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Economic growth, human development, spiritual values

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1. A time of travail

Economic growth, human development, spiritual values: the triad the conference organizers asked me to develop brings to the forefront the need to reevaluate the paradigms which have governed economic life thus far by adopting an anthropological approach. The predominant economic models, overly focused on economic growth and based on the idea of an unstoppable linear development, have clearly not maintained their promises. It is true, however, that since the onset, four years ago, of the terrible financial and economic crisis which is still plaguing us there have been many appeals for a radical change of course. In the meantime we have gone from the initial financial crisis to the equally grievous one of sovereign debt. And yet, though the crisis has already affected the life of innumerable people – I am thinking in particular of the tragedy of the many people who have lost their job or committed suicide – it seems to me that a cultural appreciation of the epochal change we are going through has hardly been attained.

The contrary seems true: the crisis has contributed to aggravate a sort of cultural paralysis which triggers behaviors now prevalent in many European societies: little propensity, even on the part of public institutions, to plan for the future; growing preference for temporary revocable relationships instead of stable ones; need interpreted exclusively as a right to well being to be satisfied through consumption.

I am ever more convinced that to speak of our present troubles in terms of “*economic-financial crisis*” is reductive. This crisis must be understood in the wider context of the transition to the new millennium, in terms of travail.¹

Public reaction to the social encyclical of Benedict XVI is paradigmatic of the difficulty to elaborate in a cultural perspective the models on which the economy has been based thus far. *Caritas in veritate* has not been ignored, nor has it been particularly criticized. On the contrary its merits have been acknowledged, though somewhat selectively, by many. But in general I feel the

¹ A. Scola, *Crisis and travail at the beginning of the third millenium. Address to the city*. Eve of the feast of St.Ambrose, Milan, December 6, 2011

Encyclical has not yet been understood in its more relevant and innovative aspects; attention has reductively focused on the need for an ethical approach to economics. This is not a wrong interpretation, provided it is placed in the right perspective: last August the Pope himself has spoken again about the economic crisis and the principles expounded in his social encyclical reaffirming incisively that *“the ethical dimension is not something exterior to economic problems, but an inner and fundamental dimension”*². However I do not intend to take up your time with lengthy comments on Benedict XVI’s encyclical and social thinking; I simply wish to analyze some of the points he makes in order to propose a reflection on the present difficulty of developing an urgently needed project of cultural “conversion”.

2. The logic of “giving” between transcendence and secularization

At several points in *Caritas in Veritate* Benedict XVI, following on the steps of Paul VI’s teachings, speaks of development as a vocation, linking its realization to a transcendent vision of the person. In its absence, *“development is either denied, or entrusted exclusively to man, who falls into the trap of thinking he can bring about his own salvation, and ends up promoting a dehumanized form of development”*³. This dimension, says the Pope in one of the most original passages of the encyclical, is fully realized in the logic of giving. In fact, *“the human being is made for gift, which expresses and makes present his transcendent dimension. Sometimes modern man is wrongly convinced that he is the sole author of himself, his life and society”*⁴. At first the link between gratuitousness and man’s delusion of self-sufficiency is hard to fathom. Contemporary man, so used to the idea that freedom consists primarily, if not exclusively, in the possibility of choosing ignores the need to accept as the means to be truly free. Thus man obliterates the “vertical” dimension of gift. An yet it is only in the optics of accepting that both the logic of gift and the principle of gratuitousness linked to it become fully comprehensible. All that is of primary importance for man (life, husband, wife, children, vocation....) begins with receiving, has receiving as a given.

In a sense, placing gift and gratuitousness within their more adequate horizon highlights also the problems they pose to the predominant culture. The question is no longer the risk of a refusal of Christian ethics, as happened at the beginning of modernity, but a growing alienation from their universality. The more so since general diffidence towards the Christian message is part of a wider mistrust of reason’s capability to know reality and to identify universally shared values. This skepticism translates into a general lack of commitment towards life, ultimate consequence of the process of secularization: an “exclusive humanism”, Taylor⁵ says, which leads to the eclipse of any

² Benedict XVI, *Meeting with media people on the flight to Madrid*, August 18, 2011

³ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 11

⁴ *Ibid*, 34

⁵ C. Taylor, *The secular age*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 14

goal transcending mankind's earthly prosperity. And this is a position which can have negative repercussions even on the economy of a country, since it concentrates on short term issues, on the indiscriminate consumption of goods, rather than on the dynamism, creativity and sacrifices capable of producing real development.

