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Authenticity, Accompaniment and Trust: Graces for a Discerning Church in an Age of Secularity

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Among the many themes sounded within the presentations and discussion of the Roman conference “Renewing the Church in a Secular Age” have been a series of vibrant reminders that we are members of a Church that, like the disciples in their following of Jesus, is, has been, and will continue to be *in via* in this world: As a pilgrim Church, we accompany one another on a journey that is at once arduous and joyful, suffused in light yet often cloaked in darkness, with sure hope in the destination ahead of us, even in the face of uncertainties on the path that lies immediately before us. We are pilgrims both of and amid the secular ways of our age, who walk with each other within the concrete multiplicity of its cultures; these ways and cultures each provide daunting challenges as well as creative opportunities for an attentive, discerning, and faithful accompaniment of one another walking into the future. In that journey, we find ourselves united in the common fragility of a shared humanity, even as we are called together by God’s Spirit to the self-emptying service that gives witness to the transforming abundance of God’s love for us and for the creation of which we are a part and in which we walk and dwell.

In this prelude to the presentations that were given in the conference session on “A Discerning Church: The Gospel Experience, and Foundations in Secular Times for Renewed Hope,” I would like to locate them as a set of complementary articulations of what I believe to be a crucial challenge that the Spirit invites us to engage on the journey we have undertaken as Church. This challenge is to shape

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and enact practices for a renewed, reformed, and deepened mutual human trust that will enable us to move together into the future in and through the challenges and the opportunities that issue from this age of secularity. In particular, these presentations suggest a need for us to attend to at least four pre-requisites for, first, discerning the challenge of renewing and deepening mutual trust and, second, for mapping ways that provide us with hope for successfully addressing the specific challenges to mutual trust that arise within the circumstances of secularity. These pre-requisites are: 1. Openness to recognition of the pluriform workings of the Spirit both in the world and in the church. 2. Attentiveness to the experience of faith as continuing reflection, not closure, reflection that enables recognition of incompleteness in our Christian discourse and practice as well as of complementarities in the discourse and practice of our partners in dialogue. 3. Recognition of our own participation and immersion in the “social imaginaries” of a secular age as itself a modality of the working of the Spirit. 4. Commitment to open and inclusive dialogue as a modality of discerning opportunities and practices for the rebuilding of trust.

My proposal is that we read these presentations as urging us to incorporate these prerequisites into the efforts we make to discern the presence and activity of God’s Spirit in our “secular times.” If we pay attention to these prerequisites, we may then begin to see how authenticity, accompaniment, and trust can function in concert as modalities of enacted grace that are particularly apt for a time of secularity: these three are, in my judgment, appropriate for shaping our discernment of the signs of our times into a practice and an enactment of the renewed hope in the living God that the Gospel calls upon us to witness. When discernment is exercised in these modalities, I am suggesting, it will be possible for us to attend more readily to the Spirit as present and active in the dynamics of plurality, not just in a comforting uniformity; as present and active in the incompleteness of uncertainty, not only in the closure of certainty; as present and active in the cultural particularities of our “age,” as well as in what is rightly treasured from the past; and, perhaps most

significant of all, as present and active in the challenging deep and persistent otherness of all our companions on the way, as well as in what we recognize of ourselves in them.

In the background of my proposal for reading these presentations in terms of authenticity, accompaniment, and trust as modalities of the “grace of discernment” for our times is a variation on a central affirmation made by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*. In that work, he articulated the impact of the “immanent frame” that constitutes the social imaginary of a secular age in terms of a major alteration of “the conditions of belief” that has been brought about in the dynamics of modernity and its aftermath. In Taylor’s account, this alteration of these conditions of belief has its impact not just upon professed adherents of the religious traditions of theism, but also upon religious non-theists, atheists, agnostics, and the religiously indifferent (the last of whom have recently been designated sociologically as “nones”¹). In other words, we all find ourselves in “a secular age” as the historically contingent locus that has shaped the social imaginary in which we live with one another and through which we accompany one another *in via*. The particular contingencies of history that have shaped us as participants in the globalizing culture that (so far) has been given its main trajectory by the West have changed the conditions of belief for all of us, not just for those of us who profess to be believers. These conditions of belief have been constituted by the socio-cultural, linguistic, material, and conceptual landscape of modernity and its aftermath in which we now are constrained by our contingency and historicity to profess, articulate, and justify affirmations, as well as denials, of the status of our humanity with respect to a transcendent (or transcending) reality. Belief and unbelief, as well as indifference to either, cannot but be “of the age” in which they are enacted – and that age is now, for all

¹ “Religious “nones” – a shorthand we use to refer to people who self-identify as atheists or agnostics, as well as those who say their religion is “nothing in particular” – now make up roughly 23% of the U.S. adult population,” Michael LIPKA, “A closer look at America’s rapidly growing religious ‘nones,’” May 13, 2015, <http://goo.gl/QcAhtU> (accessed June 21, 2015).

of us, stamped in all of its contingency with the marks of secularity. Taylor has summarized this effect in a pointed way by noting that a secular age has made “naïve belief” difficult if not impossible; all belief – particularly the beliefs (*and* the non-beliefs) that matter most for us – has become “contestable;” all of us, theists and atheists, the “nones” and the indifferent, can and will find ourselves challenged by what he terms the “fragilization” of belief.²

