

# POPE JOHN PAUL ON THE CONTEMPORARY IMPORTANCE OF ST IRENAEUS

The Holy Father's apostolic journeys throughout the whole world are a providential and modern form of the cooperation between the Petrine primacy and episcopal collegiality. The 1985 Synod made note of this in a most auspicious and pertinent manner (*Final Report*, II, C, 4). Pope John Paul II's third pilgrimage to France, particularly in the region of Lyon and Savoie, was characterized by the celebration of the memory of the martyrs and other saints of these regions. The collection of his liturgical celebrations and teachings forms a spiritual treasure from which not only the Christians whom the Holy Father visited but also all the members of the Catholic ecclesial communion must profit. In order that each one's reflection may prove truly beneficial, it is undoubtedly opportune to promote a meditative reading of these texts and to focus attention on the more important themes. This is what we would like to do as far as the great figure of St Irenaeus is concerned, taking as our point of departure the remarkable address of the Holy Father during his visit to the "Facultés Catholiques de Lyon",

## **1. The great figure of St Irenaeus**

First of all, who is Saint Irenaeus? What was the course of his life? What are his writings to which the Holy Father referred in particular?

Irenaeus was born in Asia Minor about the year 125. He was still a young man when he met Polycarp of Smyrna, who represented a generation which had known the Apostles chosen by Christ, especially Saint John. "He, the Lord's disciple, the very one who had rested on his breast (Jn 13:23, 21:20), himself published a Gospel while he was living at Ephesus in Asia" (*Adversus*

*Haereses* [AH] III, 1, 1). In the eyes of Irenaeus, this Gospel, like those of Matthew, Mark and Luke, is essentially a witness to the *Paradosis*, to the tradition which the Spirit had entrusted to the Apostles and their successors, the bishops. We shall speak of this again later, but for the moment, we most note that Irenaeus sees himself in continuity with Polycarp, John and the Apostles and with Jesus himself.

Irenaeus followed Polycarp to Rome in 154 or 155. There he met Pope Anicetus (155-166), the Christian philosopher Justin and Hermas the moralist. Irenaeus provides this testimony concerning the Roman apostolate of Polycarp: "When he had come to Rome under Anicetus, he turned a great number of people away from the heretics (Christian Gnostics) and led them back to the Church of God by proclaiming that he had received from the Apostles just one single and sole truth, that which had been transmitted by the Church" (AH III, 3, 4).

Who were these Christian Gnostics who were taking advantage of the Romans' infatuation with Eastern religions? According to Valentinian, Basilides and Marcion the most extreme dualism was the truth of salvation. On the plane of sense experience, man is enclosed in the flesh and the cosmos which are evil creatures of the secondary god who is the "demiurge". Fortunately, above this world of the "aeons" and of the cosmos, there is a Supreme God who is not a creator and who is purely spiritual. This Supreme God had sent the Saviour, Christ, who had not truly assumed a body of flesh or experienced death; all of that was a phantom appearance. On the contrary, the truth is that Christ has undertaken to save men by giving them a superior and secret knowledge (*gnosis*). The words attributed to Jesus apparently have only one single obvious meaning. In reality, they have another hidden meaning. Only those who have been initiated, the "spirituals", are able to interpret them by bringing in from elsewhere other *logia* such as in the "Gospel of Thomas". The essential point lies in the recognition of the inescapable struggle between evil and good, between matter and spirit. It is necessary to bring as many men as possible to the state of spirits divested of

all contact with the flesh.

This philosophical-religious interpretation of Christianity had reached Vienne and Lyon, the first dioceses of Gaul, Greek in origin, where Irenaeus went and where he was ordained a priest. At the time when the persecution of 177 was preparing to break out, Irenaeus was sent on a mission to Pope Eleutherius (175-189) at Rome. It was there that he learned of the persecution at Vienne and Lyon, the memory of which—like that of so many other events concerning Saint Irenaeus—is preserved in the *Ecclesiastical History* (book V) of Eusebius of Caesarea (260-340).

