

Retrieving the Tradition

DIFFICULTIES CONFRONTING THE FAITH IN EUROPE TODAY¹

• Joseph Ratzinger •

“We can give a meaningful answer to the questions raised only if we . . . are able to express the logic of the Faith in its integrity, the good sense and reasonableness of its view of reality and life.”



As bishops who bear responsibility for the faith of the Church in our countries, we ask ourselves where especially do the difficulties lie which people have with the faith today and how can we rightly reply to them.

We need no extensive search in order to answer the first of these questions. There exists something like a litany of objections to the practice and teaching of the Church, and nowadays its regular recitation has become like the performance of a duty for

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progressive-thinking Catholics. We can ascertain the principal elements of this litany: the rejection of the Church's teaching about contraception, which means the placing upon the same moral level of every kind of means for the prevention of conception upon whose application only individual "conscience" may decide; the rejection of every form of "discrimination" as to homosexuality and the consequent assertion of a moral equivalence for all forms of sexual activity as long as they are motivated by "love" or at least do not hurt anyone; the admission of the divorced who remarry to the Church's sacraments; and the ordination of women to the priesthood.

As we can see, there are quite different issues linked together in this litany. The first two claims pertain to the field of sexual morality; the second two to the Church's sacramental order. A closer look makes it clear, however, that these four issues, their differences notwithstanding, are very much linked together. They spring from one and the same vision of humanity within which there operates a particular notion of human freedom. When this background is borne in mind, it becomes evident that the litany of objections goes even deeper than it appears at first glance.

What does this vision of humanity, upon which this litany depends, look like on closer scrutiny? Its fundamental characteristics are as diffuse as the claims which derive from it, and so it can be easily traced. We find our starting point in the plausible assertion that modern man would find it difficult to relate to the Church's traditional sexual morality. Instead, it is said, he has come to terms with his sexuality in a differentiated and less confining way and thus urges a revision of standards which are no longer acceptable in the present circumstances, no matter how meaningful they may have been under past historical conditions. The next step, then, consists in showing how we today have finally discovered our rights and the freedom of our conscience and how we are no longer prepared to subordinate it to some external authority. Furthermore, it is now time that the fundamental relationship between man and woman be reordered, that outmoded role expectations be overturned and that complete equality of opportunity be accorded women on all levels and in all fields. The fact that the Church, as the particularly conservative institution that she is, might not go along with this line of thinking would certainly not be surprising. If the Church, however, would wish to promote human freedom, then ultimately

she will be obliged to set aside the theological justification of old social taboos, and the most timely and vital sign of such a desire at the present moment would be her consent to the ordination of women to the priesthood.

The roots of this opposition continue to emerge in various forms and make it clear that what we are dealing with in our imaginary but quite pointed litany is nothing less than a very coherent reorientation.

Its key concepts present themselves in the words “conscience” and “freedom,” which are supposed to confer the aura of morality upon changed norms of behavior that at first glance would be plainly labelled as a surrender of moral integrity, the simplifications of a lax conscience.

No longer is conscience understood as that knowledge which derives from a higher form of knowing. It is instead the individual’s self-determination which may not be directed by someone else, a determination by which each person decides for himself what is moral in a given situation.

The concept “norm”—or what is even worse, the moral law itself—takes on negative shades of dark intensity: an external rule may supply models for direction but it can in no case serve as the ultimate arbiter of one’s obligation. Where such thinking holds sway, the relationship of man to his body necessarily changes too. This change is described as a liberation, when compared to the relationship obtaining until now, like an opening up to a freedom long unknown. The body then comes to be considered as a possession which a person can make use of in whatever way seems to him most helpful in attaining “quality of life.” The body is something that one has and that one uses. No longer does man expect to receive a message from his bodiliness as to who he is and what he should do, but definitely, on the basis of his reasonable deliberations and with complete independence, he expects to do with it as he wishes. In consequence, there is indeed no difference whether the body be of the masculine or the feminine sex, the body no longer expresses being at all, on the contrary, it has become a piece of property. It may be that man’s temptation has always lain in the direction of such control and the exploitation of goods. At its roots, however, this way of thinking first became an actual possibility through the fundamental separation—not a theoretical but a practical and constantly practiced separation—of sexuality and

procreation. This separation was introduced with the pill and has been brought to its culmination by genetic engineers so that man can now “make” human beings in the laboratory. The material for doing this has to be procured by actions deliberately carried out for the sake of the planned results which no longer involve interpersonal human bonds and decisions in any way. Indeed, where this kind of thinking has been completely adopted, the difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality as well as that between sexual relations within or outside marriage have become unimportant. Likewise divested of every metaphysical symbolism is the distinction between man and woman, which is to be regarded as the product of reinforced role expectations.