In this situation giving, gratuitousness, charity, solidarity are not denied "a priori", on the contrary they are often lauded. But the more they are invoked, the more they are deprived of the possibility of saying something true about human experience. They remain vague rhetorical appeals or cosmetic operations used to disguise distortions of unjust economic systems.

If this is now the situation, one understands why merely economic countermeasures, however necessary, are not sufficient. What is needed is a cultural project capable of giving back all its amplitude to a self mutilated reason: as the Pope says "*The windows must be flung open again, we must see the wide world, the sky and the earth once more and learn to make proper use of all this.*"⁶ But is it feasible, in a culture that can go as far as deciding to say "good bye to the truth"⁷, to propose a well defined vision of reason, of liberty and hence of the human person, that acknowledges transcendence understanding it is founded in the relationship with God the creator?

Actually the possibility of contemplating transcendence again, with all its anthropological, social and cosmological implications, exists in the space in between the pretence of an absolute reason and the pretence of a weak one.

*"Modernity – says Donati – thinks of God either as a superstitious relic or as the light of a reason immanent to the world and its history. The novelty is that these two ways of thinking have proved false. That religion is not a superstition is proved by the fact that at the very time when all myths are abandoned the yearning for a supernatural reality, for a Being who cannot be contained in any place and any myth, does not disappear but grows stronger. That it is not the light of a reason immanent to history is proved by the fact that the world loses not just faith in reason but reason itself."*⁸

This analysis reopens the door to transcendence. However, in order for it to become the foundation of the ethical approach propounded by *Caritas in Veritate*, rather than remaining an indistinct spiritual consolation or a mere theoretical enunciation, it must interrelate with man's life so that, as Del Noce says, "*the truth may become my truth*".⁹

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Speech to the German Federal Parliament*, Berlin, September 22, 2011

⁷ G. Vattimo, *Addio alla verità*, Meltemi, Rome 2009

⁸ P. Donati, *La matrice ideologica della società*, Rubettino, Soveria Mannelli 2010, 47

⁹ Del Noce, *Politicità del cristianesimo oggi*, Costume, I (1946), 1

3. The irreducible dimension of the human person

“Man is infinitely larger than man”: a minimum of loyalty to oneself when looking at oneself in action, i.e. when the person reveals itself,¹⁰ is sufficient to make us agree with Pascal’s profound insight.¹¹ Since birth man, more or less consciously, has to acknowledge the fact that he is propelled into a web of relationships. Balthasar correlates this undeniable datum to three basic anthropological polarities: soul/body, man/woman, individual/community. He thus highlights the *dual unity of the person*, dear to Wojtyla and expounded by the blessed John Paul II in his magisterium. It affirms the innate capability of the self to exist *for* the other, to be a *self-in-relationship*. Such a relational nature, that ultimately leads to the relationship with God the creator, inescapably determines the position and behavior of man in society, as the best sociologists have not failed to remark.

Against the forms of social constructivism which mortify man, Margaret Archer affirms that the person is much more than the roles it plays in society. This is expressed in what she defines as “*ultimate concerns*”: “*we are what we most care for*”. Such ultimate concerns are the result of an “inner conversation” between society’s requests and the self’s profound needs, an inner conversation on which the person’s reflectivity and transcendence is founded.¹²

In this perspective, man cannot be identified solely by his social “function”, he must be ultimately considered in his dimension of free subject, however historically situated. The alternative is the one perceptively prophesied by Guardini in 1951: “when action is no longer supported by personal conscience, a singular void overcomes the person who is acting. He/She no longer feels he/she is the one who is performing an action, that the action begins in him/herself and that he/she therefore is answerable for it. It seems as if he/she no longer existed as a player and that he/she were just a vehicle for the action, a mere link in a chain.”¹³ Isn’t this how most people feel about economic and financial theories that are utterly beyond comprehension for their audience?