It was necessary to rebuild the Church of God which was at Lyon. Irenaeus returned to Gaul where he succeeded Pothinus and thus became the second bishop of Lyon-Vienne. Not only did he assure the presence of Christ the preacher and shepherd at the crossroads of the Three Gauls, but at the same time he carried out the composition of his masterpiece which is cited today under the title of *Adversus Haereses* (Against the Heresies). The actual title expresses more clearly the double movement of Irenaeus' theology and polemic. It is called *Detection and Refutation of the False Gnosis*. Local traditions mention the influence of Saint Irenaeus in the young Churches of Valence, Besancon, Autun, Dijon and Langres. Theodoret calls Irenaeus "the apostolic man who enlightened the West", "the one who enlightened and educated the Celtic nations".

Irenaeus' final appearance on the level of the universal Church took place during the second phase of the controversy over the date of the celebration of the Christian feast of Easter. Certain Churches of the East had come to celebrate the Easter festival on the 13th of the month of Nisan. Polycarp had brought Pope Anicetus to tolerate this usage (155). Pope Victor was more rigid and wanted to bring the "Quartodeciman" Churches to observe the common practice. He excommunicated Polycrates of Ephesus, the leader of the movement. Irenaeus wrote to Pope Victor to champion the cause of diversity. As far as he was concerned, the Bishop of Lyon agreed with the

Roman tradition, but he thought that a diversity of tradition did not endanger faith which, of itself, demanded unity.

How did the Bishop of Lyon's earthly life end? It is generally held that Irenaeus was martyred in 202 during the persecution of Septimius Severus which was particularly severe in the area of Gaul around Lyon.

## **2. The great Tradition**

We come now to Saint Irenaeus' study and example of which the Holy Father spoke at Lyon. This method contains essentially two points (Pontifical Address, n. 3): respect for Apostolic Tradition and a knowledge of the doctrines of each age. In this, John Paul II has shown himself once again as the Pope of the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, the Council cites texts of Saint Irenaeus fourteen times. With the exception of Saint Augustine, this is the greatest frequency with which a Father of the Church is cited.

That which the Pope and the Second Vatican Council have asked first of all of Saint Irenaeus is a witness to the "great Tradition", that which embraces both the Scriptures and the authentic teachings of the Magisterium (*Dei Verbum*, n, 9).

Many people were speaking of the "two sources of Revelation" and were not hesitating to tone down the testimony of Sacred Scripture. Today, the situation is rather the reverse. Some theologians are not far from the *Scriptura sola* and make light of the teachings of the Magisterium, even when they are expressed in the Ecumenical Councils. Nevertheless, *Dei Verbum* (n. 10) is as explicit as can be: "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture constitute the sacred deposit of the Word of God entrusted to the Church".

Saint Irenaeus was without doubt the first theologian to construct a system where the harmonization of the inspired written texts and the tradition of the Magisterium was explicitly and continually affirmed. For the Bishop of Lyon, it is the preaching of Christ which holds first place. He spoke openly without

recourse to the secrets of gnosis. Christ taught all the mysteries of the Kingdom of God openly. The Apostles, the disciples and multitudes of listeners heard Christ and repeated his words and gestures. "To the Apostles and the disciples, Jesus has explicitly given the power to bring men to rebirth in God; he said to them, 'Go, teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Mt 28:18-19)" (AH III, 17, 1). A Church such as that of Rome was founded first of all by the preaching of the disciples, but more especially by that of Peter and Paul, who were for it the authentic witnesses of Tradition. Peter preached his gospel there; it is only after his death that Mark wrote it down. The same holds true for Paul, whose gospel teaching was taken down by Luke (AH, III, 1, 1). The witnesses of the second generation, *viri apostolici*, continued this transmission of the oral tradition in the office of *episcopoi* and *presbyteroi* (in the primary sense of the terms). The Tradition which comes from the Apostles is thus preserved in the Church through the "continuous line of bishops, their successors, to whom they passed on their own mission of teaching" (AH III, 3, 1; cf. *Dei Verbum*, n. 7). By his grace God accepts them and preserves them "perfect" and "without reproach in every instance" (AH III, 3, 1).

