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# **“GOD”, ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE 21st. CENTURY**

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1. Love to believe: believe to love
2. The god who comes back to re-build communion
3. God actively present for ever amongst men.
4. The transparency of an experience of god: god is three in one and one in three
5. To believe means to be converted to love

Notes

## **1. LOVE TO BELIEVE: BELIEVE TO LOVE**

“The time will surely come when man, in the midst of his most profound and radical failure, will wake up as from a dream to find himself face to face with God, realising that even in his atheism he has always been in God. When this happens, he will find himself as if bound to him, not in order to escape from men, from the world or from himself, but rather in order to bear and sustain himself in being. God does not reveal himself primarily as a negation, but on the contrary, as a foundation, as he who makes existence possible... Man does not primarily encounter his God through the dialectic of his needs and helplessness. Man finds God as the plenitude of his existence and of his life. Anything other than this is to fall into a miserable concept of God.”(X. Zubiri, *El Hombre y Dios*, Madrid, 1984, p. 344)

### **1.1. Awakening from a dream**

There are moments when, if we dare to be absolutely sincere with ourselves, we believers can experience a sensation that to talk about God at the tail-end of the 20th. century is somewhat inevitably anachronistic, a thing of the past. Now that science seems to have investigated everything -though we are far from having resolved all the mysteries of the world-, can we go on talking about this strange extra-cosmic reality, a reality which nobody has ever seen and whose very existence cannot be proven? Can we allow ourselves not to grapple on to a world which daily opens up to us new possibilities, so as to put our hope in a lofty and faraway God, a God of whom there is no guarantee that he apportos anything positive to those who say they believe in him? To go on stubbornly talking about God, is that not merely trying to preserve a relic of a past which is no longer ours? Furthermore, to believe or not to believe in God, does it honestly make any difference to the lives of men?

On the other hand, there are moments in which we seem to realize with sufficient clarity that to dispense entirely with the idea of God would lead to a drastic rupture with much that seems to be important or really significant for ourselves and for the world itself. We can perceive that to believe in God is not merely to admit the existence of a strange uncontrolled extra-cosmic being -a sort of super U.F.O.-, the denial of which would not affect our own existence very much.

Bound to fatuity?

When I ask myself whether I have to believe in God or not, I have the feeling that it is a question of admitting or not admitting an ultimate principle of intelligibility, of meaning, of value of all things, including my own life; a principle which acts as the key to understanding and to valuing what I am and what I do, which supports the context of every thing that surrounds me. Belief in God means, in the end, to confess that one cannot be fully convinced, nor can hope to convince others, that everything that happens, everything I behold, everything I know and love is simply an accident of “chance or necessity”. It means not being able to resign myself to the fact that everything that comes to pass is nothing other than a stupid story -or a fatal story- told by an idiot (Dostoevski). It means

postulating according to the deep demands of my own perception and evaluation of things, that there is an ultimate and global reason for the existence and value of all things and that the world as a whole cannot merely be a fortuitous and abundant collection of things and events without any meaning whatsoever.

By denying God I cannot but perceive that I would launch myself towards fatuity, or fatality or the absurd of a radical unintelligibility of everything. It is true that there are many things that *I* am incapable of explaining, and even that may appear absurd *to me*: but to believe in God is to affirm that, even so, I cannot simply resign myself to consider those things radically absurd *in themselves*. Amidst so many enigmas and sufferings, there are so many good and beautiful things in this world that I feel that I cannot commit myself to declare it all pure darkness inconsistent and chaotic.

Could I dare to defend the tenet of philistines of all times, that the only true reality that exists is that which I can see and touch? Or else, has anyone proved the validity of the idealistic principle whereby the human mind is the proper measure of all reality? Can there be no other reality besides that which I can see and touch, besides what I can directly understand? Can I not feel entitled to suspect that the depth and greatness of reality may be greater than that which I can immediately grasp?

Faith in God arises from the capacity to be open to the ultimate depth and consistence of the truth and the good of reality, which may go well beyond that which I can immediately grasp. As Ortega y Gasset used to put it, an irreligious attitude may show “a lack of respect towards that which is above us, that which is beside us and that which is beneath us”<sup>1</sup>. Maurici Serrahima expresses it very poignantly:

“The acceptance of a mysterious Cause and of a mysterious Origin seems to me to be more reasonable and it satisfies me more than does the admission of a mysterious absence of cause or of origin, or also than the admission of a necessary and insuperable ignorance of any possible cause or origin... It is what my unforgettable friend, E. Mounier used to say: ‘The Absurd is absurd’. Or to put it in the words of another great friend, J. M. Capdevila: ‘I feel inclined to prefer the Mysteries of light to the Mysteries of Darkness’. Therefore, it is Reason itself and not Faith alone, which, when I have to decide about the foundation of Reality, leads me to admit a mysterious but positive absolute Existence and to deny a chaotic Nonsense, which, after all, would be equally mysterious”<sup>2</sup>.

Ultimately, therefore, believing means loving. Loving the world and all things in it to the point of finding it impossible to declare it all futile or absurd. Loving reason to the point of finding it impossible to declare it fatally frustrating and frustrated. Loving men so much that it would be impossible to admit that they just might be the fleeting whim of a shapeless fortuity.

## **1.2. A luminous darkness**

If, when I question myself about the ultimate meaning of the world and of my own existence, the option to believe appears to be the most reasonable, nevertheless I must be fully conscious that I can only speak about that ultimate principle, which we usually call God, with the utmost caution.

One has to be aware that this God is something rather more postulated than properly known. We recognize him as the unknown Necessary; the non-comprehensible

Truth which sustains all the truths that we understand; the fundamental Good which sustains the many goods we enjoy.

To affirm God, is to affirm him as that which we cannot explain, as that which is absolutely first and gratuitous. God, the ultimate and supreme explanation of all things, cannot be explained by anything else: he is the foundation of all things, but he can not be founded himself by anything else. For that reason to believe in God is to open oneself and to give oneself over to the unexplained founding Mystery of all things; it is to feel and believe oneself caught up in this Mystery of gratuity which cannot be properly known or explained, demonstrated or proven from any basis, despite the fact that it is postulated, implicated and given as the basis of all things.

