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# Rekindling the Christic Imagination

*Theological Meditations for the  
New Evangelization*

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## *Introduction*

### **Charles Taylor and Pope Benedict XVI: Faith Today**

In a now famous prophecy, uttered shortly after the close of Vatican II, Karl Rahner predicted: “the devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic,’ one who has ‘experienced’ something, or he will cease to be anything at all.”<sup>1</sup> Rahner’s intuition has been amply verified. The growing secularization of Western culture and society, and its increasing spread beyond the North Atlantic region, excludes God from its “social imaginary,” to borrow a phrase from the Canadian Catholic philosopher, Charles Taylor,<sup>2</sup> and seeks aggressively to restrict religion to a private sphere that has minimal relevance to the public square.

By the “social imaginary” Taylor does not intend, in the first instance, theories or even ideas. He focuses first on the images and stories that enkindle our imaginations and shape our sensibilities, the common understandings and practices that make beliefs plausible. Just as five hundred years ago the social imaginary was permeated with a sense of the reality and providence of God, today belief in God is only one of the many options our

contemporaries have. Believers, of course, are by no means exempt from this ambient culture. At least in the Western world we have, for the most part, lost the sustaining environments of neighborhood and community that made belief seem normal and natural. The air around us, to use the title of Taylor's book, is very much that of "a secular age." Thus the relevance of Rahner's affirmation.

Taylor goes on at great length to characterize features of contemporary secularity. He applauds many of its achievements: its celebration of individual rights, its espousal of racial and religious tolerance, and its respect for freedom of conscience. All these are gains, some of them acquired in the face of stubborn ecclesiastical resistance. All the more credible, then, are Taylor's critiques of secularity's blind spots, even its dark side. Among these is its rampant individualism: its promotion of the "buffered" self, allergic to relational entanglements and commitments. A further symptom of secularity's malaise is its apparent rejection of any transcendent reference, its practical atheism that risks confining humanity in a one-dimensional world. Very often a frantic consumerism strives to fill the void left by this absence of an enlivening transcendence. Its mantra seem to be: "I buy, therefore I am."

For Taylor, however (and this is striking), the philosophical and scientific developments that have spawned the modern age and the social imaginary to which it gives rise do not, of themselves, necessarily terminate in unbelief. They may also support a renewed belief.<sup>3</sup> Though belief can no longer be taken for granted, neither can it be ruled out of court. What counts is the believer's appropriation of his or her faith within a community that does not retreat into a cultural ghetto, but engages modernity with appreciative and critical discernment. Thus Taylor is very much an advocate of Vatican II's program of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*.<sup>4</sup> And here Taylor rejoins Rahner—and (perhaps to his surprise), Pope Benedict XVI.

### *The Christic Center of Faith*

*A Secular Age* does not merely analyze the challenges believers face; it suggestively indicates a way forward. I have found four themes in Taylor that are remarkably consonant with the spiritual-theological vision and teaching of Benedict XVI. First, both concur that Christianity cannot be reduced to moralism, but that it opens upon an apprehension of transcendent reality. As Benedict insisted in his inaugural encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*: "The beginning of Christian existence is not an ethical decision or a sublime idea, but rather the encounter with an event, with a person who gives life a new goal and, at the same time, a sure growth."<sup>5</sup>

Charles Taylor and Pope Benedict do not construe such "experience" in a subjectivist way, nor do they reduce it to private "feelings." For both, the experience in question is profoundly relational; thus the fittingness of terms like "encounter" or "apprehension." The subject encounters a reality other than self, a "deeper reality" that is "life-changing."<sup>6</sup> Thus the experience in question transcends moralism and verges upon "mysticism" in Rahner's sense of the word.