Thus it is that the Church is one by the faith proclaimed by the bishops, the successors of the Apostles (AH IV, 10, 1) as well as by the Eucharist which they celebrate in memory of the one Lord (AH IV, 17, 5). This unity could be demonstrated by taking up the succession of the legitimate bishops in each of the local Churches. Irenaeus outlines this demonstration for Smyrna, his native city. As we have said, he knew Polycarp (AH III, 3, 4). Polycarp "had been instructed by the Apostles—especially John and had lived with many of those who had seen Our Lord"; "it was furthermore by the Apostles that, in the Church of Smyrna and in Asia, Polycarp had been made bishop". It is not necessary, however, to trace the universal apostolic succession to come to a realization of the primacy of the Church's unity in one authentic faith. There is a shorter and surer way to reach the "great tradition" of the Apostles and bishops: It is that of the Church of Rome,

### 3. The Church of Rome, a privileged witness to Tradition

Indeed, for Saint Irenaeus, there is a centre and a guardian of ecclesial unity. It is the Church of Rome, "very great, very ancient, known to all... founded and established by the two most glorious Apostles Peter and Paul" (AH III, 3, 2). They had already had twelve successors, and it was during the reign of Pope Eleutherius (175-189) that Irenaeus wrote the third book of his *Adversus Haereses* (III, 3, 3). Among the successors of Peter, the third, Clement, intervened at Corinth to remind that Church of the authentic apostolic tradition: "For with this Church (of Rome) on account of the more powerful authority of its foundation (or: "on account of its more excellent origin, *propter potentiorem principalitatem*"), every Church must be in accord, that is, the faithful everywhere, in which Church (of Rome) the Tradition which comes from the Apostles is always preserved more than by the faithful everywhere" (AH III, 3, 2). A few pages further, in an attempt at what we today would call biblical theology, the special authority of Peter is again emphasized by Irenaeus. He highlights in particular the testimony of Peter regarding the divinity of Jesus the Saviour and his attitude of authority in the young community at Jerusalem (AH, III, 12, 1-7). Irenaeus does not ignore the "incident at Antioch" (Gal 2:11 ff.) but keeps it in its proper perspective of a pastoral adaptation to the situation (AH III, 12, 15). He forcefully emphasizes Paul's submission to Peter and to the other members of the apostolic college (AH III, 13, 3) as well as the complementary role of Paul with regard to Peter. The witness given by all the Apostles to Christ the Son of God and only Saviour is unanimous and fundamental. Peter, however, has a special place there in the same way that his successors will have in the episcopal college which is the successor to the apostolic college. There is a remarkable continuity, it must be noted, between the teaching of Irenaeus and that of the Second Vatican Council on this subject (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 22; *Nota Praevia*).

If the communion of faith to be believed and lived must be perfect between the Bishop of Rome and the other bishops, it is not necessarily the same for

all the other aspects of the Church's life. The authority of the See of Peter, John Paul II rightly noted in his address, does not imply a uniformity of all liturgical, canonical and cultural customs. "This sense of the unity of faith and of the Church does not prevent Irenaeus from making a distinction between what must be unanimous, bound to the identity of the apostolic faith, and that which arises from a legitimate diversity on account of customs, cultures and sensibilities". The most typical example of this pluralism of coherence is indeed the Bishop of Lyon's breadth of view and his intervention in the second phase of the controversy concerning the celebration of Easter, about which we spoke above. Who knows if in that Irenaeus was not recalling the indulgence which his teacher Polycarp had already shown in 155? What is essentially important is the principle which the Holy Father has taken from Irenaeus: "The difference in practice with regard to the fast established the unanimity of faith" (Address, n. 3). In this diversity of customs which, in his own opinion, went against an apostolic liturgical tradition, Irenaeus desired above all to see a secondary question which, in spite of the error of fact, attempted to retain the best possible of that which had bound together the Apostles in the question of the doctrine of salvation. Faith and the respect for the "Great Tradition" were the same in the two disciplines. On both sides, Christians were protesting against Gnostic Christology in affirming that the Word had truly become flesh, that he had died and arisen in his bodily state. What was essential was to celebrate Christ as the Son of God, the Saviour, true man and true God.

