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# Following Christ in the World

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# He Who Is

We have seen that a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect or, in other words, that contradictions cannot exist simultaneously; that change occurs but changes occur to existing things; that truth exists and is knowable. Let us now probe the concept of existence or being more deeply. Hamlet asked the essential question: To be or not to be.

We will begin with the notion of loss and gain. What can you gain? You can gain money, weight, knowledge, virtue, etc. Many things can be gained, but in every case there's a you, and you gain something. You can also lose. You can lose money, weight, liberty, hair... You are there and you lose something, but you're still there. If you were annihilated, no one would commiserate with you for losing so much weight.

What about being or existence? Can you lose or gain existence?

In order to gain existence, you'd already have to exist. If you already existed, there's nothing to gain. If you didn't already exist, there would be no *you* there to gain it. You can gain dollars, pounds, fame and friends, but erase your existence and there is nothing there to gain it. Existence isn't a little extra something added on to your curly hair and blue eyes and winning smile. All those things either exist or they don't. Think of any quality: goodness, beauty, strength... We couldn't even talk about them if they had no existence. Being or existence is absolutely prior to everything else. Cancel being and what is left? *Nothing*. You can't think nothing.

Loss is a little trickier. It might seem that things lose existence, but that is an imprecise way of speaking. If you eat a hamburger, the hamburger ceases to exist as hamburger. But it is not annihilated. What was once a hamburger is now fat globules and protein and vitamins coursing through your bloodstream. The hamburger did not lose existence. To lose something, you have to be there to lose it. If you were there to lose being, you'd still have being. That's a contradiction and impossible.

So being is not a commodity like mayonnaise which can be spread or scraped off, added or subtracted, passed around and divided up. St. Thomas Aquinas tells us that being is an *act*, not a *thing*. There is either being or there is nothing. A thing either is or is not. There is no compromise position.

Can a thing be the cause of its own being? If so, it would have to *be* prior to itself. It would have to have being before it had being. But that violates the law of noncontradiction. So nothing can be the cause of its own being.

Why is there being, then? Or, as Parmenides, an ancient Greek philosopher, asked, Why is there anything rather than nothing?

## TWO WAYS TO EXIST

When we get down to basics, there are only two ways to exist. A being is either contingent or necessary. A being is *contingent* if its nature is not to exist; if it could *not exist*; if it received its existence from another source; if its essence (what it is) is distinct from its existence (that it is). If your parents had never met, you would not exist. So you are contingent. If the paper company had gone out of business, this sheet of paper would not exist, so it is contingent. If Great Britain had won the American War for Independence, the U.S. would not exist, so it is contingent. Even the solar system or the Milky Way Galaxy does not explain itself; if there had been different concentrations of matter and energy, it would not exist. So even the galaxy is contingent.

A *necessary* being, on the other hand, must exist; could never not exist; owes its existence to nothing or no one else. Its essence and existence are identical; its essence is to exist; it *is* existence.

A being either receives existence or is existence. It can't be both and there is no other possibility.

We know there are contingent beings. We observe them. Is there a necessary being, or can contingent beings explain all reality? To answer that question we

first ask another: can an already existing contingent being cause the being of something else? A thing can cause a determination of being. We can modify beings—change a tree into paper or a table or a baseball bat; change eggs and flour and milk into a cake or pancakes or muffins; change iron into a poker or a frying pan or a Mercedes-Benz. But we can't cause being itself. A contingent being, which only receives existence, can't cause existence, because an effect can't be greater than its cause. It can't cause something to be where nothing existed before.

Only a necessary being can *cause* existence, because only a necessary being *is* existence. So if anything at all exists, there must be a necessary being to cause its existence. If even one thing exists, there must be a God.

To summarize: Things exist—a self-evident truth. A thing cannot cause its own existence because it would have to exist prior to its existence, which is a contradiction. So a thing either has to be contingent, receiving existence from something else; or necessary, which means that it must *be* existence. A contingent being cannot cause the existence of something else since it has only received existence. The only explanation for contingent beings is a necessary being. The Necessary Being is given the name God.

## THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

There are various other ways to prove the existence of God by starting with an evident fact of reality, such as change, or cause and effect. Basically, however, they follow the same method as above. The conclusion that God exists is certain from the chain of reasoning just given. If any one contingent thing exists, the Necessary Being, or God, must exist. Don't expect, however, to convert anyone from atheism or agnosticism simply by presenting him with a logical argument. Most people's lack of belief in God or doubts about His existence are based not upon failures of logic but upon irrational factors, emotions, or a fear of the consequences of believing in God (necessity of worshiping Him, obeying Him, doing His Will). Though the arguments that prove the existence of God may be important in influencing others, they are most important in giving you the certitude that your belief in God is irrefutable. Some nonbelievers try to claim that their position is based on human reason while the believer's position is irrational. However, we have seen that God must exist, and that the nonbeliever's position is the truly irrational one.