Saint Thomas expressed it perfectly in the following words: "The supreme knowledge of God is to recognize him as the unknowable, that is, to recognize that what God is in himself stretches far beyond all that we can ever know about him"<sup>3</sup>.

God must always be accepted as a "Mystery": not a mystery of radical unintelligibility, as would be the Absurd, Chance, or fatal Necessity, but rather a Mystery that makes and founds sense, a Mystery of light, or, as the ancients used to say, a "Luminous Darkness".

"It is not that this Mystery surpasses our intelligence: it illuminates it. It is not that the intelligence finds in it nothing to know; it is simply that what it finds is beyond its comprehension and slips away as it were over a flat and shining surface. A mystery is something that does not proceed from us and is beyond our grasp; and yet, it is that in which we live. It is not a barrier which is forcefully imposed on our intellect establishing its limits; rather it is a vivifying atmosphere towards which our intellect feels drawn and in which it finds an inexhaustible and ever pure air. Its darkness is not that of the night which blinds us and prevents us from seeing; it is something which originates in the limits of our capacity to see. A limitation which diminishes gradually as we penetrate deeper into the light"<sup>4</sup>.

### **1.3 "thou shall not take the name of god in vain". God and the idols.**

Therefore, God is not an object of a knowledge similar to the knowledge we have of the other things in our world. Because of that do we say "we believe" in God: God is an object of faith.

If we should lose our sense of the mystery of God, we would be treading on dangerous ground. If we gave way to the pretention of manipulating the mystery of God, of imprisoning him within our schemes and concepts, or, even worse, in our narrow self-interests, the true and real God would simply slip through our fingers. If we tried to wish to understand him, imagine him or construct him according to the canons of our minds or of our desires, then, without our noticing it, we would find ourselves faced with an "idol", a deformed God, created according to human design.

The grotesque stone or wooden figures fabricated by so-called primitive men are not the only idols: many theological and religious constructions, manipulated by highly cultured and devout people, should also be considered idols. Many people who consider themselves to be profoundly religious, may simply be idolatrous of their God, that is, a God, which they themselves have constructed or imagined, or which has been imposed on

them by others, according to their prejudices, their particular tastes or their interests.

The worst of this type of idolatry is that it can have grave consequences, since many pious people can, in the name of their God (which in this case is in the name of their idol), indulge in and justify enormous perversities.

“The word God is the most abused among human words. None is so confused or disfigured. Generations of men have unburdened on it the heavy load of their lives and have thereby defiled it. It is a word that lies in the dust, trampled by the weight of those burdens: generations of mankind in their religious struggles have killed and have been killed in the name of that word, which now is brutally stained with blood. Man can draw up any hideous figure and write below it the name of God”<sup>5</sup>.

It so happens that God, who ought to be the principle of intelligability and of meaning, can actually be easily so manipulated and distorted as to become a principle of destruction and of death. For that reason the crucial point is not to ask whether one believes in God or not, but rather to ask in what sort of God we do believe. It is not for nothing that the Bible commands us to love God above all things, but, in the next sentence, it also commands us neither to take the name of God in vain, nor to make false images of him. Not to respect the mystery of God, manipulating it so as to change it into guarantor or defender of unconfessable interests, is something that inevitably becomes an extremely dangerous game.

The figure of God has been so abused throughout the history of mankind that perhaps we ought not to be surprised that many people today refuse to believe in him: too many crimes and atrocities have been committed in his name.

#### **1.4. God as he himself manifests to us.**

Nevertheless, it is necessary to go forth in search of the real genuine God, precisely in order to exorcise, once and for all, all false idols and forms of divinities manipulated by human interests. Surrendering to false absolutes is the surest road to servitude. We are only truly free when we find ourselves bound to the ultimate foundation of meaning and value of which we have been speaking. It is true that, due to his depthness, to his blinding light, we are not able to contemplate him fixedly as he really is; but all the same we can try to see how his splendour illuminates the realities within our reach.

We can say that we know of God that which he manifests about himself in the realities or events of this world; or, putting it more classically, we know of God that which he has revealed about himself.

When I speak of God revealing himself, do not imagine any kind of apparition or vision, as if to expect that an old man with a white beard should come and have theological discourse with us (in the same way in which Our Lady is said to do so with those who claim to have visions of her). According to our christian tradition, God reveals himself in the very existence of the world and in the reality of things, in historical events and particularly in Jesus of Nazaret, a man in whom his followers recognized a special and singular presence of God himself.

#### *1.4.1. God, the creator and sustainer of all things*

We grasp the fundamental revelation of God when we recognize him as “creator” and sustainer of absolutely all that is or that could ever come to be. Yet we must try to define precisely what we mean when we speak of God the creator. At present various scientific hypotheses are proposed regarding the origin of the universe, and some people tend to believe that these hypotheses substitute the idea of God the creator. It is not so. Scientists endeavour to determine the physical processes and causes which may have intervened in the formation of the universe; but God the creator is not a physical cause, even if we were talking about the first of all physical causes. He is on another level: he is postulated as the ultimate reason for the existence and meaning of all possible physical causes which science could ever possibly discover.

As the philosopher L. Wittgenstein said, to believe is to understand that the events of this world are not all that there is; and even in the assumption that science could arrive at the solution to all possible questions that could be scientifically presented, the most important questions about the meaning and ultimate explanation of everything would still remain unanswered.

The famous biblical account of the creation of the world in seven days is clearly presented in a mythical form, which is not to say that it does not contain some very profound truths. There may be more truth in a myth than in a philosophical or scientific statement. In an imaginative fashion, written so as to be grasped by the communities of shepherds to which it was addressed, the Bible narrative shows that absolutely everything has no other reason for being than the pure will of God; that the world itself is good in its totality (excluding current dualistic views that propose a double principle, namely that of Good and Evil); that the world is not something totally chaotic or erratic, but rather something fundamentally orientated with sense and finality.

