

GOD,
THE CHURCH,
AND THE WORLD:
AN INTERVIEW WITH
THE AUXILIARY VICAR
OF OPUS DEI

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CHAPTER 1

THEOLOGIAN

It is not uncommon that theologians are counted among the myriad of scholars and experts called upon by the media to give their opinions even in matters of general interest. When you think about it, theology is actually one of the closest areas of knowledge to human interests inasmuch as it is so much more than just some study of minute physical particles.

Msgr. Fernando Ocariz has a way of getting right to the point, of sparing himself and others the tedious paring down that takes place in polemic exchange. Forty years of priesthood and twenty-five years of collaboration with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith have made him an excellent observer of the evolution of theology in recent times.

But the first venture in Msgr. Fernando's education, as was mentioned in the Foreword, was physics. Hence, it seems fitting to begin this conversation by asking him to briefly give an account of his intellectual course of study and pursuits.

It seems to me that one cannot say that you have always wanted to be a theologian. How is it that you decided upon physics before focusing on theology? Do you see common ground between them, and are they both equally attractive to you? What are some of the familial aspects, influences, and teachers that turned your attention over time and in different steps to these two sciences?

I leaned toward physics because it was the science that most captured my attention, above all from the perspective of research. It was probably family life that played a large part in this, seeing as my family was more inclined to science than the humanities. My father was a military veterinarian and dedicated his life to his research of animal biology and above all when he left the service (initially in Paris, where I was born, and later in Madrid). Beyond that, of my three older brothers one is a naval engineer, another a physicist, and a third a mathematician. I must say that there were certainly teachers during my last years of high school and my initial years at the university (who at that time taught in both the school of engineering as well as the departments of the

other sciences) that influenced this decision as well. All of these influences taken together oriented me first toward mathematics, but since I liked the direct research and knowledge of reality my attention eventually turned to physics.

The reason I moved to theology is more obvious: in *Opus Dei* all the faithful study philosophy and theology with a course-plan appropriate to one's personal circumstances. For a majority of us this means a complete cycle of studies in philosophy and theology (in my day this amounted to two years of philosophy and four years of theology). This material fascinated me—objectively speaking, nothing stirs up greater passion than deepening one's knowledge of God, of Jesus Christ, and all the Christian mysteries. I then proceeded to the licentiate program at the Lateran University (Rome) and later completed my doctorate at the University of Navarra. There is no doubt that a better understanding of the teachings of St. Josemaría had a decisive influence on my growing interest in theology. I would acknowledge as well two philosophers who have been of considerable influence: Carlos Cardona and Cornelio Fabro, both original and profound interpreters of St. Thomas Aquinas.

For me physics and theology have something in common. Both are, in their particular ways, knowledge of reality, and both unfold upon a horizon where research and development promise limitless possibilities.

How is theology different today than from when you first took it up? How would you describe the current situation in theology? Its progress, obstacles, failures, promising directions, etc.?

With respect to change I would say that theology at the moment is pursuing a stronger biblical and patristic foundation and is paying more attention to history. But one also notes a weaker footing in metaphysics in the realm of speculative theology—there is not sufficient attention given to that of which *Fides et Ratio* speaks. In this encyclical John Paul II remarks that the comprehension of revealed truth needs the contribution of the philosophy of being in order for dogmatic theology to adequately develop.¹ If theological reflection does not lift itself above empirical knowledge it

1. Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998), n. 97.

will easily fall into a reductive vision of the truth about the faith. The encyclical gives as an example of this happening in ecclesiology when one tries to explain the Church with models borrowed from civil society.

In general, Vatican II's recommendation that St. Thomas be studied more closely been not been sufficiently heeded, although there are noteworthy and valid exceptions to this.² Thomistic studies are important for various specific topics and especially for the integration of metaphysical reasoning into the *intellectus fidei*, that is, into the theological discourse.

It is also worth mentioning that currently there is a greater contextualizing of theological questions, a greater connection made to problems posed in other fields. On the one hand this has led to positive results. For example, bioethical theology serves to illuminate certain fundamental issues such as human dignity or the unity of the person, that a person is inseparably both body and soul. On the other hand, this contextualization at times is not done well and produces negative results. Liberation theology is a good example of this, a matter discussed in two instructions issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Libertatis Nuntius* (1984) and *Libertatis Conscientia* (1986).

Among the more promising lines of work one might mention the attempt, and one that certainly was not easy, to incorporate the valid contributions of historical-critical studies of Scripture in a biblical exegesis that theologically speaking is more complete. In this regard Pope Benedict XVI's volumes in the series entitled *Jesus of Nazareth* have spear-headed development in a specific direction. These works confront difficult questions and Pope Benedict XVI himself states that through this endeavor he offers answers that form a position that must not be considered magisterial.

On the subject of the mentioned encyclical Fides et Ratio, the Magisterium of the Church reminds us even in other places that theology must foster a close and cordial relationship with philosophy. Prior to any specialization, the theologian needs to plant firm roots in philosophy—a good philosophy that is in harmony with Christian-

2. Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Gravissimum educationis*, n. 10; *Optatam Totius*, n. 16.

ity—as did Cornelio Fabro (1911–1995), scholar of modern thought and pioneer in Thomistic studies, someone our interlocutor knew personally.

