

The Texts of the Convivium

MAN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE DIVINE CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE

The authentic religious is a man who entrusts himself to providence. His attitude of faith renders him exceptionally receptive. He thus opens himself to the wave of the divine initiative, abandons himself to it, lets himself, as it were, be carried by it.

In the course of history there are, indeed, special moments of grace. And a supreme one can be expected at the end of time. The style of life that Jesus Christ proposes is intoned to this supreme advent of grace, of which he himself offers a perfect example: absolute abandonment to providence, total and rigorous will to resist evil, renunciation of every urging in favour of one's own defence and survival. It is the very model that, upon the final advent of the Kingdom, each man can make his own in all things, without reserve.

From the first coming of Christ to the ultimate events there unfolds a phase – sufficiently long to seem interminable – that we could call the “penultimate” phase. Certainly, the presence of Christ – who is nevertheless with us “always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28, 20) – continues to be at work there, but in a more hidden and discreet manner, as in a long winter during which the new seeds have slowly germinated below ground.

In this phase the full advent of the kingdom of God is not yet a reality, but a simple goal of hope and expectation. Here the Divinity itself appears crucified rather than omnipotent. “Jesus will be in agony to the end of the world” says Pascal, “we must not sleep during this time” (“The mystery of Jesus”, in *Pensées*, 553).

The true and perfect resurrection, the resurrection extended to all, is the final resurrection and coincides in the “end” with the full, decisive and definitive descent of the heavenly Jerusalem onto this earth (Acts, ch. 21). From that moment onwards God will reveal himself as de facto omnipotent at every level of existence. He will dominate also the material sphere, having transformed and transfigured it into spirit.

At that point men will have completed their work and there will be nothing left for them to do except to wait and prepare themselves to receive. And there, at last, we have that supreme moment of grace when the precepts of the Gospel will be concretely in force for all and can be implemented, as I would put it, to the very last dot.

Until those final events, for as long as mankind remains in the economy of the penultimate, the contribution of men – always inspired by God and succoured and sustained by divine help – will be essential in preparing the advent of the Kingdom. In creating the conditions, that is.

The collaboration that man can offer is not only in asceticism, aiming at elevating religious practice and facilitating the road of mysticism and sanctity, but consists also of humanism.

And how can this humanism be defined? I would say: the sum total of the activities by means of which man realizes himself in positive terms, implements his humanity, creates his own autonomous *regnum hominis*.

More specifically, humanism is the sum total of the sciences and the technologies (including the psychic techniques), literature, arts and music, every form of social,

political or economic commitment to raise the quality of life, to render human coexistence more appropriate for incarnating the spirit.

By means of knowledge, in the limit, man pursues omniscience. And may even attain it, if he is helped by that selfsame God, who is neither envious nor niggardly (as someone might imagine him, probably in his own likeness), but rather generous and prodigal of himself to an infinite extent vis-à-vis the creation for which he has an infinite love.

With the creativity of the arts, poetry and music man imitates and emulates, to the extent to which he is capable of doing this, the creativity of the supreme Artist of creation.

With the implementations of technology man cooperates in transforming the universe, so that it may be acquired to the divine kingdom at every level: at the level not only of human life, but of matter likewise destined to become glorified.

One may say that through man God introduces a new principle of life into the universe: the spirit. The spirit that in the end will have to pervade all things, will have to illumine even materiality at its lowest level, gradually spiritualizing every level of existence.

Man is not the incarnation of God, in the strict sense, at least in the present economy. Later, who knows: everything is possible with divine help. If we are really destined to grow to the stature of Christ (Eph 4, 11-16), we cannot exclude that we can become like him in everything. Now, even *without incarnating himself* in man in the strict sense, God yet *dwells* in him. Here we have the God who creates man in his own image and likeness (Gen 2, 26). Deep within man, God is live presence at work.

That only barely perceptible voice that speaks to him from deep down within him calls upon man to be of God: to live not for himself and for his own egoism, not for velleities and ambitions and wholly autonomous personal projects (as if he were absolute master of his own life), but for the Creator, who is the first Beginning and the ultimate End of the creature, is his only true Good, is his Everything.

Not to hearken this divine appeal or, worse, live as if God did not exist, turn oneself into one's own god: all this is sin.

To whoever considers it with religious sensitivity, sin seems a very live and consistent reality, of a clearly negative sign (even though many of its aspects and connections may be highly shaded and ambiguous, where good and evil can cohabit in very close contact: Dostoevsky *docet*).

Sin calls for conversion, a return to God. And the selfsame Divinity urges and facilitates this return in every way, arriving even at incarnating himself, making himself present in the first person in the course of history.

