

THE HUMANITY OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

BY LEONARD DELORENZO, M.A.

PART 1: RENOUNCING CLOSURE

Over the next four volumes of *Church Life*, this column will explore the Humanity of Christian Doctrine. We will set our attention broadly upon the Trinity, while also considering the doctrines of creation, the hypostatic union, and sanctification. We set the agenda as such because, prior to being baptized in the name of the Trinity, the Elect (or godparents for infants) profess their belief in the Triune God as they respond to the questions of faith taken from the *Apostles' Creed*. Before making this profession, however, the Elect (or godparents) renounce Satan and the way of evil. Therefore, before we meditate on the Trinity and other doctrines, we will use this first article to attend to what the Christian renounces.

The Christian renounces the closed way of *not* questioning, of *not* wondering, of *not* seeking a given end. She renounces darkness. In the Early Church, it was not uncommon to call Baptism the “Sacrament of Illumination.”¹ The light of faith dawns, God draws near, and the baptized share in God’s light. In his first encyclical, Pope Francis (with an assist from Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) meditated upon this “light of faith”—*Lumen Fidei*—which comes from Christ and illumines the Christian’s



Masaccio; *The Baptism of the Neophytes* (1426-27); Santa Maria del Carmine (Florence);

Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons



journey (§1). Yet, no sooner does the encyclical announce the theme of light than it speaks of the darkness that calls this light illusory.

And there, in the second paragraph of the encyclical, appears Friedrich Nietzsche as one who brazenly claims that true humanity is found in the sort of seeking that does not succumb to belief: the true human being is the one who finds his *own* way. As the unflinching advocate of this thoroughly unchristian way, Nietzsche shows himself to be—at least intellectually, though presumably in practice, too—the staunchest of atheists. Achieving such a level of atheism is no easy task; it takes great effort to refuse God absolutely, for it means refusing to question anything. It is this very refusal that the Christian renounces in professing her faith.

Accompanying the statement of belief in “God, the Father Almighty” is the profession that he is “the creator of heaven and earth.” To the Christian, this is but the beginning of the story. If God creates all things, then the meaning of all things is hidden in God. We can, so to speak, ask God about them, since God created them *ex nihilo*. As the British theologian Denys Turner puts it,

in saying that the world is created out of nothing, you are beginning to say that the world comes to us, our existence comes to us, from an unknowable ‘other’; that is to say, you are claiming that existence comes as pure gift, that for the world to exist just is *for it to be created*.²

Believing that the world is created is a belief that makes all the difference. Without this belief, the world just “stands before us ... in some brute, unmeaningful Russellian ‘just thereness.’”³

It is not unlikely that Turner had Nietzsche in mind when he wrote the talk from which these lines come, a talk entitled “How to Be an Atheist.” Nietzsche, it

seems, meets the criterion Turner lays out for true atheism: the refusal to question existence or to see it as created. If Nietzsche is anything, he is utterly committed to denying the possibility of questioning existence, as if there were some grand meaning or purpose to which one might appeal. The formulation of the question—even the very desire to question—is already the sign of massive self-deception according to Nietzsche. Therefore, he does not just offer an alternative answer to the meaning of existence; even more radically, he nullifies the possibility of asking the question in the first place.

In Nietzsche’s view, thinking of the world as created is at once a failure of perceptivity and a corrupt desire for self-deceit. What one fails to see and wishes to ignore is that,

The total character of the world ... is in all eternity chaos—in the sense not of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphism ... There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses.⁴

To ask the question of existence is to seek an escape from reality as it is. In place of reality, those who cannot ‘stomach existence’⁵ fabricate their own meaning and construct a being who guarantees that meaning to be their own creator. They call this being “God.” The God who “creates out of nothing” is really just a figure that Christians—like Jews before them—have created to compensate for their own lack of strength. Christians allow this thought to bind them as it forces them into an imaginary sense of responsibility, guilt, and purposefulness.⁶

The fully human one, as Nietzsche sees it, is the one for whom there is no questioning; this one seeks out his own way without ever believing that there is such

a thing as good or evil. The one who stands alone is no longer the evaluator who is locked into the aimless pursuit of *the* way. This real human is the one who can say, this is “my taste, not good taste, not bad taste, but *my* taste, which I no longer conceal and of which I am no longer ashamed. ‘This—is now *my way*: where is yours?... *the* way—does not exist!’⁷

To put it briefly, the Nietzschean view is that true humanity is found in going it alone, in imposing one’s own will regardless of the consequences. There is no such thing as a greater meaning to contemplate, a meaning in which one might participate. Variations of this disposition are abundantly present in our world today, whether on the individual, civil, or international levels, where callousness and self-interest are often the operative rule. In far too many situations, ‘What I want’ drowns out the question, ‘Is this right?’

When the Christian renounces Satan and the glamour of evil, she rejects the claim that there is nothing but her own way. In stepping outside of her own closed narrative, she is now ready to profess the narrative of faith and allow it to reconfigure her story. Illumined by this faith, the Christian embarks on the adventure towards the fullness of humanity: to accept the world as created and to seek the meaning of all things in God’s light.



NOTES

1 See, for example, St. Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor*, 1.6.26.1 and St. Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.61.12 (quoted in CCC, §1216).

2 Denys Turner, *Faith Seeking* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 11.

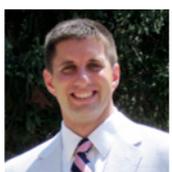
3 Ibid.

4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage, 1974), 168.

5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 93.

6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Nietzsche Reader*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 470; cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* in *The Nietzsche Reader*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 224.

7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Nietzsche Reader*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 282.



Leonard DeLorenzo, M.A. is the Director of Notre Dame Vision in the Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame. He is concurrently a doctoral candidate in Notre Dame’s theology department, in which he is writing a dissertation on the communion of saints.