It would be interesting to follow in detail this revolutionary vision about man which has appeared behind our rather haphazardly concocted litany of objections to the Church’s teaching. Without a doubt this will be one of the principal challenges for anthropological reflection in coming years. This reflection will have to sort out meticulously where quite meaningful corrections to traditional notions appear and where there begins a truly fundamental opposition to faith’s vision of man, an opposition that admits no possibility of compromise but places squarely before us the alternative of believing or not. Such reflection cannot be conducted in a context which is more interested in discerning the questions which we have to pose for ourselves today than in looking for the answers. Let us leave off this dispute for now; our question instead must be, how does it happen that values which presuppose such a background have become current among Christians?

It has become quite evident at the present time that our litany of objections does not turn upon a few isolated conflicts over this or that sacramental practice in the Church, nor is it over the extended application of this or that rule. Each of these controversies rests upon a much more far-reaching change of “paradigms,” that is, of the basic ideas of being and of human obligation. This is the case even if only a small number of those who mouth the words of our litany would be aware of the change involved.

They all breathe in, so to speak, the atmosphere of this particular vision of man and the world which convinces them of the plausibility of this one opinion while removing other views from consideration. Who would not be for conscience and freedom and against legalism and constraint? Who wishes to be put into the

position of defending taboos? If the questions are framed in this way, the faith proclaimed by the Magisterium is already manoeuvred into a hopeless position. It collapses all by itself because it loses its plausibility according to the thought patterns of the modern world, and is looked upon by progressive contemporaries as something that has been long superseded.

We can then give a meaningful answer to the questions raised, only if we do not permit ourselves to be drawn into the battle over details and are able instead to express the logic of the faith in its integrity, the good sense and reasonableness of its view of reality and life. We can give a proper answer to the conflicts in detail only if we keep all the relationships in view. It is their disappearance which has robbed the Faith of its reasonableness.

In this context, I would like to list three areas within the world-view of the Faith which have witnessed a certain kind of reduction in the last centuries, a reduction which has been gradually preparing the way for another “paradigm.”

1. In the first place, we have to point out the almost complete disappearance of the doctrine on creation from theology.

As typical instances, we may cite two compendia of modern theology in which the doctrine on creation is eliminated as part of the content of the faith and is replaced by vague considerations from existential philosophy, the 1973 edition of the ecumenical “*Neues Glaubensbuch*” published by J. Feiner and L. Vischer, and the basic catechetical work published in Paris in 1984, “*La foi des catholiques*.” In a time when we are experiencing the agonizing of creation against man’s work and when the question of the limits and standards of creation upon our activity has become the central problem of our ethical responsibility, this fact must appear quite strange. Notwithstanding all this, it remains always a disagreeable fact that “nature” should be viewed as a moral issue. An anxious and unreasonable reaction against technology is also closely associated with the inability to discern a spiritual message in the material world. Nature still appears as an irrational form even while evincing mathematical structures which we can study technically. That nature has a mathematical intelligibility is to state the obvious, the assertion that it also contains in itself a moral intelligibility, however, is rejected as metaphysical fantasy. The demise of metaphysics goes hand in hand with the displacement of the teaching on creation.

Their place has been taken by a philosophy of evolution (which I would like to distinguish from the scientific hypothesis of evolution). This philosophy intends to discard the laws of nature so that the management of its development may make a better life possible. Nature, which ought really to be the teacher along this path, is instead a blind mistress, combining by unwitting chance what man is supposed to simulate now with full consciousness. His relationship to nature (which is, to be sure, no creation) remains that of one who acts upon it; it is in no way that of a learner. It persists as a relationship of domination, then, resting upon the presumption that rational calculation may be as clever as “evolution” and can therefore lift the world to new heights. The process of development up to this point had to struggle along without human intervention.

