

DAILY COMPASS DAY

## "Quid est veritas? What is the truth?"

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### **1. Pilate to Jesus: What is the truth?**

In over two thousand years of the history of Christianity, Pilate's question to Jesus of Nazareth has never ceased to resound. Pilate said to him, "Then you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." "Pilate said to

him: "What is truth?" (Jn 18,38f.). What is the truth?

In recent centuries, apart from the work of several historians of Christianity, also a large number of apocryphal gospels have been dedicated to this event. It is a surprisingly popular genre, in which the figure of Pilate enjoys great success: among these authors it is worthwhile noting Mikhail Bulgakov, Anatole France, Roger Caillois, Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Karel Čapek; in Italy Catholic writers, such as Elena Bono or Luigi Santucci, and lay people such as Giorgio Linguaglossa and Lino Cascioli.

But why is Pilate so fascinating? Almost nothing is known about him and the gospels provide an ambivalent portrait of him which each era tries to reinterpret in the way it finds most congenial. Pilate, it seems, possesses characteristics similar to the sensitivity of human beings of all times, and therefore also to contemporary ones, and it is for this reason, he becomes the icon that many look to, asking questions and seeking answers.

## **2. The crisis of the Roman Empire**

Our research can be helped by a quick look at the widespread crisis and disorientation that marked life in the Roman Empire at the time of Pilate, where the loss of the five main values of "Romanity" condensed in the expression "mos" was beginning to be strongly felt "maiorum" and that every good Roman had to possess: fides, pietas, majestas, virtus and gravitas.

**1. Fides was faith**, that is being able to trust in the word given without contracts or witnesses. In Roman law, this value played a crucial role and in the event that someone had been betrayed the injured person could bring a lawsuit for lack of loyalty. The citizens of Ancient Rome believed that fides lived in a man's right hand – the hand of oaths – and was represented on coins with a pair of covered hands. Hence the oath in the courts was born by placing the right hand on a book, civil or sacred. Fides was a very ancient cult and the first temple in honour of him was built under Numa Pompilius, on the Capitoline hill, near the Temple of Jupiter. The goddess of good faith was described as an old woman, but she was always represented as young.

**2. Pietas was the devotion,** protection and respect due to the gods, country, parents, relatives and slaves. Cicero believed that pietas was justice towards the gods and, as such, required careful observation of the rituals for sacrifice and correct execution but also the devotion and inner rectitude of the person. Livio narrates that a temple was dedicated to the Goddess in 181 BC. and that she was often represented in humanform, as a woman accompanied by a stork.

**3. The majestas indicated the dignity of the state** as representative of the people, a value then transferred to the emperor himself. From this derives the crime of "lesa majestatis", or a crime against the state for those who defaced public works, or against the emperor or the Roman senate. This value also had the meaning of the greatness of a people, that is, being proud of belonging to the Roman people, as the best because superior to others in terms of civilisation, culture and customs.

**4. Virtus derives from the Latin term vir (man)** and included what constituted the ideal of the true Roman man. The poet Lucilius believed that virtus for a man consisted in knowing what is good and evil and also designated the hero's and warrior's valour in battle. Virtus was only such if not put at the service of one's own interests, such as the search for power. This value was hereditary and the descendants of virtuous men had the burden of following in their father's footsteps and proving that they were worthy of it. Starting from the 1st century BC, virtus is no longer considered a virtue that is transmitted from father to son but can be obtained by the civis novum through his deeds and those of his ancestors.

**5. Gravitas which corresponded to respect for tradition,** seriousness, dignity and self-control. This attitude had to be demonstrated by the good Roman in the face of any adversity.

Why did the Roman Empire collapse? If we consider the class conflicts, slave insurrections and rebellions of the colonies of that period, we should say that the empire collapsed when it was least expected. From the point of view of the socio-political struggle, the resistance of the oppressed classes (excluding the Jews and Christians) was much stronger between the 2nd century. B.C. and the 1st century. A.D. than in the 3rd and 4th centuries. A.D..