## THE NECESSARY BEING

Having demonstrated the existence of God, various related questions can arise and cause perplexity. We will now proceed to examine some of these questions, an examination which will also serve to deepen our understanding of the Necessary Being and our relation to Him.

1. Given the fact of a Necessary Being, how did contingent beings come to be? God causes the existence of every being, since as we have seen, no contingent being can cause existence, but the substance which exists is often the product of secondary efficient causes. For example, the auto plant in Detroit or Japan turns out the car. God is the cause of the existence of that car, but the auto plant is a secondary efficient cause of the substance and accidents of the car. The mother and father dogs are the secondary efficient cause of the litter of puppies, but God is the cause of their existence. God is the direct and immediate cause of the existence of every contingent being. He uses secondary efficient causes in bringing things into existence rather than directly creating everything, as He could in fact have done.

2. When God is both primary and secondary cause of a thing, He is said to have created that thing—as He did with all the angels, the universe when it first came into existence, and every individual human soul. Creation means to cause to be out of nothing. The soul, the universe, and the angels are not made out of any preexisting substance. They come to be by God's creative power, out of nothing.

3. After God creates, is new being added to the sum total of being or existence in the universe? No. Existence is an act, not a thing, as we have seen. Being cannot be added. There is either being or nothing (principle of noncontradiction). So we cannot add to God. The only thing to add would be non-existence, but that is nothing. God is the fullness of Being. There are new beings (existing things), but no new existence.

4. Since God is the cause of all existence, we are utterly dependent upon Him at every moment, even if He has used secondary causes to bring us into existence. Withdraw God's power and no number of male and female dogs would be able to cause puppies to be, no number of auto factories would be able to turn out new cars. God is not only Creator, but Conserver. His conservation of the universe is the same act as His creation



of it. By a single act of His divine will, He creates and sustains all that He creates. If God ceased to apply His creative act to any particular being, it would simply vanish, cease to exist, be annihilated, become nothing. The position of Deism is that God created the universe but then allows it to operate on its own. If God did in fact do that, the universe would be annihilated, since nothing is the cause of its own being.

5. If God is the direct and immediate cause of all existence, if in fact there is no existence apart from God, is this not pantheism? Pantheism maintains that *each thing* is God, that God is every finite thing individually. The truth is that God is the cause of the being of each finite thing and that it could not exist without Him, but that the individual thing is not God. The thing is contingent, and God is necessary. By the principle of noncontradiction, no contingent thing can be a necessary being and vice versa. Furthermore, existence is an act, not a thing. God's act of existence causes things to be, but His act does not therefore become the thing itself.

6. If God is the cause of all that exists, is He then the cause of evil? To answer this question, we must first define evil. Much of what we call evil is the working out of natural laws (earthquakes, fire, disease ...). These natural laws might have consequences we don't like, but the things themselves are not evil. The fact that the ground shifts in response to certain internal pressures in the earth is neither good nor evil; it is simply the consequence of the stresses in the earth's crust. The fact that something bursts into flames when the right conditions exist is neither good nor evil; it is simply the consequence of the dry air and the heat of the match. The fact that bacteria multiply in the right circumstances is neither good nor evil.

So *the only genuine evil is moral evil, sin*. In any sin, there is something that exists. In the theft of a watch, for example, there is the existing watch and the action of picking up the watch and walking out of the store with it. In a lie, there are existing words and the action of speaking them. But the watch and the words and the actions themselves are not evil. Picking up the watch and walking out with it would be fine if it had been paid for. Speaking the words would be fine if they conformed to reality. What makes the actions sinful is the privation introduced by our wills. In the theft, the being of the object stolen is good, but our wills introduce a lack, the

lack of payment or permission to have the object. In a lie, the being of the words is good, but our wills choose a lack, the lack of truth. Evil, then, is a privation, a nothing; it has no being. It is the lack of a due good. So God is not the cause of the existence of evil, because evil is non-being; it is a privation.

7. Can God make a stone so heavy He cannot lift it? A stone so heavy God cannot lift it is a contradiction; a nothing; it doesn't exist. Hence, it cannot be caused by anybody. God is the cause of all being. He is not the cause of contradictions, because a contradiction is nothing; it doesn't exist.