#### *1.4.2. The image and likeness of god*

If we look carefully into the biblical account of the creation, we may see that, rather than being a mere cosmogonic myth, it pretends to offer important anthropological insights. Its main intent is not to explain the genesis of the world, but rather to explain the place of man in the cosmos. According to the narrative, man is not -as some ancient theories would like to portray- a fragment of the same divine substance accidentally fallen from heaven and contaminated by its contact with matter. Man is a beloved creature, loved by God as “someone” distinct from God himself, capable of establishing a relationship with him. This is precisely the meaning of those beautiful expressions which tell us how God created man “in his image” and infused his very breath into him. The whole form of the account is mythical and symbolic, but at the same time it is wonderfully expressive and suggestive. God creates man in his own likeness, free and responsible for his own existence through the free disposal of all things in the world.

God is creator, not because he had a whim to create “things”, without any other explainable motive. He is creator because he desired that there should be “men and women” in his own likeness, that is, capable of entering into relation and into communion with him.

Creation is not just a manifestation of the omnipotence of a God intent on making an impression by creating a lot of marvellous things; it is the work of love of a God who

decides to make an “other than himself”, with the hope of starting up a fine story of love with him. The creating word is a word of love which reveals to us something about God himself: it reveals that God is Love and that he demands fundamentally a loving response from his creature, made in his image in such a gratuitous and unbelievable way.

#### *1.4.3. A god strangely committed to men*

It could seem, nevertheless, as though God’s plans had gone awry. If, for example, we take a look at the history of mankind, we can, as it were, clearly see a strange blend of great achievements and unexplainable catastrophes, of marvellous gestures and of all sorts of crimes and inconceivable aberrations committed by man.

The biblical story depicts this bizarre reality from the very start: for example, the story, also in mythical form, of the temptation of man and his fall from paradise, or the stories of the slaying of Cain, of the deluge... and so many other accounts of evil or tragedy which fill the Bible. One can even find people who are shocked and amazed that the Bible should narrate so many abhorrent and scandalous tales.

Nevertheless, the Bible, precisely through these stories, would seem intent on making one thing clear: Whatever happens, God loves this world, and even if he always reflects evil, he has a deep compassion for those men so often debased and perverse. He really loves them, he accompanies them, he challenges them, he spurs them up, he promises them a better life, he pardons them, he commits himself to them so that they can live meaningful lives.

We could say that, despite the fact that that man constantly lets him down, God stands by his faith in man: among the many attributes and characteristics of the biblical image of God -which is depicted in very diverse and even apparently contradictory forms- ultimately two features stand out: compassion and fidelity.

God is capable of compassionate love for him who is unworthy of it; and God is faithful love, unconditional and indestructible. Surely this is the only key to understanding the stories -so diverse and yet so similar- of Noah, of Abraham, of Jacob and his sons, of Moses and the wandering people, of the Judges, of the prophets... God respects man’s freedom: love can never be an imposition; it can only be an offering. And men are left free to do as they will. As a result, one could say that in fact they only cause deception to God. But, even so, God remains firm: he does not lose hope nor does he renounce his commitment to his people. What a strange God, torn as it were between his creative omnipotence and the impotence of compassionate love!

## **2. THE GOD WHO COMES BACK TO RE-BUILD COMMUNION**

Christian tradition gives us an even stranger picture of God: God, who is the first creative principle and who sustains everything that is in the world -and who, for that very reason, does not belong to the world-, makes himself present in it in a very peculiar way in this world of ours.

### **2.1. God in our midst**

According to christian tradition, once upon a time, in the days of the Emperor Tiberius, there appeared in the distant land of Galilea, a unique man called Jesus. His figure might have resembled that of the ancient prophets who spoke on God's behalf, reproaching men for their sins and exhorting them towards conversion: but his message did not have exactly that tone.

Jesus said, in the name of God, that the time had come for a new era: that with his coming was born the "Kingdom of God", which was to be a new manner of living human life, based on the recognition of God as Father of all men and women. He said that what this God-Father wanted above all, was not the fastidious fulfillment of the complicated rituals and legal practices of the Jewish tradition, but the building up of an effective fraternity of love amongst men, acknowledging that they are all equally sons of the same God.

He said that God was a Father who embraced all men alike: he did not love only the just according to the legal system, but also, and even more so, he loved sinners and downtrodden. He said that there was more joy in heaven for the conversion of one sinner than there was for ninety-nine just men who believed they had no need to repent. And he explained that telling the parable of a father whose son, abandoning his father's house, had frittered away his inheritance in far away lands: the father anxiously awaited his return; and when finally the son did come, the father celebrated it with great joy and with a splendid banquet because he had recovered a son whom he loved so much. God's joy, Jesus said, was to recover what he had lost, just as the joy of a shepherd is to recover the sheep gone astray. Indeed, men were lost to God, because they had gone astray in their pursuit of endless trifles, fighting and destroying each other, whilst they forgot they were sons of the good God-Father and that the true joy of their lives could only be found living in brotherly love in the Father's house.

### **2.2. "my father and your father".**

But there is more: Jesus did not preach as the old prophets did, passing on the message of a distant God.

He who was teaching that God is our Father, addresses a God as his Father too and dares to call him "Abba", an Aramaic term used in family life and which has a connotation of close intimacy, something like our "dad". His followers were shocked: no-one had ever dared to address the Lord of Israel with such familiarity. Jesus boldly presents himself as the son

sent by God, his Father, and even says that “nobody knows the Father except the Son and he to whom the Son would wish to reveal him”. He acts in the name of God amongst men: his joy is the joy of God in recovering what he has lost; and for that very reason he presents himself receiving sinners, prostitutes, the fallen and outcast, those whom the pious society of the Jews excluded from their ranks. He embraces them, full of bounty, in the name of God. He says that he has not come to condemn them, but to save them. He even advocated, by word and deed, that it was more important to assist one of those brothers in need than to sanctify the sabbath.

The traditional teachers of Israel were furious: a prophet had appeared transgressing, in the name of God, all the values of the Law and of the ancient religion. And nevertheless the simple people acclaimed him with great fervour, because never before, had they seen anyone speak so well and with such force about the goodness of God.

That prophet, recognised as Emmanuel -"God-among-us"- brushed aside all human concepts of a distant, dominant and self-righteous God; he revealed instead a true and living God, whose countenance was God-the-Father, whose basic attitudes were mercy towards sinners and the poor, pardon, gratuitous love, readiness to share human distress in unconditional faithfulness...