If we were to think only of endogenous reasons we would have to say that the empire fell not when it was weakest, but when it seemed strongest (at least apparently). Of course, corruption, decadence of customs and immorality had increased under the

empire, but the political, administrative and military power was very strong. It didn't collapse just because the morals were corrupt. Nor does it make sense to say that the empire fell due to the irreducible resistance of the Christians, who were anything but "revolutionaries". Constantine, in fact, at a certain point understood it perfectly. Furthermore, not the entire empire collapsed, but only the western part (the most developed one), since the eastern part, renamed in the name of Christ, survived for another thousand years. Which can perhaps lead us to believe that not all of the empire was the same, that is, that the weakness (more moral than political-military) of the western part was greater than that of the eastern part. Everywhere, hateful fiscalism, military conscription, unfair laws, existed... If anything, it is the eastern regions that had greater reasons to destroy the foundations of the empire, since they were undoubtedly more oppressed by Rome.

The reason why the eastern part of the Empire not only did not collapse but even survived for another thousand years has never been sufficiently explained by historians.

### **3. The decadence of the Roman Empire then and now of the West.**

By limiting ourselves to considering the decadence of the "Western lung" of the Roman Empire, today our West, - according to a repeated expression of John Paul II, who fought unheard so that we could once again breathe deeply together between the West and the East, - we can easily parallel the Rome of that era and the West of these last centuries where the loss of Romanity has created a void filled by the conquest of so-called secular civil values with a culture that presents itself as a harbinger of human development but that is increasingly capable of bringing out its violent and prevaricating face. An element of contact that should not be underestimated is the secularisation of the Roman era which attacked the multiplicity of gods, giving rise to a tolerant and indifferent permissiveness, which, although enlivened by religious anxieties, generated disbelief, laxity and confusion. In these last most recent centuries, a parallel can be found by noting the weakening of Christianity and the increasingly affirmation of a cultic permissiveness with a consequent loss of doctrinal clarity and the decline of ethics and morals. All this is linked to an increasingly proclaimed humanism (the autonomy of man who becomes God the creator and has no need of God). But above all, what dominated then, as perhaps now, was restlessness: Pilate's attitude towards Jesus oscillates between admiration and skepticism while good and evil, doubt and faith are ambiguously intertwined in his actions. As then, the restlessness of modern/contemporary man poses a serious question about the truth.

#### **4. What truth are we talking about?**

What concept of truth did Pilate have in mind when he asked Jesus his question? For Pilate, Rome was the only guarantee of reason for the world, while he believed that Judea was a land inhabited by superstition due to the religious innovations linked to the biblical revelation and the preaching of Jesus. However, the concept of secularism was also widespread, which considered the religions mere illusions, so everyone was free to seek comfort in them, however, making it a private matter while at a public level freedom of thought remained the primary value to be defended. The interest in religion was not because it was a bearer of truth, but because it was an instrument of internal asceticism or social control: thus there is a shift from the criterion of truth to that of validity. Pilate is the doubtful intellectual, who clings to reason because he is anxious about the divine; he tries to understand but cannot; he wants to push away the thought of Jesus but cannot; he glimpses something huge and absurd and is afraid; in short he intuits without understanding. Here is a tormented Pilate, divided between rationality and existential restlessness, and curiosity pushes him to what Pascal indicates as the last step of reason: recognising that there is an infinity of things that surpass it.

As with Pilate, also today the truth is not placed in the sphere of certainty but rather in that of doubt and research. That is, it is not possessed peacefully, but is a continually evolving process. This actually implies an interminable indecision, which reflects the difficulty of relying on a faith or choosing to live the scientific doubt which is expressed in a contradiction within one's own conscience with the final result of considering that everything is relative and uncertain. For contemporary mankind, uncertainty makes knowing the truth a personal adventure that transforms the person. We must decide not to passively accept the explanations given about the causes of events, and be convinced that, by taking our lives into our own hands, we must no longer adhere to the truth but construct it. And since the search for truth takes place in the depths of the soul, the individual's path can never be fully predicted, nor can it be assessed from the outside: hence, despite everything, a window always opens to hope. The difference between Pilate's conception of truth and that of Jesus is obvious: For Jesus the truth is absolute, immutable, eternal while for Pilate the only truth of which he is certain is that the true Truth does not exist. Let's consider ourselves today: the truth in today's culture is relative to mankind, situations and history, while the Christian then as today professes a single, absolute, incontestable truth. Today, we are witnessing an arbitrary simplification that arises from the inability to tolerate complexity and from a practical point of view implies an overbearing and often violent affirmation of one's point of view,

when for example those who fabricate a truth deny all other truths. We behave like a company that produces mattresses and the owner/manufacturer prohibits everyone from using and sleeping on mattresses made by others before and after him.