4. At the roots of development: work and labor

Respect for the person’s transcendent dimension finds a decisive litmus test in the vision of work, today more than ever the key to development. This is quite clear when one meditates on the parable of the owner of an estate who went out at dawn to hire workmen for his vineyard (Mt 20, 1-16). The daily wage which Jesus speaks of goes beyond the two, however necessary, aspects of justice (the commutative: to give in order to have, and the distributive: to give as a duty) and

¹⁰ K. Wojtyla, *Person and act*, Rusconi, Sant’Arcangelo di Romagna 1999

¹¹ B. Pascal, *Thoughts*, 122

¹² M.S.Archer, *Being human. The problem of acting*, Marietti, Genoa-Milan, 2007

¹³ R. Guardini, (*The end of the modern epoch*). *Power*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1999, 122-123

expands to include gratuitousness. One of the slogans in the many demonstrations triggered by the economic crisis sounded like this: *“Work is dignity, not charity”*. The distance from the classic binary justice/charity is obvious. It gives voice to a sacrosanct need that must be stressed: *“It is not enough to satisfy a need, it is necessary to acknowledge a desire”*.¹⁴

This exigency is felt everywhere: especially in the Western world *“the vision of labor as an economic measure is now showing all its limitations since when it comes to acknowledging the value of the person and the humanity of relationships law and market, despite their binding rationality and undeniable usefulness, provide no guarantee”*.¹⁵ Even in the Arab world the desire for dignity was the spark that triggered a major political upheaval¹⁶. It becomes thus obvious that the common experience of each man, in its triple basic dimension of work, family and leisure, however differently articulated and however constrained by resignation, ideology, power or violence, will ultimately reemerge.

Obviously, stressing dignity does not imply downgrading charity. The point is rather to go beyond the concept of charity as mere hand-out. What makes the difference is the *“way of giving”* (Levinas). And the gratuitous dimension of work, however decisive, should not be confused with *“free of charge”*. What is being questioned is not *“the just wage”*, as the Church has long been reminding us¹⁷. On the contrary, *“the just wage represents the practical verification of the justice of the whole socio-economic system”*.¹⁸ Rather, what is needed is to go back to the ultimate meaning of work, which is not merely work per se, but the man¹⁹ who works and works well. As Péguy perceptively remarked, in the old days a carpenter would make to perfection also the part of a chair that one could not see. Because only if it is done well work expresses and fulfils the free intention of the person, guarantees the dignity of the worker: this is the *gratuitousness* mentioned by the Encyclical. One can easily see that this position, that emphasizes giving and fraternity, implies a reformulation of all things having to do with labor, including market and profit, production and finance. These terms are not unavoidable expressions of a natural fact, they are cultural categories liable to change according to circumstances and relationships. This is the path that takes us to the ultimate meaning of work, based on an adequate anthropology where the person is seen from inception, from what precedes the mere doing.

Through labor man rises towards God and becomes cooperator in His work. *“Human work proceeds directly from persons created in the image of God and called to prolong the work of creation by subduing the earth, both with and for one another”* (Cat. Of the Cath. Church, 2427).

¹⁴ P. Sequeri, *Mercy, the perfect Exchange*, P. Sequeri –D. Demetrio, Blessed are the merciful because they shall receive mercy, Lindau, Turin, 12

¹⁵ Ibid, 13

¹⁶ A. Scola, *In a changing world, demand is unchanged*, Oasis, 14 (2011), 5-9

¹⁷ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 4

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*

¹⁹ Ibid

Of course there is also a harsh side: (*“Anyone who would not work should not eat, 2 Thess., 3,10*) and work always involves toil (labor in Latin means in fact toil). In its very first pages the Bible says it is part of the malediction inflicted on man for the original sin: *“cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread”* (Genesis 3, 17,-19). And yet labor never loses its dimension of work done with God in imitation of God (*“My Father is at work until now , and I am at work as well”*, John, 5,17). In this relationship with the Creator lies the dignity of the laborer, saved from the risk of being treated as a commodity, and of labor itself.

