

[“The Undefeated Light” A Christmas reflection by Joseph Ratzinger first published in German in the Bavarian Catholic journal *Hochland* 1959/60: 97-100. Translated by Professor Tracey Rowland, University of Notre Dame \(Australia\).](#)

The Christmas lights are again shining over our streets, and the Christmas shopping is in full swing. For a moment, one also lets the church participate in the heightened economy. In the holy night the places of worship tightly pack with all the people who then again, for a very long time, will pass by the church portals as something very fine and strange that does not concern them. But in this night, for a moment, the Church and the World appear reconciled. It's so beautiful: the lights, the frankincense, the music, the sight of the people who can still believe and finally the mysterious ancient message of the child who was once born in Bethlehem and is called the Savior of the world. That moves us, and yet, the concepts that we hear at this time such as redemption, sin, salvation, sound like words from a long-gone world. Maybe this world was beautiful, but it is in any case no longer ours. Or is it?

The world in which Christmas came was dominated by a feeling very similar to our own. It was a world in which *Götterdämmerung* was not a slogan but a real event. The old gods had suddenly become unreal. They did not exist anymore. Man could no longer believe what had given meaning and support to life for generations. However man cannot live without meaning, he needs it like his daily bread. So after the extinction of the old stars he had to keep looking for new lights. But where were they? A broad movement offered him, as a way out, the cult of the "undefeated light," the sun, which travels its way over the earth day by day, strong and confident in victory, a visible god of this world, as it were. The 25th of December, located in the midst of the winter solstice days, would be annually commemorated as the birthday of the ever-reborn light, a bright promise that from all destructions a path leads to a new beginning.

The liturgy of the sun religion had thus very cleverly appropriated for itself the primeval human fear and primeval hope. The primitive man, who at one time experienced the coming of winter in the long nights of autumn with the ever-diminishing power of the sun, had once again wondered with dread: does the golden sun really die? Will it return again? Or will it be defeated by the evil forces of the darkness, sometime, in this or one of the future years, and never return again? The annual winter solstice finally promised its ever renewed victory. It is the festival that encompasses the hope, yes, the certainty of the indestructibility of the lights of this world.

The time when Roman emperors with their cult of the undefeated sun gave new faith to their subjects, new hope; a new meaning in the midst of the unstoppable demise of the old gods, coincided with the time when the Christian faith wooed the heart of the Greco-Roman people. The Christian found in the cult of the sun-god one of his most dangerous opponents. For this sign was far more visible and temptingly erected before the eyes of men than the sign of the cross, in which the Christian announcement came. Nevertheless, Christianity's invisible light prevailed over the visible message with which ancient paganism sought to assert itself.

The Christians very soon claimed December 25, the birthday of the undefeated light, and celebrated it as the birthday of Christ, in whom they had found the true light of the world. They said to the Gentiles: The sun is good, and we rejoice in its ever new victory no less than you. But it has no power of its own. It can only be and only has power because God created it. So it manifests light to us from the true light, from God. And one must celebrate the true God, the source of all truth, not his work, which would be powerless without him. That's not all, not even the most important thing. For maybe you have not yet discovered that there is a darkness and cold coming from the darkened heart of man: hatred, injustice, cynical abuse of truth, cruelty and the dishonor of man...At this point it suddenly becomes apparent how exciting this is, how the Christian's conversation with the Roman sun

worshipper is at the same time the dialogue of the believer of today with his unbelieving brother, the incessant dialogue between faith and the world. True, the primitive fear that the sun would one day die does not move us any longer. Physics has long stifled such fears with the cool touch of its clear formulas. The primitive fear has gone - but has the fear disappeared completely? Or is man still a creature of fear, so much so that today's philosophy refers to fear as the "basic existential" of man? What period of human history was more afraid of its own future than our own? Maybe today's human being is bogged down in the present just because he cannot stand to face the future, just thinking about it causes him nightmares. Again: We no longer fear that the sun, conquered by the darkness, could not have returned, only to discover the true darkness which is more terrible in this century of inhumanity than the generations before us could ever conceive of it. We fear that the good in the world will be overcome. We fear that it gradually no longer makes sense to try to seek truth, purity, justice, love, because in the world the law of the strongest prevails, because the passage of the world is right for the unrestrained and the brutal, but not for the saint. We shall see: There is money, the atom bomb, the cynicism of those who have nothing sacred. How often do we catch ourselves fearing that in the end world history only distinguishes between the stupid and the strong... There is a feeling that the dark powers are increasing, that the good is unconscious - a similar feeling to what people once had when the sun was fighting its death throes in autumn and winter. Will it get through it? Will the meaning and power of the good prevail in the world?

