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ESCHATOLOGY: END OF TIME OR FREEDOM FROM TIME

When the Church speaks about “eschatology”, She declares her faith (which in Greek means “trust”), and her hope to Christ. She does not speak about what She knows as historical experience; She speaks about what She hopes to come.

The ecclesial event is not another form of religion in the history of humanity; neither is it the best religion among all the others. Religion offers a codification of “convictions” about the life-after-death and the end of the world. Religions are created from the “natural”, instinctive need of man to rest upon some kind of metaphysical certainties. Primarily, religions come out of the need for psychological reassurance that man’s ego will “be saved”, will remain in existence in eternity and will roll in happiness for time everlasting.

The Church is an event of a different order. She proclaims the ability of man to transcend the necessity of his created and mortal nature: She evangelizes freedom from time, place, decay and death; freedom from the instinctive need of man to stick with religion. In the Church “the boundaries of nature are conquered”. “The imaginary idols” are also conquered: And one of them is the intellectualist and psychological false-consolation religion offers by referring to “eschatology”.

To be able just to touch the reality (the truth) of the Church, we should always keep our eyes open on the divergence between *the Church* and *religion*. We should never forget the wise saying: In an airplane entering a zone of strong turbulences no one declares himself an “atheist”. Everyone is a believer, out of an instinctive need and a biological necessity.

The Church knows nothing about eschatology. She trusts in the love of God and She keeps hope alive. Trustfulness is another kind of knowledge, neither psychological nor “mystic”. It is a kind of knowledge that results from *relation* and we get a taste of it every time we truly fall in love. It is the same knowledge that the word of the Gospel conveys. This is why the ecclesial language is not submitted to the language of science, our everyday language, which is bounded by the limits of this world (Wittgenstein). The Gospel of the Church becomes flesh in our language but it is not contained in the meanings of this language, it cannot be exhausted by the implications of our worldly experience. The Church proclaims, the things that “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man” (*1 Kor. 2, 9*), and She refers to “unspeakable words, that are not for man to utter” (*2 Kor. 12, 4*).

So, it is possible for man to hear the language of the Church and give the words different significance and perceive them in a totally different context from that of the ecclesial language —as if they were words of any religion. It is possible for such a man to chant with the Church that “death is conquered by death” and at the same time to think that he is going to conquer death through his individual virtue, or through the retribution for his religious achievements. Then, it is possible to witness again the same thing that happened with the Scribes and Pharisees, the par excellence religious people in the era of Christ: They were standing in front of the incarnate Son of the Father, the Logos of the Principal Cause of existence, clothed in a flesh so corporeal and limited, as corporeal and limited as the language of His Gospel is. But, alas, they did not even suspected what revelation this corporeal individuality manifested; they believed (with their religious faith) that he was demonized and that “by the prince of the devils” he conquers the limits of nature (*Matth. 12, 24*).

The experience of those who participate in the ecclesial event tells us that there is a necessary presupposition in order to approach the word of the Gospel: The presupposition is *apophatism*, which is the apophatic interpretation of meanings. Let me remind you of the semantic of apophatism: It is our refusal to exhaust the truth in formulations — there is a distance between the comprehension of the words of truth and the knowledge of truth, which can only be covered through experience.

We are unable to speak even one word about the eschatological hope of the Church, if we do not struggle to keep the radical apophatism of the ecclesial language. If we refuse the apophatic word and want to be fair and consistent with the language of the common human experience, then we have to compromise with a modest agnosticism. We know nothing of life after death. All we know, out of empirical experience, is what Saint Anastasy of Sinai witnesses: That the human *nature* is created and so, unavoidably mortal —that with death it is the whole psycho-somatic being of man that comes to an end; it is all his psycho and mental functions that cease to function: his self-conscience, reasoning, judgment, memory, imagination, desire. Man “is no longer able to function through the parts of the body in order to speak, to recall to memory, to distinguish, to desire, to reason, to be impassioned, to see” (*Odigos*, Migne P.G. 89, 36).

Man of our days, all of us who live in the terms of our contemporary dominant culture, are used to consider and understand things only through the addictions and reflexes that our daily life dictates —we all share a common culture (a way of life and thinking). We are used to attest and testify the facts and events of our natural reality. Occasionally, we are even able to predict a thing that is going to happen in the future (like an eclipse of the sun or a change in the weather), based again on the mathematical (or statistical) processing of our documented observations.

Indeed, in the past century, we witnessed the appearance of a reversion of our methods of evidence, primarily in the field of the ultra exact sciences that our culture generated: We are not only able to make a prediction based on the statistical processing of our current observations; we may, reversely, deduce conclusions by studying the apparent, (functionally certified) and ulterior purpose (or the ultimate “*end*”) of the system we examine. An example of such a reversion of the evidential method is the so-called “*Anthropic Principle*”, a methodology used in quantum Physics.