God makes himself man in Jesus Christ and then, through him, in each man who has vitally associated himself with him. To the extent to which he unites himself with Christ, man frees himself of the predispositions for sin that he carries with him, little by little he sheds all egotism, dilates his soul, learns to think the thoughts of God and to want what God wants. Step by step he thus comes to be more like God to the point of living the divine life.

No matter whether he has become converted and sanctified or has remained halfway along the road (or even off the road) in his spiritual ascent, man is in any case called upon – as made clear, be it even in the language of the time, by the very first pages of the Bible (Gen, ch. 1 and 2) – to be God's confidant in the creation, is called upon to be its administrator. I would take the liberty of adding: is designated to govern the creation and, what is more, to transform it, to make it evolve to perfective completion.

And, in a very particular manner, it is through man that the divine power of transmutation and regeneration finds expression. From God we can also obtain miracles as limited foretastes of what will be the final and decisive transmutation. But it is this

final transmutation that matters, it is the total and supreme miracle. Divine grace and man's commitment cooperate to this end.

Miracles have their limits and also mechanisms of their own that can be studied and defined with a certain though always relative accuracy. Normally they follow laws that can be traced back to those noted by psychic research, or parapsychology. One can say this without in any way belittling the extraordinary potency of certain manifestations.

A fracture may suddenly heal, tissue may become regenerated. Even an amputated and buried leg can be brought to its former owner, a long distance away, and – as if handled by invisible hands of angels - re-attached to his body in the right place and recover its full function in the space of a few days, as in the altogether astonishing Marian miracle of Calanda (Spain 1640). But no phocomelus has yet received a new, previously inexistent leg.

In any case, miracles of this type are very rare. How many pilgrims to Lourdes come back cured of their ills? It has been said that the true miracle of Lourdes is the resignation with which the sick return home, accepting the “will of God” with good grace.

Be it noted, however, that the divine will was expressed in a very different manner when Jesus, intervening on ten lepers, cleansed “all ten of them” (Lk 17, 17) and not one in a thousand, one in ten thousand! If the evangelical accounts are true, it may well be that in that particular context of the history of salvation, in that singular flood of grace, conditions were so very different as to facilitate incomparably more frequent prodigious healings.

A more habitual, more stable and, as I would say, more systematic, efficacious and resolute miracle is the one that science and technology produce between them. One need only think of the achievements of medicine, or those of the many different sectors of engineering. Genetic engineering, for example, seeks to cancel the potential of certain illnesses already in the embryo, and then to establish a predisposition for its better development.

These words should not be interpreted as a form of Prometheism or Titanism: the progress of science is undoubtedly the work of man, but of a man whom God inspires and helps. And therefore every new conquest that man achieves is a further implementation of the divine kingdom on earth, a kingdom of which man is the procurator, agent and lieutenant.

Man must understand that the initiative is not his, but comes from God, that it is up to him to sustain and support this initiative. God stands in need of men, as the title of a very beautiful French film of profoundly Christian inspiration puts it.

Man must therefore understand that the initiative is in the best of hands. He is neither alone nor abandoned. He must never despair. The final victory belongs to God, against whom, notwithstanding everything, “the powers of death shall not prevail” (Mt 16, 18).

Man must not, however, expect to obtain each and every grace at any time, must forego the idea of “everything all at once”. In the end the kingdom of God, which for the moment is concentrated in “heaven”, will extend all over the earth, taking in every corner, every level and every dimension, and therefore only at the end will everything become possible for God in concrete terms and his *virtual* omnipotence will become *effective* omnipotence.

We humans try to give ourselves courage by colouring our situation as pink as possible. But we must not forget certain truly tragic situations, where man is crushed by relentless evil. In the Nazi extermination camps, for example, though a man like Father Kolbe achieved sainthood, there were innumerable others who dragged out a miserable life day after day, destroyed by sufferings and terror, ready to sell their dearest relatives for a piece of bread.

Far too many times earthquakes have seen innocent persons trapped for days on end under some fallen girder amid unspeakable sufferings. Human help did not reach them, but the same could be said of divine succour, notwithstanding their desperate and heart-rending invocations.

Where was our loving heavenly Father? Was he distracted? Or did he “permit” these infinite sufferings with a view to a greater good? But what good can come from an ill that annihilates the person?

In situations that seem without a way out, man may invoke a miracle. “God loves me and can do everything”, he may say to himself, “nature obeys him, every obstacle can be overcome by his will. Why therefore should he let me toil in such an intolerable situation? I expect God’s help with absolute confidence”. Man thus multiplies his invocations and acts of faith, but seemingly in vain. No miracle, at least on this occasion.

What shall we conclude from this? Do we have to conclude that miracles have to be eliminated from our consideration? That miracles are impossible? And irrelevant? Certainly not: a miracle is the anticipation, the foretaste of a reality to come, when everything will be miraculous and the paranormal will be normal.