Jesus does not answer Pilate's question, why? Some people think because Jesus understands that the emperor's representative believes that there is no answer, he does not believe in the truth, and ultimately he would not even want to know what it is. In his mind - Pilate is certainly not naive - a doubt oscillates: am I in front of someone absolutely extraordinary and disturbing or is this man who proclaims himself king just an exalted Jew, out of his mind, who speaks of the truth a few hours before being tortured on the cross?

For Pilate, as for much modern/contemporary culture, what matters is the concreteness of reality, the naked facts of life count: one is born to die, one grows old, there are those who are well and those who suffer: only this life belongs to me: *carpe diem*! It is not worth wasting time arguing about the nature of gods, although it is good to act as if a God exists. Ultimately the truth in the absolute sense is a pure abstraction, a castle in the air, a mere word and people do not need words, but concrete things to consume, a house to live in, a car to get around and above all money. After all, if it were possible to reach the truth, it would probably not be communicable and even if it were communicable it would not be accepted.

Therefore, there is a double contrast between Pilate and Christ: Jesus is the bearer of a single metaphysical and spiritual Truth that changes life, while Pilate represents a multiple and pragmatic truth. The first concerns the foundations of existence, the second is related to particular events and preparatory to action. Pilate tries to escape from his torments but is also concerned with acquiring and disseminating exact knowledge of the events and refuses to consider the truth as an abstract directive: «I have always followed orders, but not because they were the truth. The truth was that I was tired or thirsty». [K. Čapek, *The book of the apocrypha*, cit., p. 77]. And Bulgakov, in the dialogue between the Master and Margaret, writes: "when Pilate asks: «What is the truth?», Jesus replies: «The truth is that your head hurts». [M. Bulgakov, *The Master and Margherita*, cit., p. 24)

They are antithetical positions: Pilate seems to have a relative, partial and fragmentary concept of truth; for him the truth is to analyse, distinguish, separate while in the Judeo-Christian perspective the truth tends towards a synthetic vision. Pilate contrasts multiple truths with a single Truth: both in the sense that there can be multiple opinions, and in the sense that the divine can have different faces. He emphasises the role of the

individual in the search for truth, and places community and tradition in the background. Finally he tends to separate reason from emotion, practice from abstract theories, and the human plan from the divine plan. Ultimately Pilate is the spokesperson of a truth - or rather of several truths - decidedly with a lowercase 't', despite sometimes being forced to measure themselves with an absolute Truth, not so much on a philosophical level, but on the level of life and experience. Even for contemporary non-Christian researchers, the truth is reachable thanks to an encounter with a physical person because they believe that the truth exists and that everyone can participate in it, however always in a partial way. So the only way to get to the truth is through an encounter: not between opposing ideas, which are not always reconcilable, but between people: you cannot make a synthesis between "yes" and "no", but between people you can, because there is more truth in people than in words. You can say things that are not true, but it is always possible to trace even modest traces of truth in the soul/heart of the person with whom you listen/dialogue.

For some, truth is reachable when it is identified in beauty; for others the truth is found within themselves and coincides with their own personal internal realisation. We are always in the context of a concrete and private truth that does not resolve uncertainty but opens it to new developments. In reality today some are collapsing the wall of their relative certainties by asking themselves whether human beings need certainties since every certainty can turn out to be a deception. And they reply that we just have to fully believe in "my" uncertainty, because it is the fruit of "my" personal experience: this is ultimately the only possible truth for these thinkers. Others respond: truth cannot be a vague abstract concept, but rather the experience of self-knowledge and mastery of one's body through meditation. Still others seek and find the truth in prayer and in the Christian liturgy: we are always on a personal experiential path perceivable as a privileged encounter with the divine. In short, the truth is a mystical experience.

### **5. Quid est Veritas? Vir qui adest! The truth is Christ**

Finally, for us Christians the Truth is Jesus of Nazareth, true God and true man. To the question "Quid est Veritas? The answer is: " Vir qui adest", "the man who stands before you".

