

THE CONTINUAL ARDENT SEARCH FOR GOD

The exhortation of Pope Paul VI to the large numbers of faithful present at the General Audience on November 20th, 1968 dealt with a subject of the greatest interest and of absolute priority: the search for God.

The Pope explained it especially with regard to the many errors of those who, today, debar the human intellect from reaching its real, supreme goal: that is, Truth and Life, the radiance of God.

Restlessness prompts every activity of our time

Beloved sons and daughters!

Listen to these simple and amazing words: we must search for God! Search for him, why? . Oh! how long it would take to answer this question well! We should reflect, in the first place, on the fundamental fact that life is a search: all men are seekers of something, love, which qualifies and fills the life of man, is a search. Life is qualified, defined and measured by what it seeks. Today more than ever man is in search of new things, of new plenitude. The restlessness which characterizes the activity of our times, is nothing but a search that has become absorbing, feverish, more and more interesting and fruitful, and at the same time more and more uncertain, tiring and often disconsolate and disappointing. To seek, is the programme of culture, science, work, politics. The more one finds, the more one seeks. The more one has found, the more one desires and hopes to find. It is a sign that man always lacks something, if he always wishes and is driven to seek. Nothing satisfies him. If he had everything, he would go on seeking, for this is man's nature: he must grow, he must conquer, he must expand continually. Even if wisdom convinces him "to be content with little" (Manzoni) in the possession of a few goods, it does so in order to make him long for and possess higher goods, the goods of the spirit, for example.

“He must be sought endlessly because he must be loved endlessly.”

But now We say: we must seek God! And the first reason is perfectly obvious. Because he is hidden. “God is not an invention, he is a discovery” (Zundel, “Recherche du Dieu inconnu”, 7). In his famous speech at the Areopagus of Athens, St. Paul takes his argument from “the unknown God” (Acts 17, 23). Could we not disciples of Christ and pupils of the teaching Church, claim to know already, and how much!, the name, the mystery and the reality of the living God? Yes and no: this is important. We must be happy to have the immense, luminous, beatifying knowledge of the ineffable name of God that our religious doctrine offers us; but we must always remember what we do not know about God is far more than what we do know about him. With our mind we can only reach God as an unknown Being, and “while we arrive at knowing what God is not—St. Thomas teaches us—what he is in his intimate essence remains quite unknown to us” (Contra Gentes, III, 49); moreover an Ecumenical Council (the fourth Lateran Council—cfr. Denz, Sch. 806—formerly 432) reminds us “that it is impossible to establish a similarity between Creator and creature without realizing that the dissimilarity is greater”. God must always be sought; God must always be discovered: “he must be sought endlessly because he must be loved endlessly”; in fact “the greater the love, the more must one seek to know what the search has revealed”, says St. Augustine, always aflame (Enarr. in Ps. 104, 3; P. L. 37, 1392).

The objection of the contemporary mind

But we, men of today, object: what is the use of seeking God? a God hidden in this way? Is not the little we know, or think we know, sufficient? Is it not better to turn our thought to the study of things more in proportion with our cognitive faculties? science, psychology? that is, the world and man? This is the great objection put forward by the contemporary mind, which is bent on rational and experimental knowledge, and things that they are sufficient for the hungry seeking of the human spirit; in fact it thinks that it is quite necessary to set this limit to the thought and the experience of the modern man. This can be admitted as a criterion of method applied to a specific use of the human mind, provided it does not close the horizon to a vaster, deeper

and obligatory search, as the Council teaches us several times (cfr. *Gaudium et spes*, nn. 36, 59, 19; *Apostolican actuositatem*, n. 7; etc.) But this criterion, which defines the sphere of natural reason, has overstepped its rightful place in our culture, both theoretical and practical, turning its legitimate prerogatives into negative dogmas, and readily barring the progress of seeking. It turns so-called secularization into secularism, lay activity into anti-clericalism, critical and positive science into systematic demythization and a neo-positivism with purely phenomenological tendencies (cfr. structuralism), profane study into aggressive desacralization; that is, it aims at reducing the areas of culture within the limits of useful and practical possibilities, at taking away the thought of God from every field of man's knowledge and action, at closing his eyes to the mystery of God's all-pervading and irrepressible Reality, at weakening "religious" effort, at preventing the upward process of the spirit and at placating the inborn and profound aspirations of man with inadequate answers, limiting his horizon to external things and things of the senses, at the level of temporal goods, worthy in itself, but closed and insufficient, thus deceiving him with a precarious and inadequate happiness.

It is forgotten that man in all his spiritual being, that is, in his highest faculties of knowing and loving, is correlative with God; man is made for him; and every conquest of the human spirit increases his uneasiness, and stimulates his desire to go further, to arrive at the ocean of being and of life, at the full truth, which only beatitude gives. To take away God as the goal of the search, God to whom man is inclined by his nature, means mortifying man himself. The so-called "death of God" ends in the death of man.

With his highest faculties man is made for God

It is not we alone that affirm such a sad truth. Here is a testimony left by a very cultured avant-garde writer and a unhappy type of modern culture (Klaus Mann, the son of Thomas). He wrote: "There is no hope. We intellectuals, traitors or victims, would do well to recognize our situation as being absolutely desperate. Why should we cherish false hopes? We are lost! We are defeated! "The voice that

uttered these words—the testimony continues—a voice somewhat low, but pure, harmonious and strangely moving, was that of student of philosophy and literature, whom I met by chance in the old University town of Uppsala. What he had to say was interesting, and it was in any case characteristic. I have heard similar declarations by intellectuals all over Europe... And he said in a voice that was no longer quite firm: ‘We should abandon ourselves to absolute despair’...” (Il Ponte, 1949, 1463-1464).

Let us think of God

Beloved sons, for us it is not so, no. The search is neither stopped by the materialistic or agnostic conceptions of contemporary mentality, nor disappointed by its ever incomplete satisfaction. For us it is always right and fruitful. Reason, supported by faith, and faith by grace, are moving onwards without rest towards the invisible God (cfr. St. Augustine, *De videndo Deo*, Ep. 147; P.L. 33, 596 ss.); and this onward movement is polarized, in so many different ways, towards the central goal of human and Christian vocation (cfr. St. Benedict: *si vere Deum quaerit...* Reg. 58); and also in this continuous and tiring itinerary of ours towards Truth, which is Life, the search has a dynamism of its own, which refreshes it and encourages it, through the happiness of incipient discovery: “We seek—in order to find him more sweetly, and we find him in order to seek him even more eagerly” (*De Trin.* 15, 2; P.L. 42, 1058).

But how are we to set about it? you will ask. Oh, the discourse becomes longer and more difficult! We may perhaps return to it; but not at present. Now We wish merely to tell you of an admonition which made an agreeable, grave impression on Us when We read it, a good many years ago now, in a photograph of a very crowded street in a large Dutch city: a banner, stretched from one side of the street to the other above the feverish traffic, bore the following words in large letters: *think of God*. A strange reminder, this, flung into the busy, profane movement of modern life; but a wise one. Let us think of God! He is always near. We always need him. The meeting, disturbing and happy one, is always possible: yes, let us think of God. With Our Apostolic Blessing.