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WHAT IS TRUTH?

The relationship between faith and intelligence

(an interview of Father Philippe, which appeared in *Famille chretienne* n°835, January 13, 1994)

Father Marie-Dominique Philippe, Dominicain and founder of the Community of Saint John, has consecrated his entire life to the search for truth. We interrogated him on this subject right after the appearance of the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*.

--*Father, what is truth? Avoiding evil and trying to do good, is that not enough to be in the truth?*

--Everything rests on this affirmation: "God alone is good" (Mt 19:17). This is the great vision of wisdom that the Holy Father develops in his last encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* and that envelops his whole argument. We need to come back to this contemplative gaze. Christian Ethics cannot be reduced to a simple observance of laws and rules. It is primarily a personal, direct relationship with someone. It is a friendship. And this relationship becomes complete in the person of Christ, the Well-Beloved Son, the One who is sent, who introduces us into the mystery of the Father under the motion of the Holy Spirit.

It is from here that the relations are tied together between the search for the truth which, in a certain way, discovers the One whom the religious traditions call God, and the search for the good which, in its perfection, is each of the three Divine Persons. We understand then how every Christian Ethics is commanded by the theological virtues and finalized by the contemplation of the goodness of God. The moral aspect is necessary, but we need to go back to the source, to the mystery of God, Creator and Father.

--*If the intelligence can discover the existence of God by itself, then what is the role of faith?*

--The intelligence can discover the existence of a First Being: this is the effort of Metaphysics. Through this discovery, the intelligence is disposed to receive the gift of faith, but it cannot say—in a positive way—what faith is. Metaphysics and faith are not opposed to each other, but revealed truth goes much further: it transcends and engages the whole person.

--*Why undertake a philosophical research if faith is more powerful than the limits or the errors of human reason?*

--Faith is a gift from God, and in this sense it surpasses the strictly human order, but in its exercise it depends on it. The Holy Spirit converts our heart but leaves us the care of converting our intelligence. When we pose an act of faith, it is thanks to the Holy Spirit and with the cooperation of our intelligence. Our supernatural life is not seperated from our human life. Grace does not destroy

nature: it assumes and elevates it. Faith assumes and elevates our intelligence by ordering it to the contemplation of the mystery of God and the receptivity of his will.

--*Are there certain intellectual operations that favorise receiving the gift of faith and its vitality, and others that render the exercise more difficult?*

--I was telling you that the search for truth disposes the intelligence to welcome faith. An intelligence that seeks truth is necessarily open because it is receptive to reality—external and different from the man who is thinking. Every existing reality can teach me and open me up to a new meaning; it is like yeast for my intelligence and puts it in act. In this sense, the intelligence surpasses itself and predisposes itself to welcome a transcendant, supernatural truth, given directly by God.

But this capacity of openness and receptivity can be stopped and can stay fixed on what it has acquired, and even become totally closed: every time the intelligence exalts its own way of thinking, it is no longer submitted to the reality as it is. It no longer seeks truth but becomes its measure. It no longer asks the reality its meaning but imposes its own meaning on the reality and closes itself off in its immanence. This is the primacy of subjectivity, the domain of opinion where everyone seeks to affirm his position.

That is why, for 150 years, our culture has been overwhelmed by ideologies which hold the intelligence captive in logical and rational systems and which cut it off from the existing reality. In front of a reality that imposes itself on me with evidence, the intellectual conditioning, whether it be realistic or idealistic, has little weight. But in front of a reality that transcends me, a mystery of faith, the intelligence runs the risk of holding itself at a distance, of closing itself or even of being opposed. We have here the whole difficulty of accepting, submitting to, and obeying the word of God in its integrity, of professing all the articles of the CREDO without making a selection, of receiving with faith the Magisterium. Sometimes a declaration of the Church a little more clear is enough to inscite immediate reactions. It may not go all the way to a formal rejection, but the adhesion and development of faith will not be able to be fully realized.

--*Can you explain to us more precisely which ideologies dammage the exercise of faith?*

--I am more and more struck by the importance of the rapport between being and becoming. This is, for example, the recent position of Heidegger: his whole Metaphysics consists in making being appear by the negation of what becomes. This had already been Plato´s position. Opposite to this, the positivists no longer look at being except in the immediate experience of becoming. The temptation then is to abandon the discovery of being to a pure intellectual exercise: we confuse being with the being of reason, logical, universal. We remain in abstraction, and this quickly legitimizes the rejection of the spirit.

We have here two extreme positions which no longer respect man, on the one hand, sensible, and on the other, capable of surpassing what is sensible. Today, philosophy has a hard time rediscovering being, and yet, as long as I have not discovered it, in contrast to what becomes and as beyond what becomes, I remain incapable of grasping what the spiritual soul is, thus man, in his profound, total truth, capable of being linked to his source which is God.

--*Then without Metaphysics, it is impossible to discover the principle of the spiritual life and thus the sense of human destiny?*

--If the intelligence does not elevate itself above its sensible experience, it cannot discover the spiritual soul, and its knowledge of man remains an observation of behaviors and an analysis of human sciences: psychology, sociology, etc. It is true that all my human activities depend on my body: that is why I can say that my body is source of all my becoming. But my soul is present to my body and informs it. Look at the expression: "to be in shape"! My soul is source of my being. It gives my being life and meaning.

Plato is the first to have posed this problem, probably under the influence of Oriental religious traditions, according to the historian, Bréhier. Plato was seeking to understand whether the soul was a myth or a reality: his grandeur was affirming the profound reality; his weakness, uniting the body to it by accident and because of the fall.

It is to Aristotle, his disciple, that we owe the analysis of the *substantial* unity—and no longer accidental—between the soul and the body. This discovery allows us to establish a fondamental distinction between what conditions man: his body, his psychological domain ("psychisme"), his affectivity, etc., and what determines him, what finalizes him—which is always a person. Without this philosophical distinction, I cannot maintain the authenticity of the spiritual life whose proper activity is to exercise its freedom, to tend toward the good that it has discovered.

--*Without the discovery of the spiritual soul, no more freedom. Is this the meaning of this phrase of Christ: "The truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32)?*

--On a purely philosophical level, I can already establish links between truth and freedom because my intelligence perfects itself every time it reaches reality. It progresses by leaning upon it, like when we climb a staircase, pressing upon the successive steps.

It is in this sense that the truth sets me free: it sets me free from myself in opening me to realities rich with new meanings. For example in the experience of love of friendship! The encounter between two people capable of welcoming each other reciprocally and of perfecting each other in a common search for truth, in a cooperation, represents an authentic spiritual experience.

But in front of this passage of the Gospel: "The truth will set you free", I am in front of the full truth, not only in the word of God, but in the very person of Christ: He is the Truth, the Light of the world, the One who is more intimate to me than I am to myself and who, at the same time, surpasses me completely. When I reach him, I surpass myself completely, and I can reach him by loving him, by receiving his love, knowing that he loves me and that it is he who has chosen me first. When I respond to this love, I discover the only person capable of giving me true happiness. That is why he frees me and finalizes me perfectly. He is my Savior and my Redeemer. He frees me from my limits and my wounds by taking them in his holy humanity to lead me following him toward the Father, into the mystery of the Holy Trinity: mystery of light and love, of total gift.