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Crisis and renewal of faith

There are still differences between Christians, but today the main differences are not the divisions between churches and denominations but go across the boundaries of the churches.

There are still disparities between religious and non-religious people, but the major differences go across and question the validity of a simple division into the theist and atheist.

Rapid and radical changes in our world also affect the area of religion. Despite the self-fulfilling prophecy of the secularism, religion did not disappear from our world, but it has changed and changed further.

The opposite of faith is not atheism, but idolatry. Idolatry is a dangerous absolutisation of relative values. Our world needs cooperation between religious and non-religious people in the struggle against idolatry.

The powerful wave of populism and nationalism in our world is a kind of dangerous idolatry.

According to Pope Francis, the church is to be “a field hospital” in today's world. The Pope showed great courage to speak openly and publicly about the dark facts and tragic events in the Church itself and he also mentioned some of their roots and deeper causes. To expect that a 3-day summit of bishops brings the immediate solution would be completely naive. After a three-day congress of oncologists, cancer can not disappear from the world. It is necessary to think globally but to act locally. Practical solutions need to be followed at the local level in very different conditions.

However, something essential has already happened: the church is shaken. She is shaken by the wounds caused by some of her representatives. This world needs wounded healers. This world needs - if I can borrow the expression of my teacher Jan Patočka - "the solidarity of the shaken."

For the Catholic Church, this time is a great opportunity. Opportunity for a new Reformation.

When the Church goes in the way of humility, "kenosis" (self-humiliation, self-emptying) and "metanoia," this crisis can cleanse and transform the Church into a field hospital, into a healer who, through his wounds, understands the wounds and diseases of our world.

Our world needs a "doctor without borders": In the "field hospital," religious and non-religious people, Christian humanists and secular humanists must work together.

The powerful medicine of this field hospital is faith. Faith not as a set of religious beliefs, but as a life orientation, as the "basic trust" - the opposite of fear.

When my non-believing friends ask me *what faith is* and what it's good for, I reply that faith gives one the strength to accept reality fully and in its entirety. It is because our faith is based on the conviction and experience that there is a meaning to reality, that our life is not a succession of accidents nor - in the words of Shakespeare's Macbeth - "a tale told by an idiot... signifying nothing." Faith is the confidence that in every life situation there is meaning, opportunity and hope. So I don't have to despair and flee from reality however complicated and harsh it may be. Nor do I have to dress it up in illusions. That is why I believe that *faith is the ally of realism and critical thinking* and the enemy of superstition, prejudice and illusion. It is the courage of truth.

However, understanding the meaning of many situations in our lives and our world is not an easy task. That sense does not lie on the surface, it needs to be looked for. To understand the meaning presupposes a contemplative approach to reality, a culture of spiritual life.

I am convinced that everyone who has a living faith and not a dead ideology,

occasionally experiences **crises**, passes through the valley of darkness, or experiences the silence of God.

Crises of faith—both personal in our life stories and in the history of church and culture— are an important part of the path of faith, of our communication with God. I understand the religious crisis of our epoch as a “collective dark night of the soul”- a challenge for purification and deepening of faith.

If “God is hidden” we can either ignore him or forget about him, or we can *accept this situation as an opportunity for adventurous and courageous seeking*. It is a blessed time for seeking and questioning.

Modernity in Europe has been a major crisis in the traditional form of religion. We cannot behave as if modernity never happened. We cannot simply enter the world of the past. Attempts at “playing at the past” have given rise to today’s calamitous forms of traditionalism and fundamentalism.

As a Christian and a theologian, I consider that the secular character of society (and I live in a country considered to be one of the most secularized societies of the planet) represents *a great opportunity and challenge*. Religion cannot be for granted; this is a challenge to achieve a fresh (and possibly *deeper*) understanding of it.

Our era has seen in many areas the defeat and “death of Christianity” – or at the very least of its familiar historical forms.

We must learn to open the meaning of the present situation with the key of the Easter story: Death is not the final end. However, the resurrection is also not a return to the past. The resurrection is not the reanimation or restitution of erstwhile conditions. It is the *opening of “a new dimension”*.