Since Jesus does not answer Pilate "I am the truth", the question "What is the truth?" becomes, Who is Jesus? The truth takes on a precise face and the process of knowledge takes shape in the personal relationship between man and God. This encounter allows us to know ourselves better too and always takes place in a community through dialogue and an emotional bond with the witnesses who have encountered the Truth

which always has the beautiful face of Love. In this sense, therefore, Truth is an all-round encounter: with others, with oneself and with God. Saint John writes in his first Letter: "What we have seen and heard, we also proclaim to you, because you too be in communion with us. And our communion is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write these things to you so that our joy may be full." (Jn1,3). Jesus said to the apostles in the cenacle: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn14,1-12).

Fyodor Dostoevsky writes in a letter to Mrs. Fonvizina in 1854: "I have formed for myself a symbol of faith in which everything is clear and sacred to me. This symbol of faith is very simple, here it is: believing that there is nothing more beautiful, more profound, more sympathetic, more reasonable, more courageous and more perfect than Christ; and not only is He not there, but with jealous love I tell myself that he can't even be there anymore. But there is more: if someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth and it actually turned out that the truth is outside Christ, I would prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth"(письмо к Н.Ф. Фонвизиной, №61 , published 1854 g) Jesus Christ reveals the face of truth. There is no knowledge of the truth - writes Benedict XVI - without knowing Christ. In Him God entered the world, and raised the criterion of truth in the midst of history.

## **6. One last question remains: how can we bring today's Pilate closer to the Truth?**

The traditional method of rational investigation is no longer sufficient, since in my opinion one cannot get there by asking questions. Today's Pilate is pragmatic, he does not seem thirsty for the truth even if he sometimes feels its oppressive restlessness. After having navigated in wide and deep scientific, technical and virtual waters, his poor boat broke against a stony, tomb-like silence. Paradigmatic in this regard is what Giovanni Pascoli says in his poem: "The Last Journey", in which (Canto XXI) Ulysses in the futile hope of learning the truth from the sirens ends up shipwrecked against the sirens' rocks where there are no mermaids .

I know of no other way that leads to the Truth other than opening the heart/soul to its profound reasons and aspirations and understanding that the fulcrum of knowledge is no longer the intellectual dimension (always necessary), but rather feeling the reawakening of emotional-spiritual joy of the heart and arriving at the Truth is discovering the secret of a fully happy life.

Two common threads are always possible in human life: reason and the heart, but today



the heart: Love seems to increasingly gain ground. In this context, truth seems to be perceived as a narrative and not just as a set of theoretical statements; not as a research objective but above all as a gift to ask for. And if this is true, it is necessary to overturn the perspective of the method and language to be used: there is a concept of truth that words are inadequate to convey; today we are discovering silence as a privileged communication tool: from the depths of the heart it brings out silence without making it become banal and spaces for listening/dialogue are created free from prejudices and preconceptions.

The contemplation of Jesus' silence to Pilate's question permits us to become disciples of a human/divine Person: Christ. His silence provokes and strips away any pretence of control; our silence is transformed into revolutionary adoration and his silence is prolonged in the silent presence in the Eucharist where the silence of the Host is the answer to the deepest questions of the human soul.

The silence of Jesus speaks as Pilate well understands. In fact, the mechanisms of communication are overturned: Pilate is the intelligent and presumptuous man of the word, with the fine and witty rhetoric of a Roman magistrate who shatters upon impact with the face of Jesus, mangled by pain and injustice: "I don't find any guilt in him...and then he repeats again: I bring him out to you, so that you know that I don't find any guilt...Here is the man...Take him and crucify him; I find no fault in him... to Jesus he says: Don't you talk to me? Don't you know that I have the power to set you free and the power to crucify you? And Jesus replies: You would have no power over me if this had not been given to you from above... more silence... Pilate to the Jews: Shall I put your king on the cross? And to their answer: We have no king but Caesar... Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified." And the solution was: Finally, Pilate remains the man of questions posed or left unanswered. He began with a barrage of questions, a witty experience of a rhetorician and magistrate aware of his own power, which ends up staggering in the doubts that fill his soul with a recalcitrant darkness; he becomes sad and indecisive as if his heart were prey to opposite feelings: melancholy and irritation, remorse and the search for self-justification, the desire to win and the fear of appearing defeated, in short, a man alone with his conscience, unhappy forever: Ordered a bowl of water to be brought to him and washed his hands before the crowd, saying: I am not responsible for this blood. You take care of it": he washes his hands! Can this ever be called true freedom?