Second, the heart of that vision is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. In no other of his books is Taylor's Christian commitment so in evidence as in *A Secular Age*. He writes:

At the heart of orthodox Christianity, seen in terms of communion, is the coming of God through Christ into a personal relation with disciples, and beyond them others, eventually ramifying through the church to humanity as a whole. God establishes the new relationship with us by loving us, in a way we cannot unaided love each other.<sup>7</sup>

Late in the book, in the crucial concluding chapter, "Conversions," Taylor contends: "We have to struggle to recover a sense of what the Incarnation can mean."<sup>8</sup>

I think it right to say that the whole of Pope Benedict's pastoral-theological program was an intense effort to recover, for contemporary men and women, "a sense of what the Incarnation can mean." From his classic *Introduction to Christianity*, through the three volumes of *Jesus of Nazareth*, to his masterful homilies and catecheses, Joseph Ratzinger has been single minded and single hearted in pursuing this quest. His goal has been to help his readers and hearers "realize" (in John Henry Newman's rich sense of the word) the meaning and implications of the incarnation. T. S. Eliot, in a memorable verse, reminds us that incarnation is "the hint half guessed, the gift half understood."

x x In speaking and writing about Vatican II many focus almost exclusively upon the "breakthroughs" the council effected: Episcopal collegiality, religious liberty, dialogue among the world's religions. They seem to consider the council's Christological statements to be expressions of the church's perennial heritage that "goes without saying." But I insist that the four Constitutions of Vatican II are Christologically charged, fresh realizations and celebrations of the church's Lord and the world's Savior. They are the fruit of the council's profoundest re-Sourcement: its renewed discovery of the Christian faith's enlivening Source, Jesus Christ, and his significance for the modern world. Thus they orient all our prayer and thought to "what the incarnation can mean." Benedict XVI has firmly grasped and tirelessly furthered the council's Christological mandate.

A third theme, prominent in both Taylor and Pope Benedict, is that of "transformation." Both analyze at some depth the predicament that humanity faces in realizing its aspiration to the good, to "human flourishing." So often these hopes are derailed by what seems to be an almost congenital propensity to self-centeredness and self-deception. Causes, perhaps worthy in themselves, too easily become absolutized and opponents turned into enemies. Hostility and violence frequently follow in their wake.

Taylor employs a suggestive term to depict humankind's plight: he speaks of "excarnation." By it he signifies man and woman's uneasiness with being "in the flesh:" dependent, vulnerable, at the last destined to die. Death avoidance can become a whole program of life, both for an individual and for a culture. What makes this dis-ease before death particularly malevolent is that it can so easily transmute into scapegoating and death dealing. The Bible's placement of the episode of Cain and Abel at the beginnings of the human story has proved tragically prescient of the history that followed—down to our own day.

Taylor entitles the last chapter of *A Secular Age* "Conversions." In it he celebrates a number of individuals who have resisted the excarnational pulls of their time and have come to a new affirmation of incarnational faith. They have thus opened themselves to "the further, greater transformation which Christian faith holds out." He goes on to characterize this further transformation in terms derived from the Christian mystical tradition: "the raising of human life to the divine (theosis)."<sup>10</sup> <

Pope Benedict, of course, also puts "conversion" at the heart of his teaching and preaching. One could cite passages from any number of his writings and sermons. Here is one representative example: "the liberation of man consists in his being freed from himself and, in relinquishing himself, truly finding himself." Benedict goes on: "Such a philosophy of freedom and love is, at the same time, a philosophy of conversion, of going out from oneself, of transformation; it is, therefore, also a philosophy of community and history. . . ."<sup>11</sup> Such conversion is the antidote to excarnation. x

This quotation from the pope introduces the fourth theme that he and Taylor share in common: the theme of "communion." In presenting witnesses who have broken out of modernity's immanentist confinement, Taylor accords a special place to the French poet and thinker, Charles Péguy. Péguy, who returned to the practice of the Catholicism in which he was raised, had a

profound sense that “the spiritual is always incarnate” and that the individual is upheld and sustained by a chain of witnesses extending through the centuries: tradition in its most living form. As Taylor says, for Péguy, “the crucial concept here is communion, the ‘joining of hands,’ in other words the communion of saints to which we are all connected.”<sup>12</sup> Taylor very much endorses this conviction of the importance of “communion” for Christianity: inseparably communion with God through Christ and, in Christ, communion with one’s fellows.