I am deeply convinced that our faith is **Christian** faith **insofar** as it *participates on the drama of Easter*. I am deeply convinced that a faith that does not undergo

the darkness of Good Friday cannot attain the fullness of Easter morning. *There is no resurrection without cross.* I don't trust the faith that never has been wounded by doubts and never has been crucified by the experience of evil and injustice in our world.

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God's hiddenness has been expressed in Jesus' cry on the cross: *My God why have you forsaken me?* This harrowing sentence has become more and more the cornerstone of my faith, and the basis of my theology. God in Jesus descended among us, into history, into the world—yes, and into our pain, are dark moments, our death and our hells.

Hebrew has two words for “why”: *madua*, which refers to a past cause (why something happened to me), and *lamah*, which concerns the future purpose (why did it happen, what does it mean, what was its purpose). “Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani?” That sentence can also be translated as: My God, *for what purpose* have you forsaken me? What is the meaning of it?

It is *a prayer in the form of an urgent question.* Perhaps our profoundest prayers could take the form of questions. Perhaps our profoundest questions could become prayers.

Perhaps in the history of theology we gave too many hasty answers where there was time and space more for questions and contemplation. Perhaps the time has come for us to turn our answers *back into questions again* and dwell with questions in the house of God's silence and hiddenness.

Maybe this experience of God's radical hiddenness and remoteness connects us with some people who regard themselves as nonbelievers, even as atheists. Perhaps we have the same experience, but we interpret it differently.

I say to atheists of a certain type, not that they are wrong but *they do not have patience*, when they interpret *too quickly* God's silence as proof of the death or non-existence of God. But equally impatient are those religious enthusiasts who drown out God's silence with their ardent "alleluias", or the religious traditionalists, who do not hear God's silence because they go on repeating non-stop the phrases they have learned. *Mature faith is capable of waiting patiently*. Its waiting is not idle passivity, however, but the expression of *hope* in what we cannot see, and in particular, an expression of trust and love – because *mature love*, as we know from the great hymn of St Paul, is *patient* and "bears all things".

In the gospel stories, God does not respond *immediately* to Jesus' question. In fact he replies beyond the gates of death, in a place to which that our experience and imagination cannot enter. His response is when Jesus is "returned to the game", to the lives of people, to history.

But he returns **transformed** beyond recognition. According to the gospel accounts, even his nearest and dearest find it hard to believe that it is he. He forbids Mary Magdalene to touch him, and detain him on his onward journey. He invites Thomas to touch him, but only his wounds.

Maybe by resurrecting Thomas' faith by letting him *touch the wounds*, Jesus was telling him: it is where you *touch human suffering*, and maybe only there, that you will realize that *I am alive*, that "it's me". In other words, *all painful wounds and all the human misery in the world are "Christ's wounds"*. We can only believe in Christ and have the right to exclaim "my Lord and my God" if we touch His wounds, of which our world is still full. Otherwise I say "Lord, Lord!" simply in vain and to no effect.¹

¹ Cf. Matthew 7.21

So the Resurrection is not a “happy end”, but an invitation and a challenge: Let us not be afraid to “believe in love”² even where it is the loser by the standards of the world. Let us have courage to take our chances with the *folly of the cross* in the face of the “wisdom of this world”!³

The gospels talk about a *transformed Jesus*, who *comes in the form of an unknown stranger*, and for a long time keeps his disciples in uncertainty. Maybe it is exactly the time we live in.

If Christianity wants to return to the game after “the death of God”, after death of God of old metaphysical theism, - and after the collapse of dogmatic atheism as well - then it must be transformed.

In these post-modern, post-religious, and post-secular times, Christianity also *must prove its resurrection by its wounds*.

It is said of St Martin that Satan himself appeared to him in the guise of Christ. The saint was not deceived, however. “Where are your *wounds*?” he asked. I do not believe in “faiths without wounds”. Christ is healing us through his wound.

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As a Christian theologian I *cannot* see salvation in a mere **return** to some of the historical forms of Christianity – to “*good old-time religion*” - but instead in a realization that Christianity is a “**religion of paradox**”. “When I am weak, then I am strong,” St Paul wrote. If Christianity *manages to find an opportunity* in its present *weakness*, it will prove capable of helping people not to let up in their search for an answer to the question about the meaning of life.