No wonder the religious authorities wished to eliminate him. But meanwhile his disciples had arrived at the intimate conviction that their master was not just another prophet in a series of inspired men who spoke in the name of God. He was the very presence of God himself and in human form at that. He was the “Son of God”, “The one-sent-forth”, “The Lord”, “The Word”, of God-the-Father; and through him God made himself present amongst men. One of the authors of the New Testament was to put it more accurately: “In him there dwelt the fulness of the divine” (Col 2,9).

This Jesus, not only announced the new Kingdom of God, but he made it present and effective by his person and his acts.

The violent death of Jesus at the hands of his enemies provoked a momentary crisis in the incipient faith of the disciples: a crisis that was overcome when, a few days later, they experienced in no uncertain fashion that Jesus made himself present to testify to them that he had vanquished death: he had actually died, but, by the power of his Father, he still lived on and would not abandon them: he would continue to be present and active amongst them under a new form.

It was then that the disciples were, once and for all, confirmed in the faith by the marvellous experience they had lived in the company of Jesus. From that moment on they could no longer doubt: Jesus was the Son of God, the one sent by God, resurrected by the power of God his Father.

The memory of that experience gave the disciples a new vigour. One of them recalled what Jesus had said to them: “He who sees me, sees the Father”, “The Father is greater than me”, but “I and the Father are one”, “I do only what I see my Father do”, “My words are not mine, but they are the Father’s words, and He has sent me to you”. “In my Father’s house there are many mansions: I am going to the Father to prepare a place for you close to Him”. “I Shall be with you at all times till the end of the world”...

The disciples were aware that their living together with Jesus had been an uncommon experience: in him, God himself had made himself present in a human fashion.

Through him the greatness of of God's love for mankind was revealed. Their doubts were removed: from now on they declared Jesus to be both God and Lord, for ever and seated at the right hand of the Father, by the power of God.

### **3. GOD ACTIVELY PRESENT FOR EVER AMONGST MEN.**

There was yet more to come for the disciples of Jesus. The Master had promised them, once he had left them, he would send them from his Father the Spirit, a divine Strength, whereby they would not be abandoned as orphans and they would be taught all which till then they had not been able to comprehend.

They only understood the scope of this promise when, after some time, though still in a stage of fear and insecurity, they experienced, with visible signs, that an extraordinary force from God was poured on them and they felt irresistibly prompted to go forth and preach what Jesus was and had meant to them. Thus a group arose with the purpose of living according to the principles of that kingdom of God and of that brotherhood of the sons of God which Jesus had preached.

#### **3.1. The Spirit, Lord and giver of life**

The force of this promised Spirit of God was something they felt more and more, and with extraordinary effects. Many people, not only Jews but pagans also, felt themselves impelled to believe in Jesus and to live according to his teaching: they began sharing all they had with the poor, they assisted each other in their needs and lived a brotherly life until then unknown. Thus the group of the followers of Jesus rapidly increased, despite the persecutions.

So it was that the disciples finally became fully aware of something that they had been experiencing in fact from the very start: Jesus had not been a prophet, who had appeared only for a particular mission at a particular time, sent to communicate the will of God, to proclame a new “law”, or to interpret the meaning of the old one. Jesus had come to inaugurate a real new era of relations between God and man, a period which could be called the “era of the Spirit”. What Jesus had been above all was “*the bearer of the Spirit to the world*”, the bearer of a new form of the presence of God amongst men and women, a much more intimate and efficacious presence than that formerly achieved through the Law and the prophets.

*God's “true gift”.*

John the Evangelist sums it up magnificently at the end of the prologue to his gospel: “The Law was given by Moses, but the grace, the truth, has come through Jesus Christ. No-one has ever seen God: his only Son, who is God and who dwells in the bosom of the Father, he it is who has made him known” (Jn. 1, 17-18). The law was a list of regulations which ultimately came from God; but these were not the real truth of God. The true gift or grace of God (i.e., what John calls “The gift and the truth”) is the Holy Spirit, God’s gift of himself to men, according to which he no longer commands as from without that which we must do, but rather he himself becomes the very life and strength effective within us. It is thus that we are transformed thanks to the life and force of God acting inside us through his Spirit that has been bestowed upon us.

In this way Jesus reveals who God is: no-one can ever see God still being on earth, but we know at least that God is eager to communicate, to offer himself to us, to share his life with us by bestowing “the true gift” of life which brings us into communion with him. That being so, to be a christian does not merely mean to believe in God and try to keep his commandments: it means, more radically, to go on to live the life of the Spirit of Jesus by letting oneself be guided by him.

The apostles became conscious of that through their own experience of the Spirit and by reflecting on the words that Jesus himself had spoken to them. They remembered that when Jesus first appeared in public, at his baptism, the Father declared that Jesus was his beloved Son and the Spirit descended over him under the symbol of a dove: the scene teaches us, in a plastic and beautiful manner, that Jesus was no other than the Son of God-the-Father, fully possessed by the Spirit of God. (Furthermore the scene suggests how, in every christian baptism, the newly baptized becomes both a son of God and a bearer of the Spirit).

The disciples recalled too what Jesus, in a moment of exaltation as regards his mission on earth, had said to them: “Let he who is thirsty come to me and I will give him to drink: from his soul will burst forth rivers of living water”. The evangelist adds: “This he said referring to the Spirit which those who believed in him would receive”.(Jn 7, 39). They also recalled how Jesus had said to a disciple of good faith, that it was necessary to be born again of the Spirit: and as the disciples showed astonishment as to how that could come to pass, Jesus replied: “No-one can enter the kingdom of God if he is not first re-born out of water and of the Spirit: flesh is born of flesh, but spirit is born of the Spirit (Jn. 3, 5). In other words, Jesus was saying that natural life is a life received from our biological parents; but it is necessary to enter into a new and higher existence which is the gift and grace of the action of the Spirit of God, of which the baptismal water is the symbol.

The disciples still remembered that on the very first day he appeared to them as resurrected, he bid them farewell and breathed his breath over them saying: “Be ye filled with the Holy Spirit” (Jn. 20, 22) a gesture whereby he wished to show them that, despite his departure from them, he left them the strength of the Spirit. And yet another evangelist records the following as being Christ’s last words: “Go ye forth unto all men and make them my disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit”(Mt. 28, 18).

