition of attitudes related to *Weltanschauung*, is the restriction of religious freedom (and is especially regrettable and should be denounced, if approved by the law).

In some countries, for the sake of this neutrality, religion has been almost entirely eliminated from public life. The victorious agnosticism has caused even more damage to our moral sense. It is not by accident that since the time of Auschwitz the most popular trends of ethical thought in Europe have been utilitarianism and hedonism. If one does not even know whether God exists, one cannot seriously ask oneself the question of the ultimate goal of human existence. Thus *bonum honestum*, the good that actualizes the goal of our humanity, had to be excluded from the moral thinking developed by the agnostics. Moral philosophers have limited their ambitions to the classification of the problems

² M. S c h e l e r, *Man and History*, in: *Philosophical Perspectives*, transl. O. A. Haac, Boston 1958, p. 65.

concerning our relation to the *bonum utile* (the good which in principle is relative, for it can always be thought of as the means to other goals) and to the *bonum delectabile* (which, if one ignores the *bonum honestum*, may easily be considered a sort of goal for human existence).

What began with theological agnosticism has led, with inevitable logic, to anthropological agnosticism. It seems that the attempts to bring human dignity to light by locking man exclusively within that which can be known empirically could not possibly reach a different conclusion. For when the only good a man is able to recognize is the pleasurable and the useful, such a man truly does not know who he really is, nor for whose sake he lives.

In short, processes of de-Christianization have caused that of which Pascal had merely had a presentiment, which the Second Vatican Council described as the reality of the bewilderment of contemporary man:

By contrast, when a divine substructure and the hope of life eternal are wanting, man's dignity is most grievously lacerated, as current events often attest. The riddles of life and death, of guilt and grief go unsolved, with the frequent result that men succumb to despair. (*Gaudium et spes*, No. 21)

Furthermore, contemporary man is not always fully aware of his despair:

No doubt very many whose lives are infected with a practical materialism are blinded against any sharp insight into this kind of dramatic situation. Or else, weighed down by wretchedness, they are prevented from giving the matter any thought.

Thinking that they have found serenity in an interpretation of reality everywhere proposed these days, many look forward to a genuine and total emancipation of humanity wrought solely by human effort. They are convinced that the future rule of man over the earth will satisfy every desire of his heart.

Nor are there lacking men who despair of any meaning to life and praise the boldness of those who think that human existence is devoid of any inherent significance and who strive to confer a total meaning on it by their own ingenuity alone. (*Gaudium et spes*, No. 10).

But neither ignorance of the fact that the situation is desperate, nor masking it with activities and hopes, changes the objective fact that the situation really is desperate. At the same time, the question of who I am and for whose sake I live cannot be removed from human consciousness; even our attempts to relativise the answers to these questions are unsuccessful.

The Church can afford to speak bluntly about the deep bewilderment of contemporary man, because the Church knows the way out. For the Church knows and proclaims Christ in whom "the mystery of man takes on light. [...] Through Christ and in Christ (even) the riddles of sorrow and death grow

meaningful. Apart from His gospel, they overwhelm us” (*Gaudium et spes*, No. 22).

It would certainly be possible to easily point to the affinity between some formulations of *Gaudium et spes*, No. 22 (and those included in the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, No. 10) and Pascal’s *Pensées*. But it was not Pascal who discovered this truth, that “without Christ man cannot fully understand himself”; it is deeply rooted in the New Testament, as well as in the whole Christian Tradition. Let us study its actual content.

I would especially point out three dimensions of this truth. In the first place, Christ – and especially his Incarnation and Cross – is a living testimony of the unbelievable *value* man represents in God’s eyes. “And God showed his love for us by sending his only Son into the world, so that we might have life through him” (1 Jn 4 : 9; see Jn 3 : 16). “Even before the world was made, God had already chosen us to be His through our union with Christ, so that we would be holy and without fault before him. Because of his love, God had already decided that through Jesus Christ, He would make us His sons” (Eph 1 : 4-5). “... God, who did not even keep back His own Son, but offered Him for us all!” (Rom 8 : 32).

“Let mankind raise his hope and recognize his own nature!” – says St. Augustine with enthusiasm for this love that God has for man – “Let him see how important is the place he has among the works of God!”³

Christ is not only the testimony of this astounding value that man has for God, but is also its source. For in the everlasting plan of his love God decided that man should “become like His Son” (Rom 8 : 29; see Gen 1 : 26). This is exactly why man has remained very dear to the loving Father, even when this likeness of the Son was so obscured and disfigured as to be lamentable. Even though man is sinful, he is so dear to the Everlasting Father that he never even hesitated “to deliver His own Son in order to ransom a slave” – as we sing in the paschal proclamation on Holy Saturday. Moreover, it is not quite fortunate to say that God loves us in spite of our sinfulness. We should rather say that God loves us against our sinfulness in order to save us from our sins. In any case, this divine love for us sinners is incomprehensible enough to make us fear. “Go away from me, Lord! I am a sinful man!” (Lk 5 : 8) – Simon Peter once blurted out.