It would be a reprehensible neglect if Christianity failed to use for its own benefit the fact that, during the modern era, it was subject, more than any other religion, to the purgative flames of atheist criticism. In the spirit of Paul the apostle, we ought not ask for the body of Christianity to be freed from the thorn

² Cf. 1 John 4.16

³ Cf. 1 Cor. 4.10

of atheism; instead, that thorn should constantly awaken our faith from the sleepy tranquillity of false certainties, so that we rely more on the power of grace that demonstrates itself most in our weakness. ⁴

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I am deeply convinced *that the opposite of Christian faith and its greatest enemy is not atheism, but idolatry*. We cannot regard atheism as rejection of God; it is often *rejection of theism*, human notions of God. Some human notions of God are not only naïve, they are actually destructive, having more in common with idolatry than with the faith of the biblical prophets and the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. A certain kind of atheism can help Christians rid their faith of idolatry, and it can be an ally of faith in the spiritual battle against idolatry in our days. (One example of idolatry is the substitution of moneytheism – an adoration of money - for monotheism). I also believe that there are some fervent atheists who are closer to God than conformist and spiritually lazy members of the church. Bible readers are well aware that *God loves those who wrestle with him* – such as Jacob or Job.

I regard a certain type of atheism – the atheism of protesting hearts, wounded by pain and injustice in the world – as “mystic participation” in the Paschal drama, and the mystery of the cross.

I am profoundly convinced that this kind of atheism, the atheism of pain and protest, must be **embraced** by Christian faith, not rejected. Again: A faith that is incapable of taking seriously and integrating the Good Friday experience, can scarcely comprehend the mystery of Easter Morning.

However, in the dialogue with “the atheism of pain”, we Christians must be very sensitive and have profound respect for other people’s need to preserve their own identity and self-understanding; we must have respect for their otherness.

⁴ Cf. 2 Corinthians 12.7 - 10

According to Emmanuel Lévinas, real love comprises respect for the otherness of others, and does not try rashly to convert others into the same.

There are as many sorts of faith as there are believers, and there are as many kinds of non-belief and atheism as there are non-believers. In our time, the number of “believers without doubts” is diminishing, and dogmatic atheism is also on the wane. The argument between faith and non-belief has long since *ceased* to be an argument *between two types* of people, but has become a drama being played out *within* the hearts and minds of many people. Most of our contemporaries are “simul fidelis et infidelis”. I believe that this dialectic may lend the life of faith even greater dynamism and depth, and leading faith to greater maturity.

I see faith and doubt as two sisters who need each other. Faith without critical questions can turn into proud and stupid fundamentalism, and dangerous fanaticism. On the other hand, when doubters are not capable of having doubts about their doubts, it can lead to bitter cynicism, or pragmatism. Such doubts leave no scope for the hermeneutics of trust and hope.

In my book “Patience with God”, I expressed the view that the three “divine virtues”, *faith, hope and love, are three ways of confirming our patience in the face of God’s hiddenness and God’s silence.*

John Paul II. spoke about the necessity of “new evangelization”. However if “new evangelization” is truly to be *new* it must rid itself of nostalgia for yesterday and strike out this time on a *kenotic* path of love.

Instead of the conversion of pagans, a “new evangelization” should start by the *conversion of Christians*, a turning away from the outward to the inward, from the letter to the Spirit, from the static to the dynamic, from “being a Christian” to “becoming a Christian”.

St. Paul wanted to show that in the mirror of Jesus' Easter story, the God who is "unknown" yet near, proves himself to be a *God of paradox*. His most typical feature is that he turns weakness into strength, death into life, defeat into victory, folly into wisdom and wisdom into folly. That is why he is mysterious, unpredictable, ambiguous, cannot be "groped for", but instead opens the mystery of his heart precisely in that story about the man Jesus, who humbled himself, assumed the condition of a slave and was obedient right to the moment of his ignominious execution – which is why God raised him on high.

This life orientation of kenosis is the courage to die to one's selfishness, to forget oneself because of others, and to step out of oneself.

The authenticity and maturity of our faith lies in the courage to reject the temptation of cheap certainties, to enter into the cloud of mystery, and to endure the open questions and paradoxes of our time.