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Christian Realism is a perspective, which from the time of the Fathers to developments in the Reformed tradition and in the present day has made a profoundly significant contribution to the constant quest of believers to read and shape socio-economic and political life according to their faith in the God of Jesus Christ. Here I propose a reading from a Catholic perspective of Nigel Biggar's contribution. What follows will be articulated in two steps: 1) the presentation of some theological principles that emerge in particular from the legacy of the Church Fathers; 2) the proposal, in the light of them, of the centrality of the layperson, i.e. the Christian realist, in order to avoid the misunderstandings to which Christian Realism can be exposed. This will make possible a relational reading of it that highlights its relevance in responding to the post-modern crisis and the challenge that, after Hegel, Nietzsche has launched to the thought of contemporary mankind.

1) Theological elements

The Judeo-Christian worldview cannot but be realist because biblical revelation unequivocally indicates the existence of original sin. This is why the Christian faith can never be reduced to mere morality, i.e. to an exhortation to love or do good. The existence of true resistance is not only a fact, but also a revealed element. But at the same time this also biblically implies that it is not possible to fully read reality except in the light that flows from Trinitarian revelation. It is as if original sin had polluted the air and we could no longer fully see things as they really are. The human being, after the fall, lives in a 'fog'. This indicates that our truest identity can only be recognised in relation to Christ. In particular, the tension that dwells in every human heart between one's own finite being and

the desire for the infinite must be taken as a guiding criterion for not only personal but also social action. Before sin, such tension did not exist, because the human's finite being as a creature was always embraced by the personal relationship with the Infinite. That is why limits and boundaries were not a problem and were not sources of conflict. But Adam and Eve's choice to take 'by themselves' of the tree of life ushered in the attempt to be 'without God', to live apart from the gift. Instead, human deepest realities can never be conquered, but only received by grace. We can think of life, love, identity and so on.

The light of revelation allows us to look beyond the opposition between individual and social or that between material and spiritual. Material goods, in fact, cannot be shared unless they are given up, whereas spiritual goods are not lost when they are communicated. And before sin, everything was governed by such a spiritual dynamic, even the material dimension, because the human being was in relation to the infinite source that is God himself, pure spirit and creature of both spiritual and material realities.

The example of the Church Fathers is very valuable in this regard. They, in fact, lived in a pagan world, which is much closer to ours than the medieval world, where all were believers in one God, whether Christian, Jew or Muslim. The recourse to Aristotle's philosophy took place in that context, because a common basis was sought among people who had all already a monotheistic faith. Today, on the other hand, we are immersed in idolatry as in the early centuries of the Church. Constantly we are faced with material and finite realities that propose themselves as the response to the human infinite desire, according to a properly idolatrous dynamic. This is confirmed by the suffering and loss of freedom that this induces.

But what was the Fathers' vision of reality? Gregory of Nyssa, in the 4th century, re-read the Platonic myth of the cave in the light of the incarnation. For

the Greek philosopher, the material world was like a cave in which the human beings were prisoners. From there they could only see shadows reflected on the walls. The philosopher was the one who had freed himself and gone out to contemplate the world of ideas. His mission was, therefore, to return to free the other human beings. Such a perspective was obviously incompatible with the doctrine of creation, because the material world was made by God who judged it to be very good. The Fathers' first solution was to identify the darkness of the cave with the effects of original sin (and not with the material world as such). That is why the Christian is called to bring light into the world. But after a journey to Jerusalem, Gregory changed his mind, going so far as to reverse the movement of the Platonic perspective. The visit to Bethlehem had made him realise that if the Sun has entered the cave, there, in the material and historical world, there is the possibility to overcome darkness, because the very source of light has become present in it. As we can see, the reality of original sin is not ignored, but revelation also allows a relational reading of reality, which can also be defined as secular, because it highlights the value of the concrete historical dimension.

In Augustine, the one who laid the foundations of Christian Humanism in the 5th century by writing the City of God, we find the same perspective. The affirmation of the inextricable existence of the city of man and the City of God in history is accompanied by the affirmation of the unity of human nature, as was also the case in the thought of the Greek Fathers. The identity of each human being is inseparable from that of all others, because ultimately faith shows that we have been created in Christ in the image and likeness of God. Commenting on Jesus' paradoxical phrase in John 7:16 'My doctrine is not mine', Augustine says that nothing is more proper to each person than his or her own life, but at the same time nothing is less proper, because life is always the gift of another. And this is true for the human beings because, in the first place,

it is true in the eternity for the Son, who receives the infinite Life from the Father and eternally gives it back to Him.