#### **4. Fidelity to "Tradition"**

In speaking as he did of Saint Irenaeus, the Pope did not only wish to celebrate a great personage of the Church of Lyon or merely to thank the scholars of Lyon who have made the author of *Adversus Haereses* famous\* and have drawn inspiration from him for their own work, John Paul II also wanted to trace some lessons which concern all contemporary theologians.

The first of these instructions, it seems to me, concerns above all positive

theology and the relations between exegesis and theology. It is not a question of history alone, but of the penetration of the profound inspiration of the Sacred Scriptures in the manner of Saint Irenaeus: "The exegete and the theologian must bring into play the clear relationship which extends from the Old to the New Testament. This relationship constitutes a deposit of the Christian faith" (Address, n. 4). The Pope ascertained with joy that "this theme is currently the object of a renewed consciousness" (ibid.). He desired new efforts in order better to grasp the continuity of the People of God, to understand the Gospels and Saint Paul, to contribute to a rapprochement between Christians and Jews. Another type of clear relationship desired by John Paul II is that which regards exegesis and Scripture: "Today as yesterday, exegesis must lead to theology and theology must take its point of departure from a continual and updated return to the Scriptures read in the Church" (Address, n. 4). In reading *Adversus Haereses*, a theologian of the 1950s was not too certain whether he was dealing with a study in theology or a work of exegesis. This is because the theology of the 16th and 17th centuries had separated exegesis and theology. This problem did not arise at the time of the Fathers nor in the glorious 13th century.

Saint Thomas and Saint Bonaventure, the two great theologians of that century, drew from the same doctrine for their scriptural commentaries (the object of their courses) and the syntheses, the *Summae*, which they composed on other occasions.

This exegetical-theological synthesis found one of its most beautiful realizations in Saint Irenaeus as well as in many other Fathers of the Church. The Scholastics carried it on in their own way. On the other hand, it has been progressively abandoned since the 16th century and the intrusion of certain modern philosophies into theology. These doctrines, and most especially the "rationalist spirit", wished to go beyond the "threshold of transcendence". Like the Gnostic systems, they "pretended to answer the question of the how of the divine actions" (Address, n. 5). Irenaeus, according to the Pope, understood that it was necessary to stop at the "why" and apply it to the

History of Salvation (ibid.). For Catholic theologians, it is not a question of building monuments of speculative thought, of constructing an inviolable metaphysics. The point of departure of authentic theology is the History of Salvation (creation, sin, incarnation, redemption, divinization) such as it is presented by the Apostolic Tradition, which is expressed in the authentic Magisterium progressively unveiling the sacred writings in communion with all the faithful who follow Christ. The point of arrival is the meaning of the divine plan of the Covenant. This synthesis gathers together all the given elements scattered through the sacred books and the acts of the Magisterium in order to "emphasize God's liberty, the liberty of his superabundant love". What Irenaeus did in "a new and sound synthesis", ought to be continued by exegetes and theologians today thanks to a better knowledge of the texts and documents of Tradition and keeping in mind the needs of their contemporaries.

As we invoke this communion of thought which goes from the Eternal Christ to the unfolding of the history of ideas and philosophies, we arrive at the second major trait of Irenaeus' theology which the Pope desired to emphasize in his address to the Academic Community of the Catholic University of Lyon.

## **5. Creative inventiveness in theology: the knowledge of contemporary ideologies**

After he had reminded the professors and scholars of the demand for "a profound, demanding and delicate sense for the living tradition of the faith", the Holy Father remarked that Saint Irenaeus was nevertheless a man of his times and that he felt the necessity to give an inventive character to his teaching (Address, n. 4). It must be the same for the theologian today "who furthermore must not forget the world in which we live, its legitimate requests, the currents of thought abroad in it which often bear truths that must be recognized, but also intellectual temptations and even blindness. He must be aware of the obstacles or the prejudices which certain ideologies impose on the act of believing" (Address, n. 4). Indeed, Saint Irenaeus

renders the discourse of faith "pertinent with regard to the now requests placed by culture" (Address, n. 4).