There are men and women who feel themselves called by an inner voice to live an existence wholly entrusted to the supernatural. A supernatural that makes itself particularly present in moments of grace. The person averts the divine presence and obeys what, deep down within him, he hears as a command to so entrust himself. And there we have the miracle to which this human attitude of absolute confidence opens us and renders us receptive.

A particularly striking example is constituted by the episode in which Peter, sitting in his boat, sees Jesus walk on the water of the lake and asks him: “Lord, if it is you, bid me to come to you on the water”. And Jesus said: “Come!” Peter leaves the boat and walks towards Christ. But, frightened by the strong wind, at a certain point he was struck by doubt and began to go under. He thus implored the Lord to save him. Jesus stretched out his hand and gripped him, but not without an admonishment: “O man of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Mt 14, 28-31).

Here it is man who, feeling himself called by the supernatural, abandons himself to it with absolute confidence.

In the absence of this intimate certainty of a divine call, asking a miracle may be equivalent to tempting God, putting him to the test, as did the devil when he exhorted Jesus to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple to see whether the angels would bear him up (Mt 4, 5-6; Lk 4, 9-13).

In the normal condition of what we have called the “penultimate”, nothing should induce us to venture defenceless into the unknown in a fideistic attitude unless deep down within ourselves we strongly and profoundly feel this call. It will be as well to consider all things with the necessary prudence. Let us therefore return to considering the essential aspects of our theme one by one.

In the first place, a correctly received inspiration will induce us to see in God the Source of every form of life and positive reality, of every authentic value, every positivity.

Secondly, an attentive and watchful man will not overlook the fact that the presence and action of God are limited and weak in a world where they still find it difficult to take root. God appears triumphant in the “heaven” of his absoluteness, which is his peculiar dimension, whereas his kingdom is not yet of this world.

Third. Our eyes of faith nevertheless permit us to see God as the Lord who triumphs in the end and affirms his kingdom everywhere, “on earth as it is in heaven”.

Fourth. A correctly received inspiration will enable us to clarify the specific role of us humans. We shall become ever more aware that we are called upon to prepare

ourselves as individuals and as collectivity, and to prepare the earthly and cosmic environment for the Kingdom to come.

Fifth. As far as our interior religious life is concerned, this awareness should dissuade us from centering our devotion on personal salvation of the soul, finalizing it to this end and neglecting the rest. For each one of us the problem is not so much saving his own soul, but rather cooperating in the common salvation of all mankind, of the entire world. Indeed, we are saved all together, by bringing the creation of the universe to its ultimate completion, namely its perfection.

Devotion must not be privatized. Religious practice has to avoid all petty concentration on oneself and on one's own "particular", for this, too, can be a form of egoism. For a Christian it is far more worthy to think in universalist terms.

A certain type of religious person is anxious to comply with certain rules, because he is convinced that God wants him to do this and does not want him to do something else. He knows nothing of the reason for these rules, nor does he ask himself what it might be. He only knows that God wants it so. It is God who knows the reason, it is God who "makes the law", and there is nothing else to be said.

In return God rewards the good conduct of the devout with benefits on this earth and in the other life. Such a faithful is anxious only to avoid the punishment and obtain the reward. The reward seduces him, because it may consist of things of an earthly nature of which this type of faithful already has a rather clear idea and knows that they can make him concretely happy. He needs rather more imagination to visualize the heavenly rewards. In any case, they concern promised things that the faithful will receive if he behaves in a certain manner and therefore his action is motivated only by the vision of these things.

Certainly God's thoughts are altogether unimaginable. "How great are your works, O Yahweh! / Your thoughts are very deep!" exclaims the Psalmist (Ps 92, 5). And again: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; / it is so high that I cannot attain it" (139, 6).

But is there nobody who asks himself what God may have in mind and – if I may add – at heart? In short: what is it that God really aims at, what is it that he wants?

Here I am undoubtedly using a human language. And equally human is every effort we can make to imagine the love between man and the Divinity in terms of the love that may bind us to another person. However, may God forgive me if I take the courage of coming to grips with the question from a point of view that, as far as I am concerned, has some autobiographic relevance.

I am particularly sensitive to the attention and affection of other people; and for my part, even though I do not always succeed in dedicating to people all the space they would merit, I try at least to understand them, to put myself in their place to the extent to which this is possible. I try to understand what upsets them and causes them pain, and also to imagine what might cause them pleasure, so that in some way I might relive also their joys and satisfactions.

I confess that, at least on this ideal plane, I am very close to other people, even though in actual practice I may do very little for them. Because what I am about to say is almost instinctive for me, I expect to be requited, to be treated in the same way, as if this were the most natural thing in this world. And that is my great mistake.

There are many people who, even though they have only barely made my acquaintance and did not know me ten minutes earlier, will not hesitate to drown me with an excited monologue to tell me all about their life and problems. But very few who would be prepared to listen to me for a similar length of time to tell them about myself, my experiences, my aspirations, and so on.