Secondly: Christ helps us to understand ourselves, our own humanity, also in the sense that he lived his earthly life as a man in an *ideally perfect* way. Therefore, looking at Him, we can better understand what it means to really be a man.

³ S t. A u g u s t i n e, *De agone christiano*, XI, 12, in: *Patrologia latina*, J. P. Migne (ed.), Paris 1878, vol. XL, p. 297, transl. P. M.

Let us look, then, at Christ as Perfect Man. In His human nature he was also fully and entirely united with his Everlasting Father. "The Father is in me, and I am in the Father" (Jn 10 : 38) – He said about himself. "My food is to obey the will of the One who sent me" (Jn 4 : 34; see Mt 26 : 39; Phil 2 : 8). He was fully united with the Father not only in His deeds but also in His teaching: "What I teach is not my own teaching, but it comes from God who sent me" (Jn 7 : 16; see 8 : 28; 12 : 49). Even more so this Perfect Man did truly say: "Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father" (Jn 14 : 9; see 12 : 45).

In this way, Christ – to use the expression of the last Council – "fully reveals man to man himself" (*Gaudium et spes*, No. 22). He reveals that the source of the truth of our humanity is the fact that God loved us first, and that we will more completely realize ourselves as human beings as our relationship with God – to whom we are brought nearer only by Him, the only Mediator between God and man – deepens and becomes more all-encompassing.

As the Perfect Man, Christ is actually also a model for us, a model of what we should do in order to realise our humanity more and more deeply. First of all, He teaches us that also in the present world so much distorted by sin, one can, with God's assistance, remain obedient to the will of God – only it may not be easy: "If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget self, carry his cross, and follow me" (Mt 16 : 24). Ultimately, the carrying of the cross consists in the fact, that love – this love that comes from God – is the highest principle for man's life (see Jn 15 : 13; Eph 5 : 1 ff; 1 Jn 4 : 18-21).

In the light of Christ – the Perfect Man – the entire untruth and poverty of how we realize our humanity is also revealed. The measure of this untruth is our sin. Unfortunately, none of us can be said, like Christ, to be without sin. From this follows the understandable, though deplorable impulse that we as sinners feel to run away from Christ: "The light has come to into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil. Anyone who does evil things hates the light and will not come to the light, because he does not want his evil deeds to be revealed" (Jn 3 : 19-20).

Fortunately we can also react properly to this light which is Christ, we can accept Him as the Redeemer and let Him transform us: "I have come into the world as light, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness" (Jn 12 : 46). Christ, then, is not only a model for us. Even the mere human perfection of Christ – our Lord – so unimaginably surpasses us that if he were just a model for us, without simultaneously being our Redeemer, we would surely fall into despair.

I would suggest looking at the third dimension of the truth that "man cannot be fully understood without Christ" in the light of Eph 4 : 13: that our faith in Christ will make us "mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature." In other words: Christ helps us to understand ourselves primarily

in this sense – that he *heals our humanity* with his grace and gives us power to realize it more and more genuinely.

The New Testament describes this dimension of discovering what it means to be man, among other things, as the destruction of the old, unauthentic self, so that we could be overwhelmed by “the new self which is created in God’s likeness and reveals itself in the true life that is upright and holy” (Eph 4 : 24). Thus, Christ is the new Adam, through whom all our humanity is renewed (Rom 5 : 5-19). The end of this process of redemption will be universal resurrection, when the glorified humanity of Christ reveals itself as the source of the ultimate and complete renewal of all the redeemed (1 Cor 15 : 20-23).

Does it follow from this, then, that as long as I am a sinner, I am not yet fully a man? This is exactly what St. Ignatius of Antioch, the immediate disciple of Apostle John, wrote about himself. This is how he implored the Christians in Rome not to prevent him from passing through martyrdom on his way to eternal life:

Do not interfere with my life, do not wish me to die; you should not surrender to the world nor lead astray with material things the one who wants to belong to God. Allow me to receive the pure light. *When I reach it, I shall become man.*⁴

“Though I am imprisoned for the sake of the Name” – the aged Ignatius wrote in another letter – “I am not yet perfect in Jesus Christ. Only now am I beginning to be a disciple, and I speak to you as to my fellow disciples in learning”⁵ (*Epistle to Ephesians*, 3, 1). St. Ignatius perhaps would not write that “man cannot be fully understood without Christ.” But he would write that “only in Christ can man really and ever more fully understand himself.”

Personally, I have no doubt that this is exactly what was meant by Pascal, Vatican Council II, and John Paul II.

Translated by *Patrycja Mikulska*

⁴ See St. Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Romans*, 6, 2, in: *Corpus Ignatianum*, London 1849, p. 50.

⁵ See St. Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Ephesians*, 3, 1, in: *ibid.*, p. 20.