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## Commentary



# Catholicity in Thirteen Words

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I had to give an introductory course on Christianity to university students in a post-Christian era. How could I surprise or interest them? How could I help them understand? This is the question that has occupied me for years. So, I tried to summarize the Christian faith (creed, sacraments, commandments, prayer) in thirteen words, also with a point of provocation. Not three, not seven, nor twelve: thirteen! And these came to me little by little, as I went on to explain them historically, according to what we call the history of salvation. In the end, my words were: Creation, Bible, Covenant, Flesh, Person, Easter, Church, Glory, Grace, Freedom, Truth, Love, Prayer.

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I had to give an introductory course on Christianity to university students in a post-Christian era. How could I surprise or interest them? How could I help them understand? This is the question that has occupied me for years. We have discussed for hours. In the end, my 13 words were: **Creation, Bible, Covenant, Flesh, Person, Easter, Church, Glory, Grace, Freedom, Truth, Love, Prayer**.<sup>1</sup> Why 13 words? That is a provocation, for going against superstition, which is the opposite of Christian faith. The order is not only chronological but also logical, for making this explanation more understandable.

1. First, the **Creation**, in favor of which the ecological sensitivity of the present moment played a role. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen 1:1), that is, everything. Not good and evil, or two opposite principles, as in Manicheism. He created everything out of nothing, and not out of pre-existing matter. God is the being and author of all beings. The Big Bang theory or Evolutionism must be compatible with the story contained in the first pages of the Bible. Creation is a big explosion also of love and sense. It is good, but the world also contains much evil, which was not made by God, but arises from the devil (a real and personal being) and from the abuse of our personal freedom<sup>2</sup>.

2. After the Creation comes the **Bible**, which actually means "the collection of books" that are considered to be inspired by God. How can we know this? First of all, because of the coherence between the different writings, and then because the Church, the first believing community, does a work of sifting and discernment that allows it to understand which books are true and which are *fake*. And how can we read the Bible, alone or in solidarity? We read it – so to speak – in a choral, symphonic way. We do not read the Bible alone, or only the Bible. We read it in a certain historical context, which is the faith of the whole Church in all times and places<sup>3</sup>.

3. The concept of **Covenant** (an agreement between God and his people) runs through the history of Israel and salvation, of Judaism and Christianity. Thus, a Christian does not believe alone but is accompanied by all the preceding history: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, the prophets, and kings... Therefore, faith and salvation came little by little through concrete people and history. But the people of Israel returned to infidelity and fell also then under the power of foreign peoples like the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, and the Romans, longing then for the freedom that Yahweh had given to his people. At the end comes the redemption and the liberation from slavery, whose name is Jesus<sup>4</sup>.

4. In the **Incarnation**, "the Word became flesh" (Jn 1:14), which is a provocation in a world that tends

alternatively to materialism or spiritualism. If the world was good from creation, the flesh will be blessed by the person of the incarnate Word. "What is not assumed is not saved," said Gregory Nazianzen, an ancient and wise Christian.

Nevertheless, we must take into account the reality of sins, both original and personal. The flesh blessed by the person of the Word can also be corrupted and degraded by us. But there is always the hope of salvation: our sins can be forgiven. The Son of God becomes man so that we, the children of men, may become children of God. "The light of God's face shines in all its beauty on the countenance of Jesus Christ." (John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 2). At the end comes deliverance, through a man, whose name is Jesus, the Son of God made man<sup>5</sup>.

5. Then comes an important reality: the concept of **Person**, because – together with the Incarnation – the main dogma of Christianity is the Trinity: three distinct Persons, one God. And is this important for our daily life? Of course, because otherwise we believe in one God just like the Jews or the Muslims. But this God is in three different Persons. We are called to the community like the Trinity. In Christ, we have come to know the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The Father as the Creator, the Son as the Savior, and the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete and Sanctifier. This means that there is unity and difference from the beginning, and that Christianity is not monistic or monolithic, but appreciates diversity in unity. Moreover, we can explain the Trinity on the basis of truth and love, also the noblest of human beings<sup>6</sup>.
6. And the summit of this Incarnation is the **Passover**, where the sacraments are born, which for Christianity also have vital importance. The Passover came from the Jewish tradition when a lamb renewed the covenant of Yahweh with his people and recalled the exodus, the liberation of the chosen people from the slavery of Egypt. But now the victim will be Jesus himself, the sacrificial lamb, who will die for us on the cross. This is the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. However, as we know, the story does not end there, since he is resurrected on the third day, so we recover the eternity we had lost with original sin. And we even improve it. With the ascension into heaven, what we might call the "ceremony of the inauguration" of heaven takes place. The sacraments – another important word – are the memorial of the

Passover of our Lord: they bring to this present moment what happened then before<sup>7</sup>.