In the case of Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, it is worth noting that one of his first books is a philosophical project: *El marxismo: teoría y práctica de una revolución* (Madrid: Biblioteca Palabra, 5th ed., 1980). The years went by and Marxism seemed to be discarded by history. However, it is worth asking someone who has studied Marxism—at the time it seemed insurmountable (at least in eastern and central Europe, and fully alive in the West)—for confirmation that this ideology is indeed now merely a has-been in human thought. The same thing might be said of Thomism and, in general, the so-called “Christian philosophy.” Here we explore these two topics.

Monsignor, you had a close relationship with Cornelio Fabro. Would you say that since his time Christian philosophy has disappeared?

The term “Christian philosophy” might be used in an ambiguous sense. Insofar as it is a realist philosophy capable of expressing and penetrating the truths of Christian faith, it has not disappeared. Today there is no shortage of excellent Christian philosophers. But one cannot think of this philosophy as if it were a world in and of itself, closed off from everything else. Cornelio Fabro was truly a philosopher—and not simply an excellent teacher in this material—and someone who intellectually was very open. He himself explained that his philosophical endeavors were developed along the lines of three fundamental directions. In the first place, the interpretation and further development of the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas led Fabro to articulate what he called *essential Thomism* centered on the rediscovery of being as act and the corresponding notion of participation. A second line of directed inquiry was his study of modern and contemporary philosophy. This brought him to a rigorous demonstration of the undeniable place atheism holds in immanentist philosophy. The third aspect of his work constituted a defense of Kierkegaard’s opposition to Hegel, according to the former’s claim that freedom is the independence of the person in his engaging and committing to the Absolute, or God.

These three directions converged and cannot be considered a mere refutation of modern thought meant only to bolster the renewed focus on Thomistic philosophy. In Cornelio Fabro’s

intellectual pursuits we find an enormous effort to acknowledge and build upon the valuable content of modern thought in light of realist and Christian philosophy. Fabro's intellectual openness was always accompanied by his demeanor of coherence and sincerity. After having studied a certain topic he would then voice his thoughts without fear of finding himself standing against the current. I remember very well, for example, that in 1986 when he knew of my appointment as consultant in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where he himself had served in such a position already for many years, he said to me, "I will give you but one piece of advice: always say what you think."

Regarding Marxism, why has it aroused such passion in the past? Has it left a lasting mark on society and today's culture? In the Church?

From a philosophical point of view, Marxism was attractive because it brought the idealism of Hegel down to earth in an attempt to insert the dialectic into concrete, material history. It was also socially attractive in that it claimed to be able to overcome socialist utopias and to answer the general aspiration for social justice. Yet in reality, Marxism properly speaking leaves no room for notions such as justice and law. For Marx, law was nothing other than "a simple, decorative apparatus of power,"³ and he himself confessed that in the First International he had no choice but to speak of freedom and justice according to the "silliness" (his words) of his collaborators.⁴

In my view, Marxism—or better, Marxists in that there are significant differences between Marx, Engels, Lenin, Gramsci, Althusser, Marcuse, and so on—as a system of thought only persists in academic circles that are very much reduced and largely irrelevant. Nevertheless, it has left traces in society in various pockets of thought. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these is the generalized reduction of politics to economics. Here, paradoxically, Marxism finds itself in the company of extreme liberal capitalism. In the Church, as one knows, Marxism has influenced various move-

3. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Eastford, Conn.: Martino Fine Books, 2011).

4. Cf. Augusto Del Noce, *I caratteri generali del pensiero politico contemporaneo. Volume I* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1972), 178.

ments (Christians for Socialism, etc.) and certainly in the above-mentioned liberation theology, all of which have tried to take up a Marxist methodology without understanding what is meant by this, that when taken seriously Marxism coincides with historical materialism and, therefore, is inseparable from atheism.

Marxism has been discredited by evidence given through the political regimes that it has generated, regimes that suffocate freedom and are insufficient when it comes to economics. Where in greater or lesser degrees the principles of communistic economy are abandoned in order to pursue prosperity by means of capitalism that is protected by the state, as occurred in China, the Marxist ideology ends up being reduced to an empty shell in which only a few continue to place their trust. At the end of the day, the principles herein proclaimed serve only to prop up a rhetoric of the justification of repression by which the directing elite perpetuate their own access to power, keeping their hands on the reins of the military and police forces as well.

The failure of Marxism does not mean, however, that the problems it claimed to resolve have been resolved. The current international economic and financial crisis should teach the West to avoid self-satisfaction and rid itself of its materialism.

Let's return to present day. The most well-known theologian is Joseph Ratzinger. What place does he hold in contemporary theology? What are some of his fundamental lines of thought and his most important contributions?

First it must be clarified that contemporary theology is not a homogenous reality. Within it emerge different currents together with a variety of disciplines. Some of these appear not to be concordant with others. It is well noted in fact that in some areas of theology, again there is a great variance, there are critics or those who are openly hostile toward certain teachings of the Magisterium of the Church, and "logically" dissent from Ratzinger's teaching.

In one regard and with respect to certain themes in post-modern theology, Joseph Ratzinger occupies an important place: he is as much a point of reference because of the thematic breadth of his writing and his undeniable capacity for analysis and synthesis