Man exists, the “*Anthropic Principle*” says. Therefore, among the still unknown factors that contributed to the development and functioning of the universe, we consider as being more probable those ones that make possible the appearance of life and of rational life on earth. I would dare to think that, respectively, the ecclesial experience says: There is the beauty of the cosmos, which constitutes a *quality*, a mode of existence. This quality presupposes a receiver and a valuator of its mode: man himself. In Greek we name “*beauty*” by using the word “*κάλλος*” (and the transcription of “*κάλλος*” in the English language is the word “*call*”, that is “*invitation*”). “*Κάλλος*” then, is the reason and the potential for man to constitute a relation with cosmos; “*Κάλλος*”, “*beauty*” is a call for relation —“for, since it summons everything towards itself, it is called «*κάλλος*» (*beauty*) ”. (*P.G.* 3, 701 CD). If the reality of universe exists only in the mode of “*beauty*”, that is as an invitation for *relation* between man and cosmos, then the functional purpose or the *end* of the universe is *relation* itself. And then, the universe may be considered as ephemeral (passing), but not man who is a coefficient and coordinator of the purpose of the universe itself.

We speak about *relation* and we mean the knowledge coming from empirical immediacy; we mean a revelation: It is the potential to join the poet through his poetry, the painter through his painting, the melodist through his “*cantus firmus*”; to meet the personal otherness of the creator through his natural capacities or energies. This relation or meeting cannot be extorted. It is only presented, it is a gift; it is just an event of freedom. The knowledge that is granted by a relation, cannot be replaced by any “*objective*” information or teaching.

To have the experience of the personal otherness of a creator Logos who is a passionate lover of man is a revelation that is granted, not imposed. It cannot be gained as a scholarship through the comprehension of a teaching, but only as an experience through the adventure of a *relation*. Relation is always an adventure of freedom and frequently it is a tragic adventure. For, interwoven with the natural beauty, there is natural *evil* (horror, agony, grief and menace). The natural evil is a parallel contributor of the cosmic being: It is a canvass or field where the existential freedom of man unfolds.

To savor the historical presence of the incarnate Eros of God for man, to experience the presence of Christ as a Groom through a loving *relationship* with those who witness His presence, is an empirical knowledge; not information nor learning. It is a relationship that can only function as self-abandonment and self-transcendence, which means, it is revealed as an act of entrustment that constitutes the event and body of the communion of existence: the Church itself. My participation to the ecclesial event is an empirical knowledge of the *end* or ultimate purpose of my existence: it is a foretaste of the fulfillment of the relationship, which is the same hope and purpose that the Church proclaims for the end of times: “That they all be one, as thou Father art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us” (*John* 17, 21-23).

In the Church, we need no information for the end of times, other than the empirical knowledge that the achievement of relation and love provides. We are not interested in the perpetuation of our ego, as long as Him whom we love exists. “None of us lives for himself only, none of us dies for himself only. If we live, it is for the Lord that we live, and if we die, it is for the Lord that we die. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (*Rom.* 17, 7-8). I would dare to say that the same thing that Apostle Paul witnesses, an “*atheist*” of our contemporary way of life turned up to tragically express as a yearning: Jean-Paul Sartre

wrote: “Let Him send me to hell, a hundred or a thousand times, so long as He exists”! The thirst of Sartre could have been an example of the hope for the end of times as a loving expectation.

“We expect what God has promised: new heavens and a new earth” (2 Peter 3, 13). Again, the reasoning of our expectation is the reasoning of relation; not the one that is based on the conclusions of the physical (scientific) observation. We expect that at the end, every tiny expression of God’s love will be saved: not only the beauty of a trivial wild flower but the breathtaking harmony of the rotation of galaxies, too; not only the astonishing beauty of a leopard’s gallopade but also the dazzle in a child’s eyes or the same dazzle that is transformed to a smile at the lips of his mother.

We expect the beauty and wisdom of heavens and earth, that is the offspring of the word of God and His creative energies, to be saved. “He spoke and they were made, and the word of the Lord lasts for ever”. We expect the whole creation to be redeemed, delivered from decay, grief and death –the attributes of the created. We expect everything to be saved and become one with the imperishable flesh of the Son, enthroned on the right of the Father. We expect time itself to be saved; not as an endless and thus scary sequence of past and future; but as a freedom from any predetermination, as a potential of a wonderful transformation “from glory to glory”; a potential that guides us to experience a “face-to-face” relation with Christ the Groom, the Lover of our souls.

For the present mentality of our language and science, but also for our own disbelief as well, the foresaid eschatological expectation is nothing but “idle tales” or prattle (*Luk.* 24,11); it is just an emotional fantasy, a “projection” of our psychological wishfullness. However, in the Church we are still chanting: “Your creative command is to me both cause and hypostasis”. This song is another kind of ontology; a revelation of a different mode of existence. We use to say that it is not our corporeal nature that constitutes our hypostasis (our real existence); it is the summoning, the call of God that constitutes us into *being* out of nihility. We exist as a hypostatic response to the call of God, Who calls us to realize existence as a *relationship* with Him.

Today, the naivety to identify the human existence with the biological and psychological individuality turns out to be an inconsiderate delusion –even the sciences of our era attests that “the subject-self is born at the place of the Other”. Our existence is defined only as referential, as a yearning for life in terms of relation.

In the Church we know nothing about eschatology. And this ignorance is actually “superior of any knowledge”.