8. Why is it necessary to posit a Necessary Being to explain contingent beings? Why can't we just trace each effect back to a cause and that cause back to a cause and that cause back to a cause through infinity and never need to come to God at all? Such a position is called infinite regress and is used by some as an attempted refutation of the proofs of the existence of God. Even if there were infinite regress, none of the causes or effects would be necessary. Each would be contingent and hence would have zero existence of its own. When you add an infinity of zeroes, you still have zero. Since any contingent being could not exist, you could logically subtract it from the total of contingent beings. When you have finished subtracting all contingent beings, you would be left with nothing, and something can't come from nothing. If we posit a Necessary Being, He cannot be subtracted, because His nature cannot not exist. With infinite regress, all we've done is to find causes of the determination of being; we still have no explanation of being itself.

## THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

We have demonstrated that God is the Necessary Being, the cause of all that exists. From this fact we can reason to the attributes of God, qualities which God *must* have as the Necessary Being. It is not possible for God to lack any of these qualities.

1. God must be eternal. God could have had no beginning. If there had ever been a time when there was nothing, there would be nothing now because something can't come from nothing (principle of noncontradiction). God could not have an end. He could not cease to exist because He is Being Itself, dependent on nothing else.

2. *God is omnipotent* (all powerful, can do all things). Since God is the cause of all things, He can do all things.

3. *God is omniscient* (all knowing). Since God is the cause of all things, He knows all things.

4. *God is omnipresent* (everywhere). Since God is the cause of all being, He is everywhere in that all being is from God and cannot exist apart from Him. God is not everywhere in the sense that things are in a place because God is not a thing. He is everywhere by means of His act of existence.

5. *God is pure act* (has no potency, therefore is immutable, cannot change). Since the Necessary Being is the cause of all existence, there is nothing for Him to change to. If He could change, something would have to cause the change. That something would be stronger than He, and He would not be the necessary thing.

6. *God is unique* (only one Necessary Being). If there were another necessary being, there would have to be some distinction between them; one would have a potency the other did not and would therefore not be the Necessary Being.

7. *God is simple* (has no parts). If He had parts, some more powerful force would have put the parts together. Therefore, He would be contingent on this more powerful force and would not be the Necessary Being.

8. *God is perfect*. Only beings which have potency can be imperfect, since they could change and become better. Since God has no potency, He has no limits on His perfection.

9. *God is spiritual* (not composed of or dependent on matter). A material being by nature has potency and is capable of change. But God has no potency and cannot change.

## OUR DUTIES LEAD TO GOD

Since God is the cause of our very existence, we have a relationship with Him whether we realize it or not. We can conclude through natural reason that we have certain obligations to God as a result of this relationship.

1. *We owe God worship*. Worship is defined as the honor paid to the Supreme Being, acknowledging Him as Supreme Being.

2. *We owe God gratitude*. God did not need to create us. As the Necessary Being, He needed nothing; He was already perfect. Our creation added nothing to Him. Creation is a gift which we have received. For this gift, we owe gratitude.

3. *We owe God obedience*. As our Creator, God obviously knows what is best for us and how created things can best be used. Just as a computer won't work well unless we follow the manufacturer's instructions, so we won't "work" well unless we follow our Maker's instructions.

4. *We owe God love*. Love is a response to goodness. If God is all-perfect, He is all-good. Therefore, we owe Him love.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, through using our natural reason alone, we can prove the existence of God, we can determine many facts about His nature, and we can determine our obligations to Him. Now we can study what natural reason tells us about ourselves, so that we can see how to fulfill our obligations to God.



THE NATIVITY



# IX

## *Church & World*

**W**e will now explore social justice, the issues that affect men in society and their relationships with one another. Some examples of social justice issues are the relationship of employer and employee, the duties of government to its citizens and citizens to their government, and policies affecting war and peace.

### **TWO ERRORS ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE**

When the issue of social justice and the Church's teachings on it arise, two opposite errors threaten. The first is the contention that the Church should stay out of the public order because its function is to save individuals, not to tell the government or business what to do, and its concern is the next life, not this one. A scriptural quote often used to justify this position is Christ's words to Pilate at His trial: "My kingdom is not of this world."

For example, Cardinal Madeiros of Boston once advised his people not to support a certain candidate because of his pro-abortion stance. The Cardinal was soundly criticized for meddling in an area where he had no business. He was told that his people should be left alone to make up their own minds for whom to vote on whatever basis they chose.

Another example of this kind of attitude is the Catholic politician who will say, "I am personally opposed to abortion but I don't want to impose my private morality on others who disagree. So I'm going to vote for pro-abortion legislation."

The opposite attitude is that the Church's primary mission is political, that missionaries, for example, should give first priority to overthrowing unjust regimes and making social and economic reforms in the countries where they are stationed, that priests should go into politics, that the Church can't save individuals unless it has first reformed the society they live in.