Conscience, to which appeal is made, is essentially mute, just as nature, the teacher, is blind, it just computes which action holds the best chances for betterment. This can (and should, according to the logic of the point of departure) occur in a collective way, for what is needed is a party which, as the vanguard of history, takes evolution in hand while exacting the absolute subordination of the individual to it. Otherwise, things occur individualistically and conscience then becomes the expression of the subject’s autonomy which, in terms of the grand world picture, can only seem absurd arrogance.

It is quite obvious that none of these solutions is helpful, and this is the basis for the deep desperation of mankind today, a desperation which hides behind an official façade of optimism. Nevertheless there is still a silent awareness of the need of an alternative to lead us out of the blind alleys of our plausibilities, and perhaps there is also, more than we think, a silent hope that a renewed Christianity may supply the alternative. This can be accomplished, however, only if the teaching on creation is developed anew. Such an undertaking, then, ought to be regarded as one of the most pressing tasks of theology today.

We have to make evident once more what is meant by the world’s having been created “in wisdom” and that God’s creative act is something quite other than the “bang” of a primeval explosion. Only then can conscience and norm enter again into proper relationship. For then it will become clear that conscience is not some individualistic (or collective) calculation; rather it is a “consciens,” a “knowing along with” creation and, through creation,

with God the Creator. Then, too, it will be rediscovered that man's greatness does not lie in the miserable autonomy of proclaiming himself his one and only master, but in the fact that his being allows the highest wisdom, truth itself, to shine through. Then it will become clear that man is so much the greater the more he is capable of hearing the profound message of creation, the message of the Creator. And then it will be apparent how harmony with creation, whose wisdom becomes our norm, does not mean a limitation upon our freedom but is rather an expression of our reason and our dignity. Then the body also is given its due honor: it is no longer something "used," but is the temple of authentic human dignity because it is God's handiwork in the world. Then is the equal dignity of man and woman made manifest precisely in the fact that they are different. One will then begin to understand once again that their bodiliness reaches the metaphysical depths and is the basis of a symbolic metaphysics whose denial or neglect does not ennoble man but destroys him.

2. The decline of the doctrine on creation includes the decline of metaphysics, man's imprisonment in the empirical, as we have said. When this occurs, however, there is also of necessity a weakening of Christology. The Word who was in the beginning quite disappears. Creative wisdom is no longer a theme for reflection. Inevitably the figure of Jesus Christ, deprived of its metaphysical dimension, is reduced to a purely historical Jesus, to an "empirical" Jesus, who, like every empirical fact, contains only what is capable of happening. The central title of his dignity, "Son," becomes void where the path to the metaphysical is cut off. Even this title becomes meaningless since there is no longer a theology of being sons of God, for it is replaced by the notion of autonomy.

The relationship of Jesus with God is now expressed in terms such as "representative" or the like, but as regards what this means, one must seek an answer by the reconstruction of the "historical Jesus."

There are today two principal models for the alleged figure of the historical Jesus: the bourgeois-liberal and the Marxist-revolutionary. Jesus was either the herald of a liberal morality, struggling against every kind of "legalism" and its representatives; or he was a subversive who can be considered as the deification of the class struggle and its religious symbolic figure.

Evident in the background are the two aspects of the modern notion of freedom, which are seen embodied in Jesus; this is what makes him God's representative. The unmistakable symptom of the present decline of Christology is the disappearance of the Cross and, consequently, the meaninglessness of the Resurrection, of the Paschal Mystery. In the liberal model, the Cross is an accident, a mistake, the result of short-sighted legalism. It cannot therefore be made the subject of theological speculation; indeed it really should not have occurred and a proper liberalism makes it in any event superfluous.

In the second model Jesus is the failed revolutionary. He can now symbolize the suffering of the oppressed class and thus foster the growth of class consciousness. From this viewpoint the Cross can even be given a certain sense, an important meaning, but one which is radically opposed to the witness of the New Testament.

Now in both these versions there runs a common thread, namely, that we must be saved not through the Cross, but from the Cross. Atonement and forgiveness are misunderstandings from which Christianity has to be freed. The two fundamental points of the Christian faith of the New Testament writers and of the Church in every age (the divine sonship understood in a metaphysical sense and the Paschal Mystery) are eliminated or at least bereft of any function. It is obvious that with such a basic reinterpretation all the rest of Christianity is likewise altered—the understanding of what the Church is, the liturgy, spirituality, etc.

