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Topic 1: The Longing for God

In the depths of the human spirit we find a longing for happiness that points to the hope of a home, of a definitive homeland. We are earthly, but we long for the eternal, we long for God. A God whom we can know with certainty as the origin and end of the universe and as the supreme good, starting from the world and the human person.

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1. The longing for God: the human person is capable of knowing and loving God; our desire for complete happiness and our desire for Him

“Man is made to be happy as a bird is made to fly,” a 19th century Russian author wrote. All men and women seek happiness, their own good, and direct their life in the way that seems best-suited to achieve it. Being able to enjoy human goods that perfect and enrich us makes us happy. But in this life happiness is always marred by a shadow. Not only because after obtaining something good we can get used to it (which often happens when we receive something we had desired to have), but more radically because no created good is capable of fulfilling our longing for happiness and because all created goods are fleeting.

We are human beings, made up of body and spirit in unity, personal beings. Our spiritual dimension enables us to go beyond the realities around us: persons, institutions, material goods, the instruments that help us to grow… Growing in our knowledge of the world does not exhaust our capacity to know or our questions; we can always come to know new things and understand them in greater depth. And something similar happens with our capacity to love, No created good satiates us completely and forever: we can always love more deeply, and love better things. And somehow we feel spurred towards this: achieving new goals makes us happy. We like to understand better the problems and realities around us, to encounter new situations and gain experience. We try to attain this in our own life and get depressed when we don't achieve it. We have a "longing for complete fulfilment." All this is a sign of

greatness, of the fact that there is something infinite in us that transcends every concrete reality that is part of our life.

The world, however, is transient. We ourselves are transient, and so is everything around us. The people we love, our achievements, the goods we enjoy… There is nothing we can hold on to forever. We would like to hold on to them, to have them always with us because they enhance our lives; they bring us joy with their gifts and qualities, and delight us. But deep down we realize that they are fleeting, that they will not be with us forever, that they sometimes promise us a happiness that they can only give for a while. “Everything bears the stamp of its expiration, hidden among its promises. For the horror and shame of material goods is that they are fleeting, and to cover this shameful sore and deceive the unwary, they disguise themselves

with bright colours."[1] The shadow that marks everything earthly affects us deeply, and if we dwell on it, it frightens us and makes us wish it were not so, that we might find a way to fulfil our desire for life, for plenitude. These "longings for salvation" are present in the depths of every human heart.

We find, then, two different types of human longings that point to our "hunger for transcendence." Our experiences of a transcendent good awaken in us a "longing for plenitude" (of being, truth, goodness, beauty, love). And our experiences of evil, of the loss of these goods, awakens in our heart a "longing for salvation" (survival, righteousness, justice, peace). These experiences of transcendence leave a longing for a reality beyond this world. "Man is made to be happy as a bird is made to fly." But our experience shows that happiness in this world is never

complete, that life is never fully satisfactory. Happiness seems to be beyond our attempts to attain it, as if we were always seeking it and never finding it. Therefore in the depths of the human spirit a dissatisfaction is present, a longing for happiness that points to a secret hope: the hope of a home, of a definitive homeland in which the dream of eternal happiness, of a love that lasts forever, will be fulfilled. We are earthly, but we long for the eternal.

This longing does not in itself form the basis of a natural religion, but is rather a "pointer" to God. Man is a naturally religious being because his experience of the world leads him to think spontaneously of a being who is the foundation of all reality: "whom all call God," as Saint Thomas said at the end of his famous five ways of access to God (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.2, a.3). Knowledge of God is accessible to common sense,

that is, to the spontaneous philosophical thought that every human being exercises as a result of personal life experiences: wonder at the beauty and order of nature, surprise at the free gift of life, the joy of perceiving the love of others… all lead to reflecting on the "mystery" that underlies all this. The various dimensions of the human spirit, including the ability to reflect on oneself, to progress culturally and technically, to grasp the morality of one's actions, also show that, unlike other corporeal beings, man transcends the rest of the material cosmos and points to a higher, transcendent spiritual being that is the source of these human qualities.