In the seminar for the Gregorian faculty that preceded the Conference, discussion of Taylor’s account of the conditions of belief suggested the possibility of an important expansion of its scope: The secularities of our time have altered not only the conditions of belief, they have also altered the conditions of mutual trust with which we approach and engage one another. The alteration in conditions of trust brought about by secularity has had widespread impact both within the Church and throughout society at large, and the questions about the ways these effects bear upon one another generated a lively discussion in the seminar. As important as these larger questions may be, a secular age’s alteration of the conditions of trust has a more immediate significance for the more limited scope of this prelude, which seeks to point out why and how, in consequence of this alteration, attention to authenticity and accompaniment will be especially crucial for the Church’s discernment of its role and responsibility as agent for the renewal of trust in a time of secularity. In order to do this, a return to Taylor’s account will be helpful, since it provides at least one telling clue to the specific mutual bearing that conditions of belief and conditions of trust have upon one another in a secular age.

My point of reference for this will be a general description that Taylor provides of a social imaginary: “the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and

² *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 303-304, 531-532.

images that underlie these expectations.”³ This description indicates the all-encompassing extent to which a social imaginary provides the fundamental horizon of expectation and meaning that frames our interaction with one another; it is in consequence of its provision of such an all-encompassing horizon that the “immanent frame,” the designation Taylor gives to the operative social imaginary of secularity, can have an impact that results in an alteration to the “conditions of belief” that makes all beliefs “contestable.” This description further suggests – and this is a key basis from which an extension to “conditions of trust” can be made – that trust, as a condition for elements of a social imaginary such as “fitting together,” “how things go between them,” and “expectations,” itself constitutes one of the “deep normative notions” embedded in the structure of a social imaginary. Mutual trust is requisite for the functioning of any social imaginary, so the discernment of how mutual trust functions in the social imaginary of a secular age is certainly of importance for orienting the journey that we as church find ourselves taking in and through it.

It should thus not be surprising if the fragilization of belief that ensues in an age of secularity brings with it a correlative fragilization of trust. Such a correlation seems to be at work within Taylor’s account of the “cross-pressures” and the “dilemmas” that emerge within the “immanent frame” as it tries to bear the weight of the moral expectations entailed in our efforts to attain the fullness that our human hopes and aspirations hold out before us.⁴ In these aspirations and efforts, trust emerges as a central locus for the dilemmas and cross-pressures that bear both most heavily and often most subtly upon the putative self-sufficiency and inner adequacy of the immanent frame.

This can be seen in the extent to which Taylor’s account gestures toward the conditions of trust as the loci in which these dilemmas and cross-pressures play themselves out, particularly upon those

³ *A Secular Age*, p. 171.

⁴ *A Secular Age*, chapters 16-18, pp. 594-710.

forms of our human vulnerability for which trust constitutes both an urgently necessary yet radically fragile constituent element in enacting proper recognition and regard for the vulnerabilities that are threaded into our lives.⁵ The contingencies of the world often manifest our vulnerabilities in ways – such as severe life-time physical disabilities or affective incapacities; social circumstances foreclosing possibilities for even minimal development of basic human capacities for knowledge and well-being; large and small dislocations of people in consequence of war, civil unrest, economic instability, or natural disaster – that stretch to and beyond the limit the capacity of the chief moral sources that the immanent frame recognizes, universal justice and impartial benevolence, to move us to respond in timely, appropriate, and effective ways to those affected by them. In consequence, the multi-dimensional vulnerability of our embodiment, the variety of ways in we are subject, both as agents and victims, of the “draw to violence,” the temptation to codify values in ways that allow a facile distinction between “good guys” (“us” of course) and “bad guys” (obviously “them”), can work, both separately and together, to overwhelm the fragility of our moral intent and sympathy in ways that result in the transformation of the high demands of universal justice and impartial benevolence into a condescending and destructive misanthropy.

Taylor’s gesture towards the link between vulnerability and trust helps mark out the contested status in which they each stand in a secular age, a contestation that is fraught with significance for questions that are fundamental both for philosophical and theological anthropology: What constitutes us as human? What is the meaning and worth of our humanity? At stake in the framing of our responses to the concrete individual and social manifestations of our vulnerability and to the invitations that they offer for enactments of mutual trust is nothing less than the fundamental constitution and import of our humanity. It is in recognition of the vulnerability that goes

⁵ Also relevant here is Pope Francis’s discussion of vulnerability in *Evangelii gaudium* §§ 209-216.

“all the way down” in the humanity of all of us that our authentic selfhood is rendered open to the transforming presence of divine love – a point that Taylor reminds us has been given abidingly powerful expression both in the Johannine writings and in the novels of Dostoevsky.⁶ By referencing this point, Taylor’s account identifies vulnerability and the space it creates as a primary locus for the enactment of trust. It is the place within which the Church is invited to enact graces most fitting to its character as a Church *in via*: the graces of a welcoming and an accompaniment that are abundantly inclusive in their attentiveness to the deepest and most fragile points of our human vulnerability.⁷

⁶ *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 451-453; cf. *A Secular Age*, pp. 709-710; cf. p. 569.

⁷ For further discussion of the church’s enactment of welcoming and accompaniment and its basis in God’s hospitality in creation, see Philip J. Rossi, “Sojourners, Guests, and Strangers: The Church as Enactment of the Hospitality of God,” in *Questions liturgiques – Liturgical Questions* 90, 2009, pp. 121-131.