Naturally these crude denials, which I have described here with all the severity of their consequences, are seldom spoken of so openly. The movements, however, are clear and they do not confine themselves to the realm of theology alone. For quite some time they have entered into preaching and catechesis; on account of the ease of their transmission, they are even more pronounced in these fields than in strictly theological literature. Quite clearly, then, the real decisions today fall once again in the field of Christology; everything else follows from that.

3. Finally, I should like to refer briefly to a third field of theological reflection which is threatened by a thoroughgoing reduction of the contents of faith, namely, eschatology. Belief in eternal life has hardly any role to play in preaching today. A friend of mine, recently deceased, an exegete of note, once told me of

some Lenten sermons he had heard at the beginning of the 1970s. In the first sermon, the preacher explained to the faithful that Hell does not exist; in the second, Purgatory went the same way; in the third, he eventually undertook the difficult task of trying to convince his hearers that even Heaven does not exist and that we should seek our paradise here on earth. To be sure, it is seldom as drastic as that, but diffidence in speaking about the hereafter has become commonplace.

The Marxist accusation that Christians justified the injustices of this world with the consolation of the world to come is deeply rooted, and the present social problems are now indeed so serious that they require all the powers of moral commitment. This moral requirement will not at all be called into question by the one who views the Christian life in the perspective of eternity, for eternal life cannot be prepared for otherwise than in our present existence. Nicholas Cabasilas, for example, expressed this truth in a wonderful reflection in the fourteenth century. Only those attain to it (that is, the future life) who already are its friends and have ears to hear. For it is not there that friendship is begun, that the ear is opened, that the wedding garment is readied and all else prepared, it is rather this present life which is the work place where all this is fashioned. For just as nature prepares the embryo, even while it leads a dark and confined existence, for living in the light and forms it, as it were, according to the pattern of the life that is to come, just so does it happen with the saints. Only the exigency of eternal life confers its absolute urgency on the moral duty of this life. If, however, heaven is only something “ahead” of us and no longer “above” us, then the interior tension of human existence and its communal responsibility are slackened. For *we* indeed are not “ahead,” and whether this prospect of what is ahead is a heaven for those others who appear to us to have gone “ahead,” we are not in a position to determine, since they are as free and as subject to temptation as we are ourselves.

Here we find the deception inherent in the idea of the “better world,” which, nonetheless, appears today even among Christians as the true goal of our hope and the genuine standard of morality. The “Kingdom of God” has been almost completely substituted in the general awareness, as far as I can see, by the Utopia of a better future world for which we labor and which becomes the true reference point of morality—a morality which thus blends again

with a philosophy of evolution and history, and creates norms for itself by calculating what can offer better conditions of life.

I do not deny that it is in just this way that the idealistic energies of young people are unleashed and that the results are fruitful in terms of new aspirations to selfless activity. As an all-embracing norm for human endeavor, however, the future does not suffice. Where the Kingdom of God is reduced to the “better world” of tomorrow, the present will ultimately assert its rights against some imaginary future. The escape into the world of drugs is the logical consequence of the idolizing of Utopia. Since this has difficulty in arriving, man draws it to himself or throws himself headlong into it. It is dangerous, therefore, if the better world terminology predominates in prayers and sermons and inadvertently replaces the faith with a placebo.

All that has been said here may appear to many to be all too negative. It was not intended, of course, to describe the situation of the Church as a whole, with all her positive and negative elements. It was rather a case of setting out the obstacles to the faith in the European context.

Within this limited theme, I have not claimed to present an exhaustive analysis. My sole intention was to examine, beyond the individual problems which are constantly surfacing, the deepest motives which give rise to the individual difficulties in ever changing forms.

Only by learning to understand that fundamental trait of modern existence which refuses to accept the faith before discussing all its contents, will we be able to regain the initiative instead of simply responding to the questions raised. Only then can we reveal the faith as the alternative which the world awaits after the failure of the liberalistic and Marxist experiments. This is today’s challenge to Christianity, herein lies our great responsibility as Christians at the present time. □

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