Man's religious concern is not, as Ludwig Feuerbach thought, a projection of human subjectivity and our desire for happiness, but arises from a spontaneous consideration of reality as it is. This explains why the

denial of God and the attempt to exclude Him from culture and social and civil life are relatively recent phenomena, limited to some areas of the Western world. The great religious and existential questions remain unchanged over time, which refutes the idea that religion is confined to an “infantile” phase of human history, destined to disappear with the progress of knowledge.

The realisation that man is a naturally religious being led some philosophers and theologians to the idea that God, in creating mankind, had already prepared us in some way to receive the gift that is our ultimate and definitive vocation: union with God in Christ. Tertullian, for example, in noting how the pagans of his time naturally said “God is great” or “God is good,” thought that the human soul was in some way oriented towards the Christian faith. And in his

Apologetics (17:6) he wrote: "*Anima naturaliter christiana*": we all have a naturally Christian soul. Saint Thomas, in considering the ultimate end of man and the unlimited openness of the human spirit, affirmed that human beings have "a natural desire to see God" (*Contra Gentiles*, bk. 3, ch. 57, no .4). Human experience shows, however, that this desire is not something we can attain by our own strength, that it can only come about if God reveals Himself and unveils his mystery, if He himself comes to meet us and shows Himself as He is. But this is the object of Revelation.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 27) has summarised some of these ideas succinctly: "The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God

will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for."

2. Rational knowledge of God

The human intellect can know that God exists by approaching Him through a path that starts from the created world and that has two itineraries: *material creatures* (cosmological paths) and the *human person* (anthropological paths).

These paths to God's existence are not properly speaking "proofs" in the sense that mathematics or natural science give to this term. Rather they are converging philosophical arguments that will be more convincing according to the formation and capacity for reflection possessed by the one who considers them (cf. *Catechism*, 31). Nor are they "proofs" in the sense of the experimental sciences (physics, biology, etc.), because God is not the

object of our empirical knowledge. We cannot observe and measure Him, as one might observe a sunset or a sandstorm in order to draw conclusions.

The cosmological paths start from material creatures. The best-known formulation is that of Saint Thomas Aquinas, in his famous “five ways.” To simplify his arguments, the first two reflect on the fact that the chains of causes (cause-effect) that we observe in nature cannot continue in the past to infinity: there must be an origin, a prime mover and first cause. The third way starts from the fact that we find in nature things that are possible to be and to not be, and concludes that this cannot be so for the whole of reality: there must be something or someone that necessarily exists and cannot not exist, because otherwise nothing would exist. The fourth way sees that all material beings participate more

or less fully in perfections such as goodness, truth and beauty, and concludes that a being must exist that is the source of all these perfections. The last (fifth) way points to the order and finality present in the world and the laws that regulate material beings, and concludes that an ordering intelligence must exist that is the source of these laws and also the final cause of everything (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.2).

Besides the paths that start from the material cosmos, others begin from the nature of man, of the human person. These paths are more powerful when understood as convergent than when considered in isolation, one by one. We have already referred to them briefly above. In the first place, the spiritual nature of the human being, marked by the capacity to think and reflect, by interiority and freedom, qualities

that seem to transcend any merely material being. Nor does the human person's unsatisfied desire for happiness make sense if there is no God who can bestow it. We also see in human nature a moral sense of solidarity and charity, which leads us to open ourselves to others and to recognise in the depths of our being the vocation to transcend our ego and its selfish interests. And one begins to reflect: why are we able to view others in a non-utilitarian way? Why do we come to realise that some things are in accord with human dignity and others are not. Why do we experience guilt and shame when we do something wrong, and joy and peace when we behave rightly and justly? Why can we be enraptured by the beauty of a sunset, a sky filled with stars or a great work of art. None of these reactions can reasonably be attributed to the blind working of the cosmos, to the impersonal product of material

interactions. Don't they all point to an infinitely good, beautiful and just being who has enabled us to grasp at least a glimpse of who He is and what He wants for us? Certainly these paths don't force our intellect to assent to God's existence, but they carry a luminous logic for those who look at reality with simple and clean eyes.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 33) summarises these paths to God as follows: "With his openness to truth and beauty, his sense of moral goodness, his freedom and the voice of his conscience, with his longings for the infinite and for happiness, man questions himself about God's existence. In all this he discerns signs of his spiritual soul. The soul, the 'seed of eternity we bear in ourselves, irreducible to the merely material' (*Gaudium et spes*, 18), can have its origin only in God."