This command was to give birth to the Church: the Church which congregates all those who are sons of one and the same God, all being baptized by this triple invocation of God.

#### *The Spirit, the power of God in man.*

The apostle Paul, who had not been personally acquainted with Jesus, had nevertheless understood through his conversion, that to be a christian was to allow the growth of the life of the Spirit in us. He, who had had the bitter experience of finding it impossible to fulfil the ancient Law, declares that the Gospel is a new “power of God who can for save all those who trust in him”(Rm 1, 16). This is so because the Gospel is “the law of the Spirit which gives birth to life in Jesus Christ and which saves us from both sin and death”. To live the Gospel is: “To live, not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in us; but if anyone should not possess the Spirit of

Christ, he does not belong to him. If the Spirit of the resurrected Christ is in you, then too the Spirit of him who resurrected Christ from the dead will also dwell in you and give life to your mortal bodies” (Rm 8 2ss).

This is the new power of the Spirit which every Christian receives at baptism: it enables him to overcome the desires of the flesh and it gives him a new and immortal life. “For all those who are led by the Spirit of God, these are the Sons of God”(Rm 8, 14)

“But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, to set men free from the law and to adopt them as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son unto your hearts, thus we cry out “Abba”! Father! So through God you are no longer slaves but sons and thus you are heirs” (Gal 4, 4ss)

The profound belief that God has offered himself to us, gratuitously and totally, through the gift and grace of the Spirit, enables us to have complete trust in him. To believe in God no longer means to consider ourselves the fearful slaves of a capricious and exacting lord: rather it means to consider ourselves the Sons of a Father who loves us unconditionally, just as the father of the prodigal son did in the Gospel. For this reason, Paul was to go one step further and say that the Spirit sets us free, being no longer subjected to fear of the law or to punishment, but impelled by the inner stirrings of the Spirit which acts in us:

“For you were called to freedom: but not a freedom to indulge in selfishness, but to be free to serve one another in love. For the law can be summed up in one word: love one another as you wish to be loved... Live according to the Spirit and thus you will not be tempted by the selfish desires of the flesh” (Gal 13ss)

In conclusion, to live by the Spirit means to live by the power of God, well above our own feeble strength, and to love as God loves. Thus the Christian God is portrayed as one who is essentially love: that through love, he offers himself to us through Jesus Christ by the Spirit, thereby allowing us to share in his own impelling love to love him and to love one another.

### **3.2. Belief in God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit**

The experience of Jesus of Nazareth and the experience of the Spirit which Christ had promised, resulted in a new revelation of God, a new manner of understanding God and his relations with men. As St. Paul says, men who felt themselves slaves to obscure divine powers, were to discover that they could consider themselves free sons of a God-Father, newly revealed by Jesus and directly experienced through the gift of the Spirit; men who in their selfish interests were only intent into mutually destroy one another, were to discover the new joy of living as brothers and were ready to share with their brethren whatever they had. Really the followers of Jesus quickly discovered that faith in Jesus' God was a humanising and liberating experience. That may explain why christianity spread so rapidly, without any extraordinary means, from the small nucleus of Palestine throughout the whole mediterranean world.

This new experience of a God of brotherhood and redemption was manifest in the prayers and expressions of faith used by those early christians. At a very early stage, there appears an unchanging standard form of ending their prayers with an invocation to God-

the-Father “through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit” or, alternatively, the expression of praise: “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost (Spirit). Very soon, too, they started to synthesize their faith in Creeds of a basic ternary structure. “We believe in God, Father almighty, creator... and in Jesus Christ, incarnate, dead and resurrected... and in the Holy Spirit which is manifest in the Church...” The expressions, may vary slightly, but the affirmation of the triple divine reality, which right from baptism was the content of the faith, remains basically unchanged.

The communities, therefore, lived on the faith in the salvation which comes originally from God-the-Father, which had been proclaimed and made present through his son Jesus and which was being permanently brought to fulness by the power of the Spirit offered to believers at baptism.

It is obvious that the belief in this triple reality of God did not in any way imply a belief in three different Gods: people coming from a strict Jewish monotheistic tradition would never have dreamed of jettisoning the affirmation of a one and only God, Lord of heaven and of earth. But, inevitably, there were soon people who asked themselves how one should possibly reconcile the belief in one God with the belief in the triple manifestation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Celsus, a pagan philosopher hostile to christianity, wrote, about the year 170, that christians would be respected “if they believed in one God, but they go on to the excess of adoring that man (Jesus), who lived not so long ago, trying to make out that there is nothing wrong or against God in adoring a mere servant of his”.

Thus the question inevitably arose: how is it possible to profess faith in a single God and yet at the same time admit three divine realities, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? This question prompted believers to try to formulate a coherent theology of the Trinity.

## **4. THE TRANSPARENCY OF AN EXPERIENCE OF GOD: GOD IS THREE IN ONE AND ONE IN THREE**

Here one point has to be clarified: belief in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the result of an experience which is prior to all subsequent explanations as to how one God can nevertheless be conceived as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In other words, faith precedes any explanation or any theology.

### **4.1. A strange threeness in the experience of God.**

The doctrine of the Trinity did not arise so much from the theological speculation of a few penetrating minds as to what God might be in himself, but rather from the need to formulate, as far as could be possible, what the actual experience of God had been among those who acknowledged a totally peculiar presence of God in Jesus of Nazareth and who believed that God was still acting among men by power of his Spirit.

It was precisely the capacity to adhere faithfully to the sense of the original and unique experience of God that was to determine either the acceptance or the rejection of later theological explanations. Formulae which were considered consistent with that experience were admitted without difficulty; but those that were deemed not to do full justice to it were outright rejected.

As we have already pointed out, the chore of christian faith is the conviction that in “the incarnation” of the Son and in the “grace” or effusion of the Spirit a very singular experience of God himself has been granted to humanity. Neither Jesus nor the Spirit are, for christians, something extrinsic to God, in the way of external mediators whereby God would have communicated to man as he had done, for example through the mediators of the Law or through the prophets. Son and Spirit are of God himself and come from the very bosom of the divinity to bring about the salvation of men. It is an original proposal of God, who offers to make himself actually present and active amongst men through his Word/Son and through his Spirit.