Even at a time of transition such as the present one, when labor is undergoing such rapid changes that it must be dealt with in new ways, going back to the central role of the person and to the primacy of labor over capital – the main point of the social teachings of the Catholic Church – offers a practicable path to development. On the other hand, in advanced economies such as the western ones, that are now in great trouble, one of the most efficient ways to promote growth and development is innovation. And where can innovation come from if not from the energy, dynamism and creativity of free and responsible individuals? There is no innovation without culture and there is no culture without education. Education is the best guarantee of the prime good which consists in the insuperable primacy of the person-in-relationships.

5. Safeguarding solidarity

Man’s relational dimension brings into play the urgent need of preserving national and international solidarity. This is particularly obvious in Europe. If on the domestic front the crisis is severely stressing social cohesion, at international level the recurrent speculative attacks on many Eurozone countries and the structural weakness of some of them are casting doubts on the functioning of the monetary union and the possibility of balancing fiscal domestic reforms with initiatives of mutual support. Clearly it is not for me to treat these issues in detail, but I do wish to underline that the debate should be framed in a wider perspective. European countries, in fact, have a global responsibility: on one side financial turbulence has grievous negative effects on peripheral countries, in particular because it causes the price of primary goods to fluctuate wildly; on the other side a sustainable growth must be inclusive in order not to be jeopardized by excessive imbalances.

It is therefore necessary to stress – and this is one of the goals of the Foundation *“Centesimus Annus”* – that addressing the urgent needs of a great part of mankind, both in economically advanced countries (where we know only too well that poverty is widely present) and in low income ones represents also an opportunity to create jobs, innovation and development for all. A sustainable way out of the economic-financial emergency implies involvement in the global socio-economic dynamics and in those of countries previously excluded or emarginated.

Even in this case, however, we must retrieve the full range of the very idea of solidarity, endangered today by a preoccupying conceptual impoverishment. It is perhaps also for this reason

that social sciences are so interested in solidarity²⁰ or are even striving to come up with a radical new way of thinking about it.²¹

The social doctrine of the Church has not shirked from the task of challenging common thinking and is courageously advocating an articulate way of viewing society. It is based, as stated in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (162-163) on unity, on interrelation and on the articulation of the principles of the Social Doctrine, of which solidarity is one. Therefore extrapolating the concept of solidarity is already a mistake. This is why Benedict XVI, on the occasion of the 14th session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, stressed the urgency of linking solidarity to three other basic concepts of the social Doctrine: common good, subsidiarity and human dignity.

The idea is this: talking about solidarity makes sense only if we recognize a common social good, which is first and foremost the good of being together (in common) and which solidarity translates into sharing. On the other hand, in order to enjoy this common good in a way that does not infringe on human dignity one should not mortify (paternalistically) the role of social players: subsidiarity fulfils this very purpose, because it implies that individual or collective initiative is just as important as, and cannot be replaced by, public policy.

The result is a cross like scheme. Benedict XVI says in fact: “We can initially sketch the interconnections between these four principles by placing the dignity of the person at the intersection of two axes: one horizontal, representing “solidarity” and “subsidiarity”, and one vertical, representing the “common good”.²²

If we wish to do away with commonplace thinking on solidarity we must therefore draw two fundamental axes.

On the horizontal axis: human dignity is not respected if there is no solidarity towards those in need and if subsidiarity does not guarantee the fundamental role of individual action.

On the vertical axis: common good is fully understood when it is not limited to the historical social one but is open to an eschatological perspective, open to the good that is beyond death and coincides with God One and Threefold from Whom we come and to Whom we go back, a perspective of fulfillment of the person and of all persons. If the common good of society became the one and only horizon (no transcendence) we would fall into a totalitarian approach, i.e. into constraining the person within the narrow compass of waiting for intra-historical salvation. Every totalitarian regime is essentially the divinization of a purely earthly idea of good life. Obviously this

²⁰ K. Bayertz, *Solidarity*, Kluwer Academic Publisher, Dordrecht 1999; A. Bassi, *Gift and trust. The forms of solidarity in complex societies*, Edizioni Lavoro, Roma 2000; F. Crespi–S. Moscovici, *Questioning solidarity. Theoretical contributions and empirical analyses*, Meltemi, Rome 2001; H. Brunkhorst, *Globalizing solidarity: the destiny of democratic solidarity in the times of global capitalism, global religion and the global public*, Seminar of Critical Theory, Gallarate 2008