The various philosophical arguments used to “prove” the existence of God do not necessarily cause faith in Him; they only ensure that such faith is reasonable. In the end they tell us very little about God and often rely on other convictions that are not always present in many people. For example, in today’s culture a certain scientific understanding of the processes of nature might object to some of the cosmological paths. Although the universe displays order, beauty and finality in its phenomena, it also possesses a significant amount of disorder, chaos and tragedy, since many events seem to occur in a haphazard (random, chaotic) and uncoordinated way, and thus can lead to real tragedies. Similarly, anyone who views the human person as only a slightly more developed animal whose actions are regulated by necessary drives, will not accept the anthropological paths based on

morality and the transcendence of the human spirit. For they reduce the source of spiritual life (mind, conscience, soul) to the corporeality of the cerebral organs and neural processes.

These objections can be answered with arguments showing that disorder and chance can have a place within an overall purposefulness in the universe (and thus within God's creative plan). Albert Einstein said that in the laws of nature "so superior a reason is revealed that all the rationality of human thought and laws is, in comparison, an absolutely insignificant reflection."[2] Similarly, the study of anthropology points to the self-transcendence of the human person, the free will at work in our choices – even if they depend on and are to some extent conditioned by nature – and the impossibility of reducing the mind to the brain. The *Compendium of the Catechism*

teaches that starting “from the world and from the human person, through reason alone one can know God with certainty as the origin and end of the universe, as the highest good and as infinite truth and beauty” (no. 3). But acquiring this certainty is a complex process that depends on one’s personal dispositions and that allows considerable room for discussion, which explains why the rational paths to God’s existence are often not completely convincing.

3. Current attitudes of people and society with regard to the transcendent

Despite the reality of globalisation, attitudes towards God and religion vary markedly in different parts of the world. Speaking in general terms, a clear reference to a reality that transcends this world (albeit expressed in very different religious and cultural forms) remains for most

people an important part of their daily life.

An exception to this general picture is the Western world, and especially Europe, where a number of historical and cultural factors have led to a widespread attitude of rejection and indifference towards God and the until now dominant religion in the West: Christianity. The sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, has summed up this change by saying that in Western society the Christian faith has lost its “plausibility structure,” so that if in the past it was enough to let oneself be carried along in order to be Christian, nowadays it is enough to let oneself be carried along to stop being Christian. We could even say that the desire for God seems to have disappeared in Western society: “For large sectors of society He is no longer the one longed for or desired but rather a reality that leaves them

indifferent, one on which there is no need even to comment."[3]

The causes of this change are many. On the one hand, the great scientific and technical achievements of the last two centuries, which have brought humanity so many benefits, have also given rise to a materialistic mentality that views the experimental sciences as the only valid form of rational knowledge. A worldview has spread according to which only what is empirically verifiable, what can be seen and touched, is true. This narrows the "horizon of rationality," since besides undervaluing non-scientific forms of knowledge (such as trusting what others tell us), it leads to a selfish effort to make the world more comfortable and pleasurable. This process, however, is in no way necessary. The mysterious beauty and grandeur of the created world need not lead to idolising science, but

on the contrary it can spur us to admire the wonders God has placed in his creation. Today, as in the past, many scientists continue to open themselves to a reality that transcends this world in discovering the perfection and order contained in the universe.