It goes without saying that such an attitude of inventiveness and dialogue has a preliminary condition: The Christian theologian must not only know the Christian and Apostolic Tradition, he must realize "that one cannot respond to a religious ideology without knowing it well. That is why, before refuting such an ideology, he must gather information and understand it" (Address, n. 4).

Saint Irenaeus was convinced, in fact, that if Gnosticism was able to spread among the Christians, it was because no one had taken the trouble to study it seriously. No one was able to offer a pertinent response. He therefore dedicated the first part of his work to an exposition of the systems of Ptolemy (AH I, 1-9), of Mark the Magician (AH I, 11-21) and of Valentinian (AH I, 23-28). In the following books, in which he engaged in his polemic and re-established the authenticity of the Lord's teaching, Irenaeus took up the exposition of the non-Christian errors in detail. The trustworthiness of his information was elsewhere confirmed by the writings of Clement of Alexandria and of Origen. The breadth and exactness of his information received even clearer recognition when, in 1943, a Gnostic library in Coptic was discovered buried in the sands at Nag-Hammadi in Upper Egypt.

It may perhaps be said that this information and this loyalty are taken for granted in a theologian, above all after Vatican II. Indeed, the Council insisted on contact with all cultures, all currents of thought and on dialogue with thinkers of every school and of every ideology (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 3, 40, 92; *Ad Gentes*, nn. 11, 16, 34, 41 etc.). Certainly it is no longer a question of principle today. However, if the Holy Father recalled this instruction for openness and inquiry, is it not because some former apologetic or "ghetto" reflexes run the risk of acting again against certain things which one would fear to see "trouble the faithful"? The priests of the generation which made its ecclesiastical studies before the Second World War cannot but

recall certain cases of ostracism with regard, for example, to the thought of such a spiritualist philosopher as Bergson; or again the difficulties which, in certain centres of studies, prevented the students in the years preceding the Council from becoming acquainted with currents of thought so different as Personalism and Marxism. Certainly, one does not venture into such ideological fields without trustworthy guides! But was this not at the time a necessity for preparing future priests to face contemporary systems, for helping them to make a distinction between the false and the acceptable? Was there not a lack of this inventiveness which the Holy Father extolled at Lyon?

## **6. Seeking the truth everywhere**

How does one approach the reading of contemporary authors? The Holy Father sanctioned several stages: Seeking the truth wherever it may be found, rectifying and perfecting it, being on guard for Christian authenticity.

According to John Paul II, in applying to our age the lessons of the life and the methods of Saint Irenaeus, "the theologian, faithful as he may be to Tradition, cannot however forget the world in which we live, its legitimate demands, the currents of thought abroad in it which often bear truths that must be recognized" (Address, n. 4). The Pope does not ignore the necessity of a critical reading demanded by the authenticity of the faith, but he emphasizes first of all that which draws together, the authentic institutions to be favoured and the need to correct.

Here likewise, we find again the spirit of Vatican II, notably of *Gaudium et Spes* and of *Nostra Aetate*. The Church does not forget that there are in the world before her very many errors and defects. She refuses, however, to be hypnotized by them. It is necessary also to consider what the Fathers have called the *Semina Verbi*, the *Preparatio Evangelica*, the traces of the grace which is active in every person (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22).

The Apostles, notably Saint Paul, had an acute awareness of Christian authenticity. Their vision above all was of Jesus, and of Jesus crucified (I Cor

1:23). This did not prevent Paul at the Areopagus from making use of the commonly held Greek religious sentiment. In the Letter to the Philippians (4:8-9) he does not hesitate to praise the moral values which the pagans recognized: "Everything which is true, everything which is noble, just, pure, worthy of love, of respect, everything which is virtuous and worthy of praise". He sees in this, however, above all an authentic good of the Christian tradition preached by the Apostles and blessed by God.

