

# An Ardent Love for the Truth

Relativism entails a way of acting that manifests a deep perplexity in the face of reality: since I cannot know anything definitively, I cannot make decisions that lead to a true and lasting self-giving.

05/31/2024

“Saint Thomas was impartial in his love of truth. He sought truth wherever it might be found and gave consummate demonstration of its universality. In him, the Church’s

Magisterium has seen and recognized the passion for truth; and, precisely because it stays consistently within the horizon of universal, objective and transcendent truth, his thought scales heights unthinkable to human intelligence.”<sup>[1]</sup>

These words of John Paul II referring to Saint Thomas Aquinas offer high praise for a great saint, while also showing how much the Church values the gift of human intelligence.

As John Paul II said, taking an expression from Paul VI: “Rightly, then, he may be called an ‘apostle of the truth.’ Looking unreservedly to truth, the realism of Thomas could recognize the objectivity of truth and produce not merely a philosophy of ‘what seems to be’ but a philosophy of ‘what is.’”<sup>[2]</sup>

Praising the philosophical and theological efforts of a saint also means praising a specific attitude

towards the truth: an ardent love in searching for and being open to it.

Part of the Church's mission is to encourage and spur forward the minds of Christians and all mankind in their search for the truth. This was a constant aim of the teaching of John Paul II – clearly shown in his encyclicals *Fides et ratio* and *Veritatis splendor*. And it is also the attitude of Benedict XVI who, from the first days of his pontificate, has encouraged everyone not to let themselves be defeated by a relativistic mindset, which implies renouncing the investigation into the truths that give meaning and transcendence to human life.

Relativism, which Joseph Ratzinger in his book *Truth and Tolerance* referred to as “the central problem of the Christian faith,”<sup>[3]</sup> is a position towards the truth that can easily undermine human relationships. It is

not so much a philosophical system as a style of thinking in which one avoids speaking in terms of true or false, since no objective validity is seen as being possible for statements about realities that transcend what we can see and touch: God, the soul, even the possibility of the love every human heart longs for.

This attitude, moreover, entails a way of acting that manifests a deep perplexity in the face of reality: since I cannot know anything definitively, I cannot make decisions that lead to a true and lasting self-giving. Everything can change; everything is provisional.

According to this position, what we can know and affirm about divine realities and those that refer to the meaning of life is so imperfect and relative that our words lack any truth.

Inside this perspective, any attempt to escape the method of the experimental sciences, the only authorized source of knowledge, is illusory, or is simply declared to be a return to pre-scientific knowledge, or a restating of ancient mythologies.

## **Truth and freedom**

Relativism tries, therefore, to impose a position that embraces one's entire life. If we cannot reach any certain conclusions, we can at least try to establish a path, a *method*, that seems to lead to the greatest amount of happiness in this confused world of ours – a happiness that, due to the contingency of our knowledge, is always fragmentary and limited.

Hence the most important thing is to evade completely the problem of truth: any opinion is acceptable as long as it is not presented with a claim to be universal, and certainly

not as a complete explanation about God and the world.

Thus religious truths remain at the mercy of the preference of each one's taste, reduced to debatable questions and lacking in rationality, precisely because they cannot be validated with the experimental method.

And hence relativism becomes the justification for leading a "livable" existence in each one's private world. What better guarantee is there for the peaceful coexistence of all men and women than a world without truth?

In many places today, a weak idea of reason has emerged as a necessary presupposition for democracy and living together. In a multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious society, defending the existence of truth leads to conflict and violence, since those who are convinced of these truths are suspected of wanting

to impose – in a “fundamentalist way” – what is nothing more than their own opinion.

But, curiously, just the opposite happens. The lack of sensitivity for the truth, for the search for answers about the reality of the world and the meaning of human life, leads to the deformation, and often the corruption, of the very idea and experience of freedom.

It is not surprising that the social and legal expressions of ways of life consistent with relativism are always based on an alleged “right of conquest” on the part of each person’s freedom.

Certainly, political freedom has been one of the great achievements of the modern age. And yet, human freedom is not an absolute; quite the contrary: it is linked, first of all, to human nature.

If it is disconnected from reason and from the totality of who man is, so that it is conceived as “being able to desire everything” and “being able to put into practice everything that is desired,” in the end it turns out that “desire itself is the only norm for our actions.”<sup>[4]</sup>

But we all realize that we don’t act simply out of desire. Reality itself is already guiding us and suggesting reasons for our actions. No one buys a jar of jam just because of the design of the jar. A good housewife before choosing first informs herself about what this product really contains. And her choice – the example is banal, but indicative – has some good reasons: the percentage of fruit, its quality and origin, whether it is “organic,” whether sugar is added or not, etc. Freedom is not an *unrestricted* power; it has its limits. Freedom is linked to the integral

good of man, that is, to the truth of who he is.

And hence what lies beneath the accusation of fundamentalism that is often made against many Christians who want to be consistent with their faith, is actually another form of fundamentalism: the weakness of convictions that is much more dangerous because it hides itself under the mask of tolerance.

Being convinced of the truth does not necessarily mean trying to impose it on others. Therefore, faced with the more or less implicit accusation of despotism directed at anyone who defends the truth as an essential human good, this presumed despotism would come about only if there were a lack of respect for each person's freedom.

The esteem for contrary ideas, and especially for the people who hold them, does not stem from the

weakness of one's own beliefs, nor from being willing to question any conviction. Rather the opposite is the case: an authentic attitude of respect for all men and women requires some universally accepted, "non-negotiable" truths, starting with the recognition of the dignity of each human being – a necessary presupposition in order to respect their freedom.