²¹ S. Paugam, *Repenser la solidarité. L’apport des sciences sociales*, PUF, Paris 2007; A.M. Baggio, *Il principio dimenticato. La fraternità nella riflessione politologica contemporanea*, Città Nuova, Roma 2007

²² Benedict XVI, *Speech to the participants in the 14th session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences*, May 3, 2008 in M. S. Archer–P. Donati “Pursuing the common good: how solidarity and subsidiarity can work together”, the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Vatican City 2008, 16

does not mean the submission of politics to theology, but it does mean getting rid of the delusion of self sufficiency that prompts human beings to believe they can fulfill the promise of happiness by simply building just societies.

6. A common responsibility to politics and culture

As one can see from the picture we have synthetically sketched, the challenges the crisis poses to man in this third millennium are huge and go beyond the power of response of economic-financial operators. They call for action by a variety of players. I would like to conclude with a double short reflection on the world of politics and the world of culture.

In my opinion political institutions, which have the arduous task of providing both immediate solutions and medium and long range policies, should orient their action according to a double criterion. On one side they should promote individual initiative, typical of civil society, through subsidiarity. As the most perceptive sociological interpretations now acknowledge, it is in fact civil society that generates the capital of solidarity no democratic State can do without²³. Just think how the family, at least in Italy, has absorbed some effects of a crisis which could have been far more devastating. Political institutions are not called upon to run civil society, they must only govern it. On the other side, they should strenuously support religious freedom, i.e. the acknowledgement that the socio-political dimension cannot represent the sole horizon of the human person²⁴.

In the pursuit of both goals, a mistaken reference to the principle of the autonomy of temporal realities should be overcome - and this is particularly true for Christians (*Gaudium et spes*, 36). It has sadly led man to disregard the anthropological and ethical values needed to confront the practicalities of social, political and economic action. Thus “autonomous” has become synonymous of “indifferent” or “neutral” to these fundamental values. Irrespective of individual

²³ P. Donati – M. Archer, *Riflessività, modernizzazione e società civile*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2010; J-L Lavivlle – P. Glemain, *L'économie sociale aux prises avec la gestion*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 2010; J. Braun – G.S. McCall, *Dilemmas in nation-building*, Blackwell for UNESCO, Oxford 2009; C. Ruzza – V. Della Sala, *Governance and civil society in the European Union, vol 1, Normative perspectives*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, UK (distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave) 2007; M. Magatti, *Il potere istituyente della società civile*, Laterza, RomaBari 2005

²⁴ As John Paul II eloquently said, acknowledgement of religious freedom is fundamental, because “it is an implicit recognition of the existence of an order which transcends the political dimension of existence” (Address to the Diplomatic Corps, 1989; also THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, *Universal Rights in a World of Diversity. The Case of Religious Freedom*, XVII Plenary Session, 29 April – 3 May 2011, Vatican City 2011

beliefs, honesty suggests the need to acknowledge that there is no such thing as a neutral position. Each and every decision, in fact, implies a fundamental orientation.²⁵

The world of culture, on the other hand – and here I am thinking in particular of Universities – will have to focus on that widening of reason which Benedict XVI has repeatedly advocated. To start with, this implies opening each discipline to a close comparison with the others including those, as theology, which see in the human person a relationship with God that cannot be obliterated: we are not talking about doing away with the necessary delimitations of the diverse disciplines, but about discovering, through their interrelation, that no discipline can afford the luxury of absolutism and self referral.

A fresh start is necessary: we must focus on man, man as self-in-relationships because this is “*unified totality*”, as *Gaudium et Spes* teaches (3). It is not an impossible return to the past, but an urgently needed renewal also of politics and economics.

²⁵ Benedict XVI, Meeting with representatives of the world of culture and of the economy, Venice, May 8, 2011
“In the context of a city, any city, the administrative, cultural and economic decisions depend, basically, on this fundamental orientation, which we may call “political” in the most noble, the loftiest sense of the term. It is a question of choosing between a “liquid” city, the homeland of a culture that appears ever more relative and transient, and a city that is constantly renewing its beauty by drawing on the beneficial sources of art, of knowledge and of the relations between people and peoples.”