Certainly it is very often necessary to correct the propositions which one encounters. To the extent possible, this will be done from within, as the example of Saint Irenaeus suggests. The papal address (n. 5) made a discreet allusion to the anthropological doctrines which the Gnostics borrowed from the major Greek philosophies. Through them there was spread the Platonic dualism which made the body the prison of the soul; a doctrine which is the distant ancestor of all the anti-humanism of certain schools of thought and spirituality, from Manichaeism to Jansenism. Saint Irenaeus (AH V, 6, 1), for all that, does not escape from the body-soul duality; he presents them as complementary elements of the Christian person, all the better unified to the extent that this person is governed by grace. "It is the mingling and union of all these things", he writes, "which constitute the perfect man. That is why the Apostle, in explaining himself, clearly defined the perfect and spiritual man, the recipient of salvation when he wrote to the Thessalonians: 'May the God of peace make you holy in such a way that you may reach full perfection and that you may be preserved whole and entire, spirit, soul and body, irreprehensible for the coming of the Lord Jesus' (I Thess 5:23). They are thus perfect who at the same time have the Spirit of God always with them and keep themselves without reproach with regard to their souls and with regard to their bodies; that is to say, who keep faith with God and practise justice towards their neighbour".

## **7. To be on guard for Christian authenticity**

The theologian faithful to the Revelation of Christ transmitted by the

Apostolic Tradition will not only have to correct the false interpretations which the people of his time give regarding the human vocation and divine love.

It will be necessary for him to find in the inexhaustible riches of Christ (cf. Eph 3:8) the means with which to promote an authentic encounter between God and man. The duty of the theologian is to be on guard for "Christian authenticity" as was Saint Irenaeus (Address. n. 5).

Indeed, "The Gnosis which Irenaeus had to combat appears to us today as a series of works which has already been overcome", the Holy Father noted. But it remains a type of thought and deformation which is almost eternal. It can even be said that these processes of thought are found in a striking manner in certain intellectual tendencies of our time. It was a "para-Christianity whose danger Irenaeus saw". Then, as in our own day, it was a question of "using Revelation" and of "interpreting it from a very particular point of view". In extreme cases, some people have recourse to the "familiar formulae of the Christian Creed in order to justify a doctrine contrary to the faith. In this sense, the Gnostic temptation is always an obstacle for the Church" (Address, n. 5).

The Pope immediately demonstrated what he had said by making use of two recent examples. True, he did it with his usual tact, but that did not impede either the firmness of his intention or the clarity of his exposition. The first example was taken from the "idealist Christology", which has recently been the object of some remarkable critical studies.

John Paul II stated (Address, n. 5): "The attempt at an interpretation of Christianity by philosophers such as Hegel was indeed a manner of emptying the Christian faith of its substance by interpreting the humiliation of the Son of God as the loss of identity of God and the abolition of the abyss between God and his creature".

The example which the Holy Father also drew from certain contemporary

exegetical tendencies was obviously not aimed at the great majority of Catholic scholars, This tendency is relatively limited. It nevertheless illustrates the danger which is always present of a certain Gnostic tendency which the Pope presented in this manner: "Today, too, there exists, in a manner widespread among certain Christians, the temptation to give an interpretation of the Bible determined by presuppositions foreign to the faith, which attempts to bend the faith to a system constructed outside it, all the while preserving the familiar formulae of the Bible or of Christian doctrine in support of those heterogeneous ideologies" (Address, n. 5). How can one not think of certain politicized interpretations of the "Magnificat", of the preferential choice in favour of the poor, the spirit of service is opposed to the *libido dominandi*, which have flourished in certain presentations of the "theologies of liberation"? In the background, can not an attentive reader find Marxism taken not only as a means of sociological analysis but as an ideology to be realized for rendering present and active the Kingdom of God? The two "Instructions" of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith have fortunately opened many eyes. Once again, after the, example of Saint Irenaeus, sound theology has joined fidelity to Tradition to a sense of inventiveness.