A second aspect, linked to the previous one, is the secularisation of society, that is, the process by which many truths about the world that were previously related to religious notions, beliefs and institutions have lost that dimension and have come to be viewed in purely human, social or civil terms. This aspect is linked to the previous one, because scientific progress has made it possible to understand the causes of many natural phenomena (in the field of health and human sciences) that were previously directly related to the will of God. For example, in ancient times a plague could be

understood as a divine punishment for the sins of men, but nowadays it is seen as the result of poor hygienic practices and living conditions that we can counteract. In itself, this better knowledge of the world is a good thing, and also helps to purify the idea that we have of God's way of working. He is not just another cause of natural phenomena. God is on another level. He provides the answers to the ultimate questions that we human beings ask ourselves: the meaning of life, and of suffering and joy, the final destiny of each person, and so on. Science is unable to provide an explanation here, so when people ask these deeper questions, it is easy for them to come to realise why God is indispensable.

The weakening of the role that God plays in today's Western culture is also linked to the individualistic attitude that deeply shapes people's way of thinking. This attitude is one

of the results of the process of emancipation that has characterised Western culture since the time of the Enlightenment (18th century). This process, like the previous ones, also has positive aspects, since it is contrary to human dignity that, under religious or other pretexts, a person should be placed “under guardianship” and forced to make decisions in the name of imposed doctrines that are not self-evident. However, it has also strengthened the conviction that it is better not to depend on or be tied to anyone, so as to be able to do whatever one wants. Who of us hasn’t sometimes heard – perhaps formulated in different ways – the statement that the most important thing is “to be authentic,” “to live one’s own life,” and to live it as one pleases? This attitude leads to treating relationships in a utilitarian way, seeking to ensure that they do not tie one down or restrict personal spontaneity. Only relationships that

provide personal satisfaction are valued.

Within this perspective, a sincere relationship with God is going to be seen as bothersome, since obedience to his precepts is not felt as something that frees us from our selfishness. Religion will be valued only to the extent that it provides peace, serenity and well-being, and does not involve serious commitments. Hence an individualistic attitude gives rise to forms of religiosity with little content or institutional structure, characterised by a subjective reliance on feelings that easily change according to personal needs. The current trend towards some highly "personalisable" Eastern religious practices is one sign of this.

Other features of the mentality that currently dominates Western societies include the cult of novelty

and progress, the desire to share strong emotions with others, the dominant role of technology in shaping the way we work, relate to others and rest. All these certainly have an impact on the way people view a reality that transcends this world and the Christian God. It is also true that there is much that is positive here. Western societies have known a long period of peace and material development, and have tried to enable as many people as possible to share in these advances and play a role in society. There is much that is Christian in all this. But it is also clear that at present many people shy away from the topic of "God" and not infrequently show indifference or rejection when it is brought up.

In such a society, impervious to a transcendent reality, Christians will be convincing only if they evangelise first of all by the witness of each

one's own life. Witness and word: both are necessary, but witness has priority. Human happiness is linked to love, and a Christian knows by faith that there is no love more true and pure than God's love, shown by Christ on the Cross and communicated to us in the Eucharist. The only way to convince a society that has turned its back on God that it is worth committing oneself to Him is show others the presence of that love and happiness in one's own life.

"Not all satisfactions have the same effect on us: some leave a positive after-taste, able to calm the soul and make us more active and generous. Others, however, after the initial delight, seem to disappoint the expectations they had awakened and sometimes leave behind them a sense of bitterness, dissatisfaction or emptiness."[4] The happiness of those who believe only in what can be seen and touched, or who are dominated

by a utilitarian or individualistic conception of life, is fleeting. It “lasts only as long as it lasts,” and needs to be renewed frequently. It is often a happiness that does not make people better. In contrast, those who serve Jesus wholeheartedly lead a different kind of life and also have a different kind of happiness: deeper, more lasting, which produces fruit both in themselves and in others.

It is worth re-reading the well-known words from the *Epistle to Diognetus* (V and VI) on the life of Christians in the world: “Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and

confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed.

“They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in

all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

“To sum up all in one phrase--what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world.”

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[1] J. L. Lorda, *La señal de la Cruz*, Rialp, Madrid 2011, pp. 65-66.

[2] Albert Einstein, *My Vision of the World*, Barcelona 2013.

[3] Pope Benedict XVI, Audience, 7 November 2012.

[4] *Ibid*.

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