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VATICAN - THE WORDS OF DOCTRINE by Rev Nicola Bux and Rev Salvatore Vitiello - Progress is not God

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - One of the evidences of our time is humanity's continual thirst for progress. This thirst is continually and amply increased by the media which, with remarkable constancy, portray progress, whether scientific, economic or social, as the "supreme good" which resolves all evils.

We know this is a mistruth of modernity! As the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI teaches in the encyclical Spe Salvi at paragraph 17, in modernity “hope […] acquires a new form. Now it is called: faith in progress. […]through the interplay of science and praxis[…]totally new discoveries will follow, a totally new world will emerge, the kingdom of man”. This kingdom tends progressively, precisely, to replace the Kingdom of God.

In this “thirst for progress” there is substantial ambiguity: it has something very positive and at the same time it holds within itself a radical threat.

In positive, in the continual longing for progress, there is an objective good: man is not a static being, he is a dynamic; he is unable to see his existence outside of history, understood as continual development both of self and society, and of positive sciences and technology. In a word we could say that the idea of “progress”, when exasperated, is none other than the human need for the infinite, the desire to conquer all limits, evil and ultimately, death. In this sense, progress, and above all the accompanying ideology of progress, reveal an essential human dimension: they say, although indirectly, that man is a being open to the infinite, to the Mystery and desires, continually, to overcome the limits imposed by the cosmos and by his own being.

In negative, progress tends unjustly to take the place of God, assuming that central position in life and society, which belongs to God alone. Progress, if we look carefully, is expected to bring salvation, which only an infinite God and infinite Hope can offer.

If this position in recent decades has been objectively less rooted at the philosophical and social level, because international crises, terrorism and the difficulty to reach and maintain peace, render it objectively less sustainable, nevertheless it is still very present at the economic level. The economy is the place where progress triumphs and, it is to economic progress that societies risk having to sacrifice every other human value.

Economic progress is a relative not an absolute good, and in this sense, it is a means, rather than an end. Moreover, as every “human invention”, economy is limited and must set itself limits, even in progress or, as they say, in economic development or growth. A productive system which aims exclusively for “economic growth”, as the sole goal to pursue at any cost and with every means, is unthinkable. Economy is certainly an essential tool, which often succeeds in improving the living conditions and potential of individuals and societies, but its progress is not to be confused with salvation, progress is not God.

We must learn then to read the human heart, to discover what tensions really guide human behaviour, what are humanity's authentic needs and consequently, we must begin to imagine a society in which, also with a profound revision of life style through serious education, progress may once again be a means, never an end to which, with an act almost secularly religious, to “sacrifice”, everything else. (Agenzia Fides 14/3/2008; righe 40, parole 567)

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