The more strongly we are convinced of each person's dignity – which seems so obvious to Christians, who realize that all men and women are children of the same Father – the more it will be possible to guarantee respect for all men and women, including those who do not share our principles.

In fact, if the universality of human rights and the objective truth that underpins them – the dignity of each person – are not accepted, they will

not be enforceable for all citizens, nor will arbitrariness in the exercise of power be limited. And hence democracy itself will be defenseless against its own abuses.

The problem of relativism is found in the core of man himself, who, no matter how much he aspires to enjoy autonomy without ties or limits, will always desire to know the meaning of his life, a desire that is closely tied to questions about God and salvation.

Our Lord proclaimed that *man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God* (Mt 4:4). The natural desire to know and the hunger for the divine word are inextinguishable, and no one can make them disappear: *so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that*

*which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it (Is 55:11).*

## **Making the truth loveable**

The truth is loveable in itself, but sometimes we can try to defend it in a somewhat unfriendly way.

Certainly, some truths make those who hear them uncomfortable, and a coherent life is not an easy path for anyone. But the truth has a force of attraction that we should never try to hide.

To show others the splendor of the truth, we first need to strive to seek, know and contemplate it, also through study and the formation we receive. If we really love the truth, it is easier to express it with the gift of tongues, and make it visible with our own life.

Part of our service to the truth involves knowing how to find the appropriate channels to transmit its

attractiveness and invite others to seek it.

It is sometimes easier to use a negative tone than trying to get to know our interlocutors better in order to find the best way to explain things. But it is certainly much less effective.

Relativism is an attitude that flees from the truth out of the fear of losing one's freedom and happiness. Hence charity is the best path for reconciling truth, freedom and happiness: "Truth and love are identical. This proposition – understood in all its depth – is the highest guarantee of tolerance; of a relationship with the truth whose only weapon is the truth itself and which, because it is true, is love."<sup>[5]</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI, in the opening points of his first encyclical, raised a question that describes the defensive attitude many people can have

towards the truth, in this case towards moral truths taught by the Church, especially in the area of sexual morality: “Doesn’t the Church, with all her commandments and prohibitions, turn to bitterness the most precious thing in life? Doesn’t she ‘blow the whistle’ just when the joy which is the Creator’s gift offers us a happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the Divine?”<sup>[6]</sup>

Making the truth loveable entails showing that greater happiness and joy is found in living in the truth than in trying to escape from it. “When you embark on the apostolate, be convinced that it is always about making people happy, very happy. Truth is inseparable from authentic joy.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Making the truth loveable is a good description of an apostolate in which love and truth are joined together. A harsh and uncharitable truth would

become unattractive and even unattainable, because the truths decisive for existence “are attained not only by way of reason but also through trusting acquiescence to other persons who can guarantee the authenticity and certainty of the truth itself.”<sup>[8]</sup>

We Christians serve the truth above all when we accompany and present it with Christ’s charity, which means, among other things, knowing how to welcome everyone.

Saint Josemaría deeply loved both truth and freedom. That is why he always taught that the truth is not imposed, but rather offered: “Do you feel as if goodness and absolute truth have been deposited with you, and therefore that you have been invested with a personal title or right to uproot evil at all costs? You will never solve anything like that, but only through Love and with love,

remembering that Love has forgiven you and still forgives you so much!”<sup>[9]</sup>

The best environment for helping people to come to love the truth is not one of confrontation – of winners and losers. Friendship, joy, affection and a willingness to serve convince and move others, breaking down the walls of relativism that close intellects to the truth. “The best defense of God and man consists precisely in love.”<sup>[10]</sup> The best environment for restoring confidence in the truth and preparing others to receive and love it, is that of the example of a coherent life.

Even among people who haven’t known Christ, we see ardent and coherent witnesses to the truth. For example, Socrates, one of the great seekers of truth, whom John Paul II highlights in the encyclical *Fides et ratio*: “the death of Socrates gave

philosophy one of its decisive orientations, no less decisive now than it was more than two thousand years ago. It is not by chance, then, that faced with the fact of death philosophers have again and again posed this question, together with the question of the meaning of life and immortality.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Christians have an even greater reason to give witness to the Truth, not only with their intellect informed by reading, study and reflection, but also through the virtues reflecting Christ, incarnate Truth.

“Today’s society needs a new way of living and spreading the eternal truths of the Gospel, since it has departed from Christian faith and morals. Children of God at the very heart of that society, of the world, have to let their virtues shine out like lamps in the darkness – *quasi*

*lucernae lucentes in caliginoso  
loco.”<sup>[12]</sup>*

Christ taught us the Truth about God and human life by dying on the Cross. The saints have made it credible that God is love, by giving their lives out of love for God and all men and women. The Church never ceases striving to enlighten the world and rescue it from the darkness of a life without truth and meaning.

*Article published in 2007*

<sup>[1]</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, no. 44.

<sup>[2]</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. Paul VI, Enc. *Lumen  
Ecclesiae*, November 20, 1974, no. 8.

<sup>[3]</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and  
Tolerance*, p. 105.

<sup>[4]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>[5]</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and  
Tolerance*, p. 199.

<sup>[6]</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 3.

<sup>[7]</sup> Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 185.

<sup>[8]</sup> *Fides et ratio*, no. 33.

<sup>[9]</sup> *Furrow*, no. 185.

<sup>[10]</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 31.

<sup>[11]</sup> *Fides et ratio* no. 26.

<sup>[12]</sup> *Furrow*, no. 318.