### **THE CHURCH'S RIGHT TO SPEAK**

Let us examine each attitude to see where the errors are, and then we can more accurately formulate a correct position. First, does the Church have the right to comment on issues? Yes, for the following reasons:

1. It is true that the Church's mission is to help individuals save their souls, but when we are speaking of social, political and economic actions, it is individuals who perform them. Individuals have to make the decisions about how much to pay employees, whether to support a minimum wage law, whether to vote for increased defense spending, and so on. Individuals need moral guidance for these decisions.

2. Men are helped or hindered toward salvation by the society in which they live. A secular society is not going to be as much help toward salvation as a Christian society. Thus, the Church has a right and a duty to teach on the issues that affect the kind of society in which we live.

3. Every Christian should want to see God glorified, in public as well as in private. He wants his actions, the actions of his government, and the actions of other public institutions to be for the greater glory of God. Again, the Church has a right to speak out.

4. A politician who votes in accord with Church moral teaching is not imposing his own morality, but God's, and not really imposing it but conforming the public policy to the law of God and thereby enhancing the good of all. Remember, the natural law applies to all men, not just Catholics. Even if the majority of voters in his electoral district disagree with the moral position, he has an obligation as their elected leader to do what is right, not what is popular.

5. The Church is the only institution which can speak infallibly on moral issues. Thus, there is no better place to go than to the Church for guidance in these social issues.

## THE CHURCH'S PRIMARY MISSION

Now let us look at the opposite position. Should the Church concentrate primarily on social and political issues? No, for the following reasons:

1. Those who say that the Church's primary mission is political reform are confusing ends and means. The end of all human action should be the glory of God and the salvation of souls. We have seen that God is glorified and souls are aided toward salvation when the political order obeys His laws. But the reformation of the political order is the *means* toward the end of God's glory. Those who say that the Church's primary mission is political make God a means to their particular goal.

2. The primary duty for priests is to administer the sacraments and to preach the Gospel. No one else can do the two essential things of offering the Mass and forgiving sins, and though others can preach the Gospel, priests more than anyone else receive the graces to do that. Priests who get involved in politics are distracted from their primary duties.

3. When priests or religious become directly involved in politics, the Gospel can then become identified with a political system or group instead of being seen as the standard against which all political movements are to be judged.



SAINT PETER

What overall conclusions can we therefore draw? The Church is supposed to speak out on social and political issues. The Pope, bishops and priests are not supposed to become *actively* involved in the political order itself. Therefore, lay people must put the principles into effect, using the graces God makes available to them.

## VATICAN II ON THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

One of the goals of the Second Vatican Council was to teach Christians how to Christianize the modern world. Here are some excerpts from the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World), which give us magisterial teaching on this issue of the relationship of the Church to the social and political order. These quotes underscore the principles which we have just been discussing.

### THE CHURCH'S RESPONSIBILITY TO TEACH ON SOCIAL ISSUES.

SECTION 4: "... the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about the present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other."

SECTION 43: "This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age."

### The Church's Goal Is the Glory of God and the Salvation of Souls; Political Reform is a Means, Not an End.

SECTION 45: "While helping the world and receiving many benefits from it, the Church has a single intention: that God's kingdom may come, and that the salvation of the human race may come to pass. For every benefit which the People of God during its earthly pilgrimage can offer to the human family stems from the fact that the Church is 'the universal sacrament of salvation,' simultaneously manifesting and exercising the mystery of God's love for man."

### The Hierarchy and the Clergy have the Responsibility to Teach the Principles of Social Justice; Laymen, to Put Them into Practice.

SECTION 43: “Laymen should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city. From priests they may look for spiritual light and nourishment ... enlightened by Christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church, let the layman take on his own distinctive role.”

## CONCLUSIONS

Here are some general conclusions for social teachings based on the philosophical considerations we have already made:

1. God’s law is supreme over state law. God is infinitely wise and infinitely good; the state is not. Therefore, when the state’s law conflicts with God’s

law, God’s law takes precedence. The state cannot justly command us to do what is forbidden by God’s law or to prevent us from doing what is commanded by God’s law. If it does, the citizen must disobey the state.

2. Man’s supernatural end is supreme over man’s natural end. Man’s supernatural end is to live forever. His natural end is limited to life on earth. Therefore, if the two come into conflict, the supernatural must take precedence. The state has the responsibility to put no obstacles in the way of man’s supernatural end.

3. The individual is supreme over the state. The individual will live forever; the state will not. Therefore, the state must safeguard the dignity and worth of every citizen, including the helpless, the aged, the retarded, the handicapped, the poor. Man cannot be made a tool of the state, as is done in Communist countries.



JESUS PREACHING BY THE SEASIDE