At the very most they will deign to note that I look fine that day and will pay a minimum of attention if I say that I have been to the dentist, better if I tell them about an operation I had the month before: after all, ill is ill, and health is all.

But if I suddenly open up and tell them what is on my mind...? All I can expect is a minimum of courteously formal attention until my interlocutor interrupts me to change the subject.

When I was young and a good prospect for a possible marriage, I may also have had girl friends with more serious intentions, so to speak; but most of the time I gained the impression that the young woman in question was on the lookout for any kind of husband (capable of being defined by means of four or five adjectives of a short advert in the "Corriere" or the "Messaggero") and not specifically interested in me and what I had in mind or at heart at the time.

You claim to love me; but what interests you in me other than the fact that I have a head, two arms, two legs, etc., of average attraction, a university degree, a fair job, and preferably a house of my own and a bank account? My family isn't up to anything very much, you don't like my friends, my spiritual and cultural interests make you yawn. If I convince myself to confide one of my thoughts to you, a secret of my mind, you will interrupt me to talk about buying a tablecloth or the sink that is leaking and has to be repaired right away. What is there between us? What do we have to tell each other? A case of mistaken identity: almost enough to file a nullity case before the Rota!

Mutatis mutandis, if the human comparison is not excessively peregrine, I would say that many professedly religious people display a similar indifference vis-à-vis God. They love him, certainly; they would even walk on burning coals for him; but are they really interested in knowing who He is, what creative plan he has in mind, what he desires and wants, what he really has at heart?

Greater awareness should bring us closer to God, should induce us to free ourselves of the spiritual and mental laziness that we so willingly mask as humility face to face with the inscrutable mystery.

For our part, we have to despoil ourselves of all egoism, egocentrism, "particularism". We have to free ourselves of all these fetters of the spirit.

Within us we shall thus strengthen the feeling that we don't belong to ourselves, but are of God, called upon to incarnate him, elected to be his vehicles of expression, urged to carry the divine will and manifestation wherever we may happen to live and work.

At a certain moment we shall feel encouraged to raise some veil in the hope of sharing – within the limits to which this is possible for human beings – the thoughts of God; what theologians call – possibly still improperly – his "project".

We shall feel induced to love what God loves, to become enamoured of the creation, to long for the coming of the Kingdom, to take delight in all the beautiful and good things that reflect God.

And even more so shall we be driven to cooperate each passing day with God's creative action. Let there be no despisal of the world, no escape from the world. May their place be taken by live interest and passionate commitment in the humanist activities. May we, little by little, become more clearly and more profoundly aware that such a human and earthly commitment also contributes to preparing the ground for the Lord who is coming, that it enriches and completes the kingdom of God.

There can be no doubt that the primary need remains sanctification, to be pursued by a life of prayer and ascesis in a continuous relationship of love with the Divinity. We have to admit that when the masters of spirituality exhort us to concentrate our attention on God in an exclusive manner, they are far from being wrong. The silence of prayer, the staying before God, admits of no distraction, calls for a maximum of concentration.

How can such a religious commitment, such a commitment to sanctification, be reconciled with a humanist commitment? I think that between *ora* and *labora*, as also between the moment of ascesis and the moment of joyous partaking of the things that life has to offer us – which likewise constitute a divine blessing – a wise alternation is highly desirable.

Moses thus prescribes an alternation between working days and the Sabbath, to be dedicated to God and abstention from all activity (Ex 20, 8-11). And the apostle Paul suggests that married couples should alternate the times when they have sexual relations with times when, by common agreement, they dedicate themselves exclusively to prayer (1 Cor 7, 1-5).

But there are also acts of cult and prayer and colloquy with God that do not have to be alternated with humanist activities, but rather combined with them and carried out at the same time.

While I carry on one of these activities, I feel to be collaborating with God.

When I pursue cognitive activities, I believe myself to be tending, in the limit, to omniscience.

While I create, I feel myself to be imitating the creativity of the supreme Artist and am aware of bringing the grain of my contribution to enriching the creation, albeit humbly, with beauty and culture.

The while – in my own small way – I work to transform reality or excogitate new techniques or invent and construct new instruments and means, I feel myself to be collaborating with the Divinity.

It does not matter whether I put my papers in order, or organize some collective activity, or buy and sell, or hoe the soil, or sweep the stairs, or compose a piece of music or a poem or a treatise, I feel that I am collaborating with God to render the human world and the earth and – in the limit – the cosmos more orderly, more prosperous, cleaner, more beautiful, more aware: in short, a better place.

I feel that God is at work, and I with Him. My thought concentrates on God, in the joy of participating in full syntony in his work. Here meditation forms a single whole with concrete practice and acting on the earth becomes prayer addressed to heaven.