In the name of the faith and of the message of the love of Tradition, in communion with the present difficulties of many thinkers and pastors in the face of a social injustice which is ever greater and better known, contemporary theologians understand better the human and Christian doctrine on the right use of material goods, on the duty of austerity for some and of non-violent struggle for others, Taken according to an authentic inspiration, "liberation theology" is united with the concern of Vatican II, of the Pope and of many other witnesses to Tradition for the necessity to understand "humanization", development and human progress as elements of the redemptive work of Christ in the recapitulation of all things by Christ... Another lesson which Saint Irenaeus gives us.

## **8. The 'value' of man, the work of God**

Once again, there is found in Saint Irenaeus the concern to bring to the fore and to bring together the greatness and the love of God and the dignity and potentiality of man. Moreover, here is perhaps the profound reason for the attention which has been given him for the past fifty years in theology as well as in spirituality. It is thus useless to oppose the Fathers of the Church to other Doctors. We have seen through the centuries the dangers which arise from the interminable battles between different theological schools. It cannot be denied, however, that the Church in our day has felt the need to react against the false interpretations of certain post-Augustinian elements which had developed through the course of history. The contempt for man, his incapacity to live an authentic dignity, the total weakness attributed to man, the obsession with sin and concupiscence were still deep-rooted tendencies at the beginning of this century against which many wished to react without knowing too well how to do so. How was it possible to attribute an authentic value to man, a just autonomy in the responsibilities which are his own without breaking the relation of the creature vis-à-vis God, without granting him a complete autonomy? Complete autonomy was the temptation of atheistic Marxism. Respect for God too often appeared as contempt for human existence, which was sacrificed to the purely eschatological aspect of the Kingdom of God.

In one sense, it can be said that the profound significance of the great conciliar documents such as *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* is the will to overcome this false dilemma and to eliminate the last effects of Jansenism. It is not due to chance if each of these two conciliar Constitutions harks back to the doctrine of the recapitulation of human history in Christ. Certainly—and we shall say so—Saint Irenaeus is there, too, the witness of the Roman tradition of Saint Paul, and he is not the only one. This does not take away from the fact that historically he has given to this theological doctrine an importance and a sense which are his own. It is to Book III of the *Adversus Haereses* (16, 6; 22, 1-3) that *Lumen Gentium* (n. 13) refers in order to say: "This character of universality which adorns the People of God is a gift from the Lord himself whereby the Catholic Church ceaselessly and efficaciously

seeks for the return of all humanity and all its goods under Christ the Head in the unity of his Spirit". As for the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (n. 57, 4), it refers to *Adversus Haereses* (111, 11, 8) in order to justify the promotion of culture in the general sense of the search for human values when it states: "As a consequence (of culture) the human spirit, freed from the bondage of material things, can be more easily drawn to the worship and contemplation of the Creator. Moreover, man is disposed to acknowledge, under the impulse of grace, the Word of God, who was in the world as 'the true light that enlightens every man' (Jn 1:9), before becoming flesh to save and recapitulate all things in himself".

## **9. Recapitulation in Christ according to St Paul and St Irenaeus**

Before the Council, Pius X's pontifical motto, *Instaurare omnia in Christo*, was often cited according to the translation which the Tridentine Vulgate gave of this passage of the hymn which opens the Letter to the Philippians (1:10). The Neo-Vulgate has returned to a greater fidelity to the original text: *recapitulare omnia in Christo*. Many ideas and images come together under this presentation of Christ as the Head of humanity. For the sake of brevity, let us say that it is above all a question of two essential themes. For different reasons and, moreover, to different degrees, Christ is the Head of all men and of Christians in particular. He imparts to them the values of creation and of divine adoption. He is the Head who guides and directs, who causes humanity to live and develop. Under a second aspect, the image is concerned more with the idea of gathering, of joining together, of enrichment in universal fraternity.

In section 6 of his address at Lyon, the Holy Father presented a synthesis of this theology of recapitulation according to Saint Irenaeus. There is nothing to be added. I shall therefore content myself here with placing again before the eyes of the reader one of the expositions by which Saint Irenaeus demonstrates in the work of Christ, the Head of humanity, the redemption and the surpassing of all values and all hopes, the pardon of all failures and of

all sins.

