

Modern Man in Search of the Light

By Julián Carrón*

Dear Editor,

Pope Francis responded to the questions that Eugenio Scalfari raised in recent months regarding the encyclical *Lumen fidei* with an unusual gesture—he wrote a letter to *La Repubblica*.

What moved the Pope to do this? The desire to “walk this path together,” thus demonstrating to what extent he, first of all, intends to put the “culture of encounter” into practice. And what allows him to travel this path with someone whose beliefs differ from his own, specifically the founder of *La Repubblica*? The need that they both have, as people, for the light that permits them to live as well as humanly possible. “I, too, would like the light to be able to penetrate and dissolve the darkness,” Scalfari responded to Pope Francis.

It is this desire for a light, so as not to lose our way, that constitutes the criterion for dialogue among men. In the end, every experience of life is judged by this need that we find in ourselves and that constitutes our deepest depth. Faithfulness to this desire is what stimulates men to true dialogue, so much do they value their lives.

Modern man has tried to respond to this need with the “lamps” of rationality. Is it possible for a modern man who is so proud of his autonomy, his reason, and a successor of Peter to engage in a dialogue that is honest, not artificial? Pope Francis and Eugenio Scalfari have demonstrated to us that it is. But they have also shown us what the arena of an authentic dialogue is—not dialectical confrontation, but the encounter of two human experiences. Dialogue is possible, but only if each party is willing to put his own life experience in play.

Pope Francis consented to play the game in this arena, without putting any other “authority” on the field except his personal experience as a man desirous of light: “For me, faith was born of an encounter with Jesus. It was a personal encounter that touched my heart and gave new direction and meaning to my life. At the same time, it was an encounter made possible by the community of faith in which I lived [...]. Without the Church—believe me—” he confesses to Scalfari, “I would not have been able to encounter Jesus, even with the awareness that the immense gift of faith is kept in the fragile clay jars of our humanity.”

With Gospel in hand, Pope Francis describes how, from the very beginning of Christianity, it could be reasonable to adhere to faith. This adhesion is entirely based on the recognition of the “authority” of Jesus that “comes from within and is self-evident,” that is given to Him by God “so that He may offer it for humanity’s sake.” “The unique identity of the Christian faith [...] centers on the incarnation of the Son of God,” which “is not revealed so as to emphasize an insurmountable separation between Jesus and everyone else.” On the contrary, continues the Pope, “the uniqueness of Jesus has to do with communication, not exclusion.”

This means that it is possible to grasp the truth of faith—the light that dissolves the darkness—only from within a relationship. As Salvatore Veca acutely observed, “the Pontiff presents an idea of truth founded on a relationship. It is certainly not a variable truth, but it is impossible to isolate it, to immunize it against external contacts, to carve it into stone, because it lives only in relationship and is therefore, by its very nature, open” (*Corriere della Sera*, September 12, 2013).

Will the light of faith ever be able to interest a man who does not want to give up any of his reason and freedom? Won't he feel it to be a constant mortification of his humanity? Or, as Dostoevsky said, "Can a cultured man, a European of our day, believe, really believe, in the divinity of the Son of God, Jesus Christ?"

According to the Pope in *Lumen fidei*, Nietzsche accused the Christian faith of "diminishing the full meaning of human existence and stripping life of novelty and adventure. Faith would thus be the illusion of light, an illusion which blocks the path of a liberated humanity to its future" (n. 2). The encyclical does not dodge this challenge, but rather reissues it: "Yet in the absence of light everything becomes confused; it is impossible to tell good from evil, or the road to our destination from other roads which take us in endless circles, going nowhere" (n. 3).

But the light of faith will interest only those who do not reduce their humanity and their desire. In this sense, it was moving for me to see two people like Francis and Scalfari meet each other as men on the road of life. This is the value of the dialogue established by the Pope, as an indication to the Church of which road to travel for a true and authentic comparison. Is this not the task of Christians and of the Church—to witness to the sort of light that faith introduces into life in order to address everything that happens? It is up to those who meet them to verify whether or not this light can really be useful for illuminating their lives. This is the risk that God took in becoming one among men.

The dialogue between the Pontiff and the journalist—so outside of the usual framework, yet so fascinating—is a great help for the road that we all have to travel: each person, in fact, must compare his life experience with that desire for light—for truth, for beauty, for justice, for happiness, as Fr. Giussani would say—that constitutes us. Can we track down, in our experience, the signs of a response to this ineradicable desire, which persists and continues to surface, though we bury it under piles of rubble?

Jean Guittou said that the term "reasonable designates one who submits his reason to experience." With his letter to *La Repubblica*, the Bishop of Rome offered to everyone the witness of this submission that sheds light on things. Wherever a person, in all of his humanity, is willing to "walk this path together," what more could he desire than to come across traveling companions like this?

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