Such proposal compels us to rethink all our ideas about God: God is not just, as it used to be thought, “the transcendent”, the Remote Being, entirely apart from this world, inaccessible, closed in on himself in eternal solitude. Through the experience of the communication of God both in Jesus and in the Spirit, the veil which hides the ineffable reality of the divine is, at least partly, withdrawn and we surmise that God must necessarily be someone who has joy in sharing, in communicating himself, in living and loving as he wishes, with boundless liberty. Prior to the creation and to temporary action in the created world, God is essentially and eternally both life and communication of life through the unfathomable interchange of the three who, when they would be revealed to us, we would call the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Precisely because God is eternally and essentially communion and communication of life in himself, he can therefore communicate himself to us, and make us participants, through the Son and the Spirit, of the eternal life that they would bring down to us.

## 4.2. Some all too simple solutions.

1. It was very tempting to try to solve the trinitarian question in a simple logical fashion. For instance, some people tried to solve the problem by saying that Father, Son and Spirit were simply three different names, or at most three modes of manifestation, of the one and only undividable God. This could be said a nominalistic interpretation: the reality of God is one and undivided, but we, according to circumstances, can refer to him by three different names. Thus could be salvaged both the strict unicity of God and the old tradition of referring to him by a triple denomination. (I am afraid that the majority of present day christians unconsciously tend to think of the Trinity in this nominalistic fashion).

Soon it was to be discovered that this solution was not acceptable, for the simple reason that it would strip the whole New Testament of all literal meaning whatsoever, besides being incompatible with the original christian experience. Indeed if the Father, the Son and the Spirit were simply three names -or three manifestations- of one and the same reality, what meaning could there be in saying that the Father had sent forth the Son or that the Father and the Son send forth the Spirit, or that the Son takes us up unto the Father? The New Testament clearly supposes a real distinction between these three realities. Moreover, the experience of the early christians had recognized in Jesus something divine that proceeded from God the Father. He had been sent forth by the Father, and, precisely because of that, he had to be considered distinct from him. The same could be said of the Spirit.

2. Another all too simple attempt to make the affirmation of one and only God compatible with the traditional use of the three divine names was the theory called subordinationistic, which maintained that only God-the-Father could be named God in a strict and proper sense and had the right to consider himself God. The Son and the Spirit would be really considered as inferior realities subordinate to God, as intermediary beings between God and man; and, as Arius (the most famous defender of this theory), would say, the son would belong to the temporal and created sphere of being, and not to the strictly speaking divine and eternal world. This proposal was rejected, -after much dispute- because again it did not adequately express the original experience of Jesus or of the Spirit as recorded in the New Testament.

Namely, the first followers of Christ had arrived -especially after the resurrection- at the profound conviction that Jesus really was someone who had come from God himself, and was the very presence of the eternal God amongst men, the self-giving of God himself to men. It was an experience summed up in expressions such as:

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son”(Jn 3, 16); or even: “Jesus Christ, although he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be kept to himself, but, on the contrary, he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, born in the likeness of man. And in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, and at that, death on the cross...” (Philip. 2, 6 ff). “But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his only Son, born of woman, under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And the proof that you are sons is that he has put in your hearts, the Spirit of his Son, who cries out: “Abba”! Father!” (Gal 4,4 ff)

The original christian experience was that something of God himself, something from God's very bosom, had entered into our history and was acting in it, and that precisely because of this there was a new salvific force through this presence of the Son and of the Spirit among us.

The author of the prologue to the fourth Gospel expresses the same thought in wide ranging terms:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God... And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us; and we have seen his glory: the glory of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth..."(Jn 1, 1ss).

To relegate the Son and the Spirit to the sphere of intermediary creatures, -however high we may place them- not only contradicts these texts, but also contradicts the profound message of salvation which these texts contain.

Really, could we still proclaim, as tradition did, that we are saved because God himself became incarnate and because he entered into our history and transformed it? Could anyone except the Son of God, God of God, allow himself to call God his "Father"? Who, apart from the Spirit of God could enable us to participate in an unfathomable communion with God, whereby our salvation was assured?

If both the Son and the Spirit are inferior to God, we should have to proclaim that no authentic communication of God ever took place: this specific christian experience would vanish and we would have to relay, as both jews and pagans did, in a distant relationship with an unaccessible God, by means of intermediaries who would be no better than Moses or the prophets of the Old Testament.

#### **4.3. Communion in the very Heart of God**

The way in which early christians experienced God through Jesus and the Spirit, obliges us to modify our anticipations about the being of God. We tend to visualize God, in ontological terms, as a "Supreme Object", supercosmic, eternal, simple, unchanging, impassive. Unless we are on guard, we could actually end up by thinking of God as a mere cosmic "Thing" or "object", supreme, static, immobile, sterile... out of sheer and onesided stress on simplicity and impassivity.

But the christian experience of God through Jesus and the Spirit brings us to think of God rather within a symbolic system in which God has to be declared, first of all, Father, namely, principle and origin of life, of sharing and participation in love, who eternally expresses himself and gives himself totally to another of himself who is his Son, eternal expression or communication of his own life, entering with him into a communion which concludes in the Holy Spirit, uncreated and divine love and gift, mutually offered and received by the Father and the Son. All three constitute, in essential self-implication, the fulness of being of the one and true living God.

Theologians will try to work out this basic symbolic system received from Scripture conceptually. They propose, for example, to talk about a nature or essence in three distinct persons; they try different ways of speaking of trinitarian relations "ad intra" and "ad extra", etc. It is soon found that human concepts and language are always inadequate (as is wont to happen with symbolic terms), but they are unavoidable in the effort to remain faithful to the specific kind of communication of God which is at the basis

of christianity.

Thus the terminology of trinitarian theology, despite all its limitations, allows us to penetrate somewhat into the very essence of God as he has actually revealed himself: we are forced to say that there exists in God a kind of internal and eternal dynamism, which results in a kind of being which can be said to be simultaneously one and multiple, unity in total community, and community in perfect unity. In this way we may be said to have a glimpse of how God is: he cannot be mere substance; he is rather eternal and fertile Life, eternal Principle and Origin of life, eternally shared by Father, Son and Spirit.