7. The **Church**, universal sacrament of salvation, is a continuation of the salvific action of Jesus Christ. Against the slogan "Christ yes, Church no," we must understand that the Church is nothing other than the body, the bride of Christ: inseparable from Him, but distinct from Him. But the Church is for making Jesus Christ present in the Word and in the sacraments. As the Fathers of the Church said, "Christ is the sun, but the Church is the moon that reflects the light of the sun"<sup>8</sup>.
8. When this salvation succeeds, comes the final **Glory**. We have been created not for death but for eternity. With Easter, Christ has conquered eternity and heaven for us. Eternity is impossible to think or imagine, but it is our true life. This is only a test in which we conquer an eternity of love or hate. Heaven is nothing else but love won. God, who is love, wants to give us an eternity of love. That means that our salvation is not alone but we are saved with the others – in the Church – only by Jesus Christ. But it is also true that this heaven depends on what we love on earth: in the evening of life, we will be judged in love, by love. Heaven is total love, hell the rejected love, and purgatory the love that purifies<sup>9</sup>.
9. **Grace** is heaven on earth, the anticipation of the future Glory. It is to taste eternal bliss. Grace is not a liquid or a gaseous element within us, but the presence of the Spirit. God lives within us, to the point that we can say with St. Paul: "It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:2). I am me, but I am not only me: I am Christ. Without losing any of our personality, it is enriched by the personality of Jesus Christ. And this is a tremendous gain: identification with Jesus Christ. But it is necessary to grow in the life of grace<sup>10</sup>.
10. Nevertheless, Grace without **Freedom** is not operative. Freedom – it is often said – is a stone so heavy, so heavy, that not even God – the Omnipotent, the Almighty – could move it. If you do not want to (so strong), God cannot, because without freedom you cannot love, and that is the only thing God wants. He begs for our love. Christian ethics can be summed up in the beatitudes and the commandments. The beatitudes are the self-portrait of Jesus Christ: we identify with Him when we are poor in spirit, clean of heart, persecuted, hungry and thirsty for justice... And the commandments – shared with the Jews and with other religions – are those

instructions for the use of the human being, with which we can make the most of our nature<sup>11</sup>.

11. The next word is **Truth**, because freedom without it remains blind and disoriented. "The truth sets you free" (Jn 8:32), Jesus tells us. That truth not only sets us free in a general way but also in a personal way. We can grow in that freedom to the extent that we know ourselves better and know how to rectify the course of our conduct. For Christians, however, this truth is identified with a Person, that of Jesus Christ: "I am the Truth" (Jn 14:6). In reality, as Pascal said, we know ourselves best in Jesus Christ. That is why this personal contact with him is totally sharp<sup>12</sup>.
  12. But Truth without **Love** is hard. Sometimes we can see it in ourselves when we are treated with truth but without charity, without affection. There is a feedback between love and truth: truth allows love not to fall into arbitrariness or sentimentality, while love makes it possible for truth to establish itself in our lives. When we consider sex or social justice, for example, we must consider both realities together. But to consider this, we have to take into account all that has been said above about human dignity and eternal destiny, in order to understand it in depth. Love could have been the last word, for indeed it has the last word in Christianity (cf. 1 Cor 1:13)<sup>13</sup>.
  13. If well I wanted to end this list with **Prayer**, because this is how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ends, after having reviewed the creed, the sacraments, and the commandments. We can fulfill the commandments in their fullness thanks to the grace that comes to us not only through the sacraments but also through prayer. And the prayer par excellence is the Our Father, for it was Jesus himself who taught it to us. There, he reveals to us that we are children of God, something essential for the Christian life. God is my Father, come what may. Therefore, the Christian's prayer must be a filial prayer: the prayer of the children of God<sup>14</sup>.
- So, I tried to summarize the Christian faith that is contained in the four pillars of the Catechism (creed, sacraments, commandments, prayer) but in thirteen words, also with a point of provocation and especially with a didactical intention. Not three, not seven, nor twelve, but thirteen! And these came to me little by little, as I went on to explain them historically, according to what we call the history of salvation, but the logical connection between the parts was also important. And I think it has been

working. For further information, you can see: Pablo BLANCO, *Cristianismo en 13 palabras. Preguntas y respuestas sobre la fe*, Madrid: Rialp, 2022.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. James J. BUCKLEY, Frederick Christian BAUERSCHMIDT – Trent POMPLUN (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Catholicism*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011; Robert BARRON, *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith*, New York: Random House, 2011; Pablo BLANCO, *Cristianismo en 13 palabras. Preguntas y respuestas sobre la fe*, Madrid: Rialp, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Faith* (=CCC), Nr. 279–421; José MORALES, *Creation Theology*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001

<sup>3</sup> See CCC Nr. 50–141; Stephen J. BINZ, *Introduction to the Bible: A Catholic Guide to Studying*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Scott HAHN, *Understanding the Scriptures: A Complete Course on Bible Studybooks*, Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> See CCC Nr. 457–570; Anthony Marinelly, *The Word Made Flesh: An Overview of the Catholic Faith*, New York: Paulist, 1992; Stephen J. BINZ, *Jesus the Word Made Flesh, Part One: John 1-10*, New London: Twenty third, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. CCC Nr. 198–268, 422–455, 683–747; Gilles EMERY, *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, Washington: Catholic University of America, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> See CCC Nr. 571–667, 1066–1666; Joseph RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Entrance Into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. CCC Nr. 748–975; Thomas P. RAUSCH, *Towards a Truly Catholic Church: An Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> See CCC Nr. 988–1065; Matthew R. PLESE, *Eschatology: The Catholic Study of the Four Last Things*, Raleigh: The Goldhead Group, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. CCC Nr. 1987–2029; Juan Luis LORDA, *La gracia de Dios*, Madrid: Palabra, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> See CCC Nr. 1730–1748; Clive Staples LEWIS, *The Abolition of Man*, New York, Harper, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. CCC Nr. 1716–1729, 2052–2557; JOHN PAUL II, *The Splendor of the Truth* (1993).

<sup>13</sup> See CCC Nr. 2083–2550; BENEDICT XVI, *God is love* (2006).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. CCC 2759–2865; Clive Staples LEWIS, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, London: Harper Collins 2020.

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