"The Word of God, the Only Son, has always been present to humanity. According to the Father's pleasure, he has united and mingled himself with the work which he had formed. He became flesh. This Word made flesh is Jesus Christ, Our Lord. It is he who suffered for us, who has been raised for us, who will return in the Father's glory in order to raise all flesh, to reveal salvation and to apply the rule of just judgment to all who will be subject to his power. There is, thus, only one God, the Father, as we have demonstrated; and one Christ Jesus, Our Lord, who has passed through all 'economies' and has recapitulated everything in himself (Eph 1:10). In this 'everything' man is also included, this work formed by God. He thus also recapitulated man in himself; invisible he became visible, indiscernible he became discernible, impassible he became passible, the Word made man. He recapitulated everything in himself in order that, just as the Word of God has the primacy over the supercelestial, spiritual and invisible beings, he might also have it over visible and corporeal beings, assuming this primacy in himself and setting himself up as Head of the Church (Eph 1:22) in order to draw all to himself at the proper time" (AH III, 16, 6).

What paths for research are not to be found here for theologians rightly concerned to mark out better the harmony between the creation and the divinization of man, between the spiritual life and implantation in the cosmos and in time, between the Incarnation and the Redemption! We are far from the disharmony and the lack of consistency of numerous theological manuals of a former time.

## **10. Conclusion: man fully alive and turned towards God**

It is not only in the doctrine of recapitulation by the grace of Christ that Saint Irenaeus wanted to situate the true value of man, which was denied by the Gnostics. He was careful to note the intrinsic dignity of man, let us even say the relative autonomy of the creature capable of freely orienting himself. Certain contemporaries of ours thirty years ago were gladly spreading about

the ambiguous formula: "The glory of God is man fully alive".

In fact, this formula was truncated and ended up making the Bishop of Lyon say the contrary of that which he had taught. Man's life is for him the glory of God provided that man remains in contact with his Creator. Shortly after the Council, some theologians and some historians such as Père de Lubac had already protested against this false interpretation. The Holy Father did just as much with the tact which distinguishes him. In his address at Lyon (n. 2), he recalled the authentic and complete text of Saint Irenaeus: "The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God. If the revelation of God through creation already brings life to all living beings on the earth, how much more will the manifestation of the Father by the Word bring life to those who see God" (AH IV, 20, 7).

Thus the life of the Christian, in faith as in future vision, is essentially knowing and being known. This is one of the fundamental texts of Christian personalism. The disciple of Jesus is not an isolated being. In order to exist, in order to act, he must know the Christ and his Father and be known by them. Nothing is taken away from human values; they are merely taken up and transfigured. In this, Irenaeus, as the Holy Father said (Address, n. 2), "has been at the same time the theologian of God and of man".

In order to grasp the profound sense of this personalism, it is perhaps necessary to note here the resonance of certain Johannine texts into which Irenaeus had been initiated in a special way by Polcarp who, as we have said, had known the Apostle himself. One would be tempted to say that there is a more profound sense of knowledge, gnosis in the primary sense of the word, in Johannine theology. May I, in conclusion, cite three texts of the Beloved Disciple which give us the full meaning of this Johannine knowledge? In Jesus' farewell prayer are found these words addressed to the Father: "Give eternal life to all those whom you have given to me. Eternal life is this, that they may know you the only true God" (Jn 17:3): "I have made your name known to them and will make it known again, so that the love with which you

have loved me may be in them and that I may be in them". This love is a truly dynamic one as the First Letter of Saint John says (1 Jn 2:3): "by this we know that we have knowledge of him, if we keep his commandments".

To the false Gnosis there is opposed the authentic knowledge of God and of man in the reciprocity of love. It is this which is the profound meaning of Saint Irenaeus' message.

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\* It is to be noted that the prestigious collection of patristic texts *Sources Chrétiennes* began at Lyon. The ten volumes of the collection dedicated to Saint Irenaeus were presented to the Holy Father on the occasion of his visit to the Facultés Catholiques at Lyon. Return

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