## **7. Two final considerations:**

1.Although doubt can have a positive connotation, the search for truth always remains

unsatisfied. The truth has a performative and personal meaning: it must be experienced rather than found. Lessing said: «If God had offered me in my right hand the knowledge of all truth, and in my left hand the perennial search for truth, with all the dangers and disappointments that this entails, I would have chosen the left hand». And Mario Pomilio notes: "Christ did not come to found certainties. He came to propose to us a way of being in faith in which everything is included, even the possibility of doubt. Therefore, ceasing to question Christ would lead to enclosing him in a "formula", and thus "we would be done with Jesus". (M. Pomilio, *Il fifth evangelio*, Milan, Rusconi, 1975, p. 356, p.329). In this light, Pilate could become our traveling companion in the search for truth; he invites us to look for it without settling for pre-packaged answers, and to accept its uncertainty without extinguishing hope. This applies to everyone regardless of everyone's beliefs because, as Schmitt notes, "we are all united under the question, divided in our answers" (E. Schmitt, *The Gospel according to Pilate*, cit., p. 340). Pilate has the merit of having immortalised the question, bringing the suffering of doubt and remorse and re-proposing it over the centuries to those who read the Gospel. Ultimately his legacy is precisely this question: "What is truth?"

2. Joseph Ratzinger Benedict XVI in the book "Jesus of Nazareth" states that the question "What is truth" is "a very serious question, in which the destiny of humanity is actually at stake". And he notes that it is evident that the topicality of the question and its formulation: today, in fact, the non-redemption of the world is connected in a particular way with the non-decipherability of creation and with the consequent non-recognisability of truth. Even modern science, which claims to have deciphered the language of God, according to the expression of Francis S. Collins, and to be able to unfold the mathematical formulas of creation, recognised even the genetic code of mankind, has actually only introduced us to a sort of functional truth about being. "But the truth about himself - about who he is, where he comes from, what purpose he exists for, what good or evil is - that unfortunately cannot be read in this way" (p. 218). Without the truth man does not grasp the meaning of his life, ultimately leaving the path to the stronger. "Redemption" in the full sense of the word can only consist in the fact that the truth becomes recognisable" (ibid.). The truth, according to the lapidary formula of Thomas Aquinas, is God himself *ipsa summa et prima veritas* (*Summa theologiae*, I q. 16 a. 5 c). This is why the truth in all its greatness and purity never fully appears and "truth and erroneous opinion, truth and falsehood in the world are continually mixed in an almost inextricable way" (p. 216). Mankind comes closer to the truth to the extent that he conforms to reality and to his own reason, in which God's creative reason is somehow reflected. But the truth in its fullness, being God himself, "becomes

recognisable, if God becomes recognisable. He becomes recognisable in Jesus Christ. In him God entered the world, and raised the criterion of truth in the midst of history" (p. 218). The recognition of truth coincides, therefore, with the recognition of Christ alive and present in history, that is, of the Risen Christ. But even this recognition is never full and from the first appearances of the Lord to the disciples it is subject to what Ratzinger calls the "dialectic of recognising and not recognising". A dialectic which corresponds, moreover, to the way Christ appears. "Jesus he comes through closed doors, suddenly stands among them. And in the same way he suddenly withdraws, as at the end of the meeting at Emmaus" (p. 295). Precisely in this experience of the unavailability of His presence there is proof of a real event, irreducible to an invention on the part of the disciples. The question to the Lord remains for all of us: "Why have you not demonstrated with irrefutable vigour that you are the Living One, the Lord of life and death? Why did you show yourself only to a small group of disciples whose testimony we must trust?" (p. 306). But "it is typical of the mystery of God to act in a subdued way". The Risen One wants to reach all humanity "only through the faith of those to whom he manifests himself" and "knocks softly at the doors of our hearts and, if we open them, slowly makes us capable of "seeing"" (ibid.). It must be admitted that, today more than ever, the recognition of truth, without wanting to deny the path of natural reason, is linked to the credibility of the testimony of Christians (what a responsibility!) and to the freedom with which each person is willing to accept Him. God, in fact, does not want to "overwhelm with external power, but to give freedom, give and inspire love" (ibid.). "Seeing" always has to do with loving.

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