It is interesting that Augustine had decided to receive his baptism in Milan, listening to Ambrose's preaching. His entire intellectual life had revolved around the challenge posed to the human spirit by the problem of evil. After his first attempts to follow the Manichaeans, he had taken up sceptical positions in Rome. But it was Ambrose who had fully responded to his aspirations. And Ambrose himself is a true example of a Christian realist, as the homily he delivered at the funeral of Emperor Theodosius in 395 reveals. A few years earlier, the bishop had excommunicated the emperor, who had ordered a massacre of civilians in Thessalonica, to avoid the risk that the citizens might betray him and let the barbarians through. Theodosius had done public penance and was readmitted to church communion. Thus, Ambrose, who before being acclaimed bishop of the city was an imperial official, during the funeral of the man he could call his friend, explained that the decision to excommunicate the emperor and that to readmit him did not contradict each other, because from the revealed perspective, mercy coincides with justice. This consists in giving each his or her own, and nothing is more proper than life, but life itself is always received from others and needs great care and gift to develop.

The theological contribution that the Church Fathers offer us, then, is that we must simultaneously keep in mind original sin and the call to the relationship with God, the finite and the infinite, the material and the spiritual. In other words, it is necessary to be realistic with regard to both evil and good. This means that it is necessary to contemplate the real dynamics of politics, economics, history, knowing their laws and being competent in them, but also always remembering that these dynamics are open to divine action, which prevents their closure.

2) Christian Realists

The example of Ambrose shows how it is essential to focus more on the believer who is called to be a Christian realist than on Christian realism. Indeed, the co-presence of evil and good, of the finite and the desire for the infinite, of the spiritual and the material, make it impossible to give unambiguous criteria. In other words, Christian Realism is not a theory, but is the result of the prudential choices of believers, who are Christian realists because they read the world in its reality both in terms of the finite and in terms of openness and the possibility of relationship with the Infinite, as the Risen One is present in history and in the very lives of the human beings of every time.

From the perspective of my tradition, this can be expressed in terms of social doctrine of the Catholic Church. It is founded on four principles: the sacredness of the person, the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity. One can easily observe that these four principles are made up of two pairs in relational tension: the sacredness of the individual person can come into conflict with the common good, so it is not always easy to hold solidarity and subsidiarity together. In fact, the question concerns the relational reality of the good itself, and thus the relational texture of reality as we know it through revelation.

It is not possible to determine a priori all the ways to reconcile the one and the many, solidarity and subsidiarity. That is why Christian Realism cannot be considered just a theory. Instead, it is essential to educate through a deep synthesis of theology, history, economics and politics the believer, empowering him or her to be a Christian realist, who makes decisions on his own behalf, with his or her own personal responsibility.

From the perspective of the Church Fathers and their understanding of Greek metaphysics, it can be said that the relationship between the person and the common good, as well as that between solidarity and subsidiarity, are

relationships. As such they cannot be reduced to concepts, because they are unique. We can draw a picture of a table that everyone can understand, even if sometimes there may be difficulties as Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince teaches us with his drawing of the boa eating the elephant, mistaken by adults for a hat. The relationship between me and my father, on the other hand, cannot be drawn. The only way to talk about it is to tell a story. But this confirms that the way to Christian Realism are the Christian realists, with their stories, their lives.

This opens up an extremely interesting possibility of confrontation with post-modernism. Indeed, the Christian realist can recognise the relationships between the person and the common good, or between solidarity and subsidiarity, because the light of revelation has made these relationships familiar to him. These are not only logical, but primarily real and irreducible to ideas. The relational dimension of reality accounts for its excess over thought. But this means that the relationships themselves are sources of being. When a man and a woman marry, something is created that did not exist before, a new dimension in history, which becomes particularly visible with the birth of children. When a business is created, if the relationships that constitute it are good, a new fruitfulness and profit is born. Lawyers say 'contacts are contracts'. In business we speak of 'win-win'. These are all expressions of the fact that free and personal relationships are the source of a novelty of being.

This suggests that Christian Realism should increasingly develop to help believers recognise relationships, so that they can make personal choices in conscience, becoming more and more competent in the art (irreducible to tutorial and mechanical method) of fostering this relational dimension, as in the case of the family, business or intermediate social bodies. In this way the evil that is present in the world can be addressed not only in a dialectical key, but also through the relationship with the infinite divine source that can make our relationships, be they family, political or economic, fruitful.