This persuasion is also shared by Benedict XVI. As a theologian he develops more fully than does Taylor the trinitarian ground of this communion, both in the very life of God and in God’s purpose for human salvation. Benedict’s studies of Saint Augustine led him to prize Augustine’s notion of the “*totus Christus*,” the “whole Christ,” encompassing both Christ the Head and we the members of Christ. In an early essay, from 1961, Joseph Ratzinger wrote: “Following Christ . . . demands over and over again the personal risk of searching for him, of walking with him, but at the same time it means ceasing to build a wall around oneself, giving oneself over into the unity of ‘the whole Christ,’ the *totus Christus*, as Augustine beautifully puts it.”<sup>13</sup>

Fifty years after writing that early essay, Pope Benedict repeated his steadfast conviction. In a catechesis offered in Saint Peter’s Square in October 2012, he told the people gathered there: “The dialogue that God establishes with each one of us, and we with him in prayer, always includes a ‘with.’ It is impossible to pray to God in an individualistic manner. In liturgical prayer, especially the Eucharist and—formed by the liturgy—in every prayer, we do not only speak as individuals but on the contrary enter into the ‘we’ of the church that prays. And we must transform our ‘I,’ entering into this ‘we.’”<sup>14</sup>

22 The themes of transformation and communion are so interconnected in Benedict’s vision that he understands transforma-

tion as the paschal passage from the isolated “ego” to the new self in communion with Christ and with all one’s brothers and sisters. An especially salient expression of this vision is found in his second encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, where Benedict audaciously writes: “Our hope is always essentially also hope for others; only thus is it truly hope for me too. As Christians we should never limit ourselves to asking: how can I save myself? We should also ask: what can I do in order that others may be saved and that for them too the star of hope may rise? Then I will have done my utmost for my own personal salvation as well.”<sup>15</sup>

### *The Poetry of Faith*

A final sensitivity common to both Benedict XVI and Charles Taylor deserves mention. It is their conviction of the need for a personally appropriated, poetically refined language with which to speak (always inadequately) of the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being. The perennial risk is for religious language to become hardened into the merely formulaic, losing its mystagogic thrust.

That is why poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins and Charles Péguy assume such importance for Taylor. Hopkins’ poetry evokes a sacramental world that is “charged with the grandeur of God.” Péguy sings of the larger, more encompassing reality of divine-human communion. Both craft “a new subtler language.”<sup>16</sup> Certainly not many can match such poetic genius. But we can all sit in the school of the poets to be tutored by them how better to express, in the words of Hopkins, “the dearest freshness deep down things.” We can learn to guard against the deadening cliché that coarsens rather than celebrates Mystery.<sup>17</sup>

In a similar manner, the young Joseph Ratzinger railed against merely rote preaching. He laments: “Perhaps nothing in recent decades or even centuries has done more harm to preaching than

the loss of credibility that it incurred by merely handing on formulas that were no longer the living property of those who were proclaiming them.”<sup>18</sup> More than mere exhortation, Benedict provided in his homilies concrete paradigms of preaching done with theological depth and linguistic suppleness.

These themes, insights, and sensitivities of Benedict XVI and Charles Taylor provide important orientation and guidance for the New Evangelization. The following chapters will now seek to ponder and probe dimensions and implications of the Christic Center which is the very heart of the Good News. Two passages from the First Letter of Peter can, therefore, bring this “introduction” to a close and serve as prelude for the reflections to come.

Peter writes to an early Christian community concerning their faith in Christ Jesus and the love they bear him: “Although you have not seen him, you love him. And, even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and you rejoice with indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet 1:8-9). He then goes on to admonish them: “In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account [*logos*] of the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15). That hope is founded upon the crucified and risen Christ and Christians’ love-relation to him. One may equally well say, “Always be ready to give an account of the love that is in you!” That *logos*, that “account” of our love, is the permanent core of Christian theology.<sup>19</sup>