The unicity of God can in no way be jeopardised: but his oneness is a vital unity in which the divine life communicates itself as if from a fount (the Father) to the Son (with whom by total communication has actually all that the Father has), being joyfully possessed by both in the Spirit, which is the joy, the fruit and the encounter of the two.

Thus God presents himself simultaneously as one and as a communion: a unity of vital and perfect communion in which each possess everything that the other has or is: in which each one affirms himself, not apart from the other, but by the self-donation of one to the other, because the essence of God is sharing, giving himself, surrendering in pure and total love... Thus our God is a living God for all eternity.

The new Catholic Catechism of the Church (n. 254) states, quoting a very beautiful ancient saying, that “ God is one, but he is not alone”. A solitary God, a God who is alone would be a very sad God indeed. How could we possibly imagine a living God in eternal solitude, inactive throughout eternity before the creation of this world? Leaving out his free creative action, which would be the proper, essential and necessary activity of God? We cannot state that God only communicates with our world: that would render him dependant on the creation in order to be a really living God. No, God cannot possibly be an eternally solitary God who has to look upon our world to relieve his boring eternal solitude... At least we may say that the experience of Christ and of the Spirit have enabled us to have a deeper insight of God as eternal communion.

#### **4.4. God wants communion in the hearts of men.**

God as communion is not simply a more feasible God than that of the rigid God of the philosophers, but it is also the only God that man could possibly tolerate. As Sartre has put it, the Absolute would crush man, it would leave him no vital space. The symbolic threeness of the God of life and love softens the unbearable burden of a Necessary and Absolute Being who would subject all things to the blind necessity of fatality. The christian God is not the unconditioned Absolute but the eternal Self-surrendering to life, to love, to good and to communion. This is the contribution of the symbolism of the Trinity towards a higher and more tolerable idea of God. Being essentially communion, God opens himself to the creation of the world, which is the place where he extends his original movement of communion, wherein man is placed as a creature in the image of God-the-Trinity, that is, a creature made for communion.

Trinitarian symbolism shows us that in the beginning there was not an exclusive One, but an embracing Communion; not the Being but the Good; not fatality and arbitrariness but Love. In the beginning it was not unshared Power that was present but radical Equality within real distinction. The God in whose image we are created is a God

who is eternally being brought into being in a net-work of “interpersonal” relationships, which sustain one another in otherness but not in antagonism, and which are founded on the affirmation and acceptance of one another, free from any sort of possession or domination.

Western philosophy has often presented the human person as the being who sets himself up as opposed to the other who limits, constricts and conditions him. Therefore do some writers (as G.F. Fichte) claim that the category of a person is not applicable to God. But the consideration of the trinitarian community can help us to discover that the “other” is not necessarily like a brick wall which sets me a limit, or an obstacle in my way; he may be the openness which makes my being possible, that sustains me, receives me and enriches me, becoming even the mirror where I can contemplate my own image, with the assuredness that the benefit of the other will also be a benefit to me.

A person is a being meant for communion: a communion which in God is perfect and total, and which we hope will be also ours when God calls us to participate fully in his own life. But already in this world the human person, created in the image of God-the-Trinity, is prompted to live in a communion resembling the likeness of the Trinity. We are really persons, not by setting ourselves up against others, but by entering into enriching relation with others in the most perfect communion possible within the undeniable limits imposed by temporality and materiality. We are human persons only if we are really convinced of the fact that it is in the well being, the good and the joy of the other where we must search for our own authentic well being and good.

#### **4.5. The Trinity: a social programme?**

In an effort to reply to the inhumanity of communism, orthodox thinkers used to say years ago: “Our social programme is the Trinity”. The trinity is in fact not exactly a social programme; but one does certainly find in it the most solid ground for defending a new concept both of man and society. Recent Trinitarian theology has underlined the link which exists between the trinitarian doctrines and the Kingdom of God, “on earth as it is in heaven”. The Kingdom is the new era where God is effectively recognised as Father of all in the actual and practical experience of brotherhood. This is what Christ preached and which has to be brought about by the power of the Spirit. To believe in God-the-Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not merely to affirm a theoretic dogma, which would amount to little more than an unintelligible jig-saw. It means recognizing that:

“The mystery of the Trinity has opened up a whole new perspective to us: namely, that the very nature of being is Communion... If we feel capable of overcoming all the crises which drive us to despair of the human adventure, it is precisely because, thanks to the Revelation of this mystery, we know that we are loved”<sup>6</sup>

The Church, therefore, ought to live in the light of this new perspective and it ought to be promoter of fellowship and communion in the image of the Trinity. The sense of the importance of building up communion in human relationships ought to be the primary contribution of christians into our world. Their primary intent should be to make communion real and effective in a world which we is so distraught with self interests and violence. Should we not do so, then we should be, in the Gospel's words, as the tasteless salt and the light incapable of shining.

It is not, then, a question of honouring the Trinity merely with dogmatic formulas according to tested orthodoxy, but, above all, it is a question of following Christ, under the motion of his Spirit, in trying to establish amongst men relationships which make society a true image of the trinitarian community. To sum up, this would mean to make real what Christ expressed as his last desire on the eve of his death:

“That all may be one: as thou Father art in me and I in thee; that they also may be one in us, and thus the world will believe that thou hast sent me” (Jn 17, 21-22).

Thus, to believe in God is to surrender oneself to the power of God whose desire is that there be communion amongst men, amongst all who are his true sons. To believe in God is not to affirm the existence of an extraordinary extra-cosmic being: it is to live committed to communion.

## **5. TO BELIEVE MEANS TO BE CONVERTED TO LOVE**

A nun who spends her life and gives her heart to serving the poor in one of those dreadful districts, where overcrowding, dirt, problems of the dole and drugs abound, once said to me full of anxiety: “I simply cannot talk to the youngsters in the school about the beatitudes. To tell these poor people that they are blessed seems to me, not only something they are unable to bear, but something that sounds like mockery and sarcasm “. That good woman showed a remarkable sensitivity, which is often sadly lacking in ecclesiastical circles. The beatitudes -in fact the whole Gospel- cannot be preached indiscriminately everywhere, nor can be preached in the same fashion and with the same meaning to all persons in all situations.

Jesus preached the beatitudes in a very concrete setting: that of one who “being rich, became poor on our behalf”; one who “humbled himself and became a servant”... And he did not preach exactly the same meaning to one and all alike: for the rich, the sermon on the mount must have sounded like a whip-lash, which the evangelist St. Luke summed up sharply: “woe to ye rich, for you have your consolation here and now”. But for the poor it must have been a comfort to hear, for example, the words of hope that the same Luke recalls in the inaugural scene at synagoge of Nazareth: “I have been sent to bring great tidings of joy to the poor”.

### **5.1. Where is God perceived from?**

#### *1. God, the vouchsafer of selfishness?*

One cannot believe in God in the same way under different circumstances (or perhaps, not in the same God); for one cannot feel the same way about the ultimate meaning of life in utterly different situations. Here you have, on the one hand, the powerful, the rich, the opportunists, those whose ideal is to revel in what they steal from others. Of these, St. Paul says unequivocally that “Their God is their belly”, that is, that which allows them to satisfy, at other's expense, their greed for power and pleasure. “In God we trust”, is written on the coin of the adorers of money. God, they think, is he who allows me to keep and multiply the capital acquired by the chances of fortune or through the elimination of others who presumably were in covetous competence with myself. For such men, God can only be the guarantor and supporter of selfish interests; and for that reason there are as many gods -or as many idols- as there are selfish interests in such persons.

#### *2. God, hope of the poor.*

On the other hand, we have the destitute, the unwanted, the dispossessed, those who feel that their lives are empty of meaning, either because of some accident of misfortune -illness, mental or physical diminution, hostile environment-, or because the malice of others has deprived them not only of the essential goods of life, but also of the very right to be human. These people too will perhaps search for a meaning in God: but their God will not be a God to protect what they possess, -because they have nothing worth

protecting-, but a God who can be their strength and hope, who can lend meaning to their lives despite their unbearable shortcomings and who impels them to try to retrieve that which, so unjustly, has been taken from them.

Everyone seeks in God, protection and salvation; but for some, salvation means retaining and increasing what they already have, whilst for others who have to live without anything it will mean to have the strength to survive and to fight for what they ought to have.

To say that is not to indulge in demagoguery, as is sometimes thought: it is a question of fidelity to God as he manifested himself in the judeo-christian tradition. According to this tradition, God is not an Abstract Remote Object (Supreme Being, Absolute, Necessary); neither is he a God concerned mainly with things (the stars, natural forces, atmospheric phenomena or land fertility). Those were the Babilonian gods or the Canaanite Baalim. The God of Israel, from the very outset, was a God concerned with people: the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob. He was a God concerned with men and their particular problems; and thus can he be recognised by men in their concrete situation, where he presents himself as guarantor of values and meaning in their lives or, as expressed in biblical terms, he becomes the “promise” of blessing and protection. As we have seen, he is the God who, hearing the groanings of his people oppressed by slavery in Egypt, comes to them and urges and helps them free themselves of their burden.

### *3. A god, who is truly god for all*

Modern sensitivity takes a decisive stand at this point: either God is just, that is, he loves all men and is concerned about all; or if not, there is no place for God. An unjust God is clearly unacceptable. To think that I can rejoice in my chapel giving thanks to Divine Providence for curing a severe toothache or simply because I lack nothing essential, while thinking that the same Providential Power does not care about the rickety children dying of hunger in Zaire or about the peasants led to death by a selfish minority in El Salvador... this, today, is simply not admissible.

If God exists at all, God must wish all men to have a life worthy of living; if this is not the case, then something has interfered with the will of God; or otherwise there simply is no God. As is well known, the greater part of modern atheism is brought about by choosing this last alternative. We believers, on the other hand, must point out that the injustices, inequalities, oppressions and abuses between men are something which can never be desired and accepted by God: they are something which surely is partly due to the very limitations of finite being, but, above all, it is due to man's will as opposed to God's project, and therefore we may say that it is due to a “sinful” human will.

Modern sensibility, as I say, sees this all too clearly. But there is not much new in it. We find it in the Bible magnificently expressed: “to acknowledge Yahve”, to identify him as the one true God among all other false gods and idols, is to discover that he is a God of justice, whilst the idols only serve the purpose of the selfish interests of their devotees. The true God frees people from Egyptian slavery, protects the orphan, the widow, the destitute and the alien, all of whom were likely subjects of oppression in that society.

- He who is submitted to evil and injustice will be able to believe in God only if he can acknowledge that the evil and injustice are not desired by God.

- He will acknowledge this with difficulty if he experiences that the evil and injustice are fostered and inflicted by those who claim to believe in God.

- On the other hand, he could be persuaded to believe if he could see that faith in God brings real strength to fight against all evil and injustice on earth and between men.

Believing in God implies, then, an absolutely true demand for justice among men.

## **5.2. Believing implies conversion.**

To sum up, “to believe in” is always a “conversion to”. For he who experiences evil and injustice, believing will mean to convert oneself from desperation or opium apathy towards active responsibility in favour of justice: a justice is guaranteed by a promise that, being divine, it will be undefectible. For him who lives a selfish existence at the expense of others in an unjust order, to believe in God ought to mean to convert oneself from one's own sinful satisfaction to an effective practice of justice and solidarity; something which, obviously, will imply renouncement and painful sacrifice.

To sum up, perhaps it is merely a question of living to the full what St. John said long ago:

“Truly we will be knowing him, if we keep his commandments. He who says ‘I know him’, but does not keep his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him”(1 Jn 2, 3-4)

To believe in God, to accept him as he is, means to keep his commandments: and his main commandment is none other than to love as he loves. And here, and nowhere else, is found all justice.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Obras, 1, Madrid, 1969, 31.

<sup>2</sup> El fet de creure, Barcelona, 1967,27.

<sup>3</sup> De Potentia, 7,5,14.

<sup>4</sup> Y. de Montcheuil, Problèmes de vie spirituelle, 186.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Buber, Eclipse of God.

<sup>6</sup> H. de Lubac, La fe Cristiana, Madrid, 1970, 13.

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