In the stable of Bethlehem there is placed the sign which joyfully answers us: Yes, because this child - God's only begotten Son - is set up as a sign and a guarantee for this. He is the sign that in the end God keeps the last word in world history, He, who is the truth and the love. [Note: Ratzinger's original German was "die Wahrheit und die Liebe" not "die Wahrheit und die Licht" - that is, truth and love not truth and light]. That's the true meaning of Christmas. It is the birthday of the undefeated Light, the winter solstice of world history, which gives us the certainty amidst the rise and decline of this story that here, too, the light will not die, but has already achieved the final victory. Christmas drives out of us the second, greater fear that physics cannot dispel. This is the fear of humanity and before man himself. It is a divine certainty that the light has already conquered in the hidden depths of history, and that all the great progress of evil in the world in the end can do nothing more about it. The winter solstice of history has irrevocably taken place in the birth of the Child from Bethlehem.

Something, of course, will be noticed on this birthday of the Light, on this entry of the good into the world, and might once again fill us with more anxious uncertainty: that is, whether the great thing about which we are talking actually happened in the stable of Bethlehem. The sun is great, glorious and powerful; nobody can overlook its annual triumphant march. Did not its creator have to be more powerful or even more recognizable when he arrived? Should not this real sunrise of history flood the face of the earth with unnamable splendor? Instead how poor is it all as we hear it [the event of the Incarnation] presented in the Gospel. Or perhaps this poverty, the inner worldly insignificance, should be the sign of the Creator, with which he marks His presence? This seems to be an inconceivable idea for now. And yet, he who pursues the mystery of the governance of God, especially as it is known in the writings of the Old and New Covenant, sees more and more clearly that there is obviously a double sign of God. There is first the sign of creation, which, through its greatness and glory, lets us suspect that there is one still greater and more glorious. But next to this sign, the other sign, the sign of inner-worldly poverty, emerges more and more strongly with the God as the very other to let us know in this way that he cannot be measured by the standards of this world, that he is beyond all such dimensions. It is impossible to better understand this peculiar contrast between the two signs to which God testifies, and the nature of the second sign, the sign of lowliness, than by considering the contrast between the messianic sermon of the baptist John and the messianic reality of Jesus himself. John had described the one who was to come in an Old Testament style as he who would place the axe to the

roots of humanity, as a judge full of holy wrath and divine power. How different he looked when he came! He is the Messiah who does not cry out and make a noise in the streets, who does not break the bruised reed and does not extinguish the smoldering wick. [Is 42, 2f]. John had known that he would be greater than he but he had not known the new kind of his greatness: It consists in humility, in love, in the cross, in the value of obscurity, in the silence which Jesus, as the one who is even greater, is lifted up as the greatest in the world. In the end, the truly great does not lie in the size of the physical dimensions but in what is no longer measurable through them. In truth, what is great by physical quantities is only a preliminary form of magnitude. The real and the highest values occur in this world precisely under the sign of lowliness, obscurity, silence. The great thing about which the destiny and the history of the world hangs is that which appears small in our eyes. In Bethlehem, God, who had chosen the small, forgotten people of Israel as His people, finally made the sign of littleness the decisive sign of His presence in this world. It is the decision of the holy night - the faith - that we accept it in this sign and trust it without grumbling; accept him - that is: to subject ourselves to these signs, the truth and the love, which are the highest, godlike values and the most forgotten and *geräuschlosesten* [meaning free from noise or sound], at the same time.

Finally, let me tell you a story from Indian mythology, which has surprisingly anticipated this mystery of the divine littleness. In one of the myths surrounding the figure of Vishnu, it is reported that the gods had been overpowered by the demons and had to watch them distribute the world among themselves. Then they see a way out: they requested only as much land from the demons as the tiny dwarf-like body of Vishnu could cover. The fiends agreed with that. But they had not known one thing: Vishnu, the dwarf, was the sacrifice that penetrates the whole world, and so the world was redeemed through him to the gods. When one hears this, it sounds like a dream in which, through the confused perspective of the dream, one senses the form of the real. As a matter of fact, it is the tiny reality of the sacrifice, of vicarious love, that turns out to be stronger than all the might of the strong, and that with its littleness in the end pervades and transforms the entire world. In the Child of Bethlehem, this invincible power of divine love is drawn into this world. This Child is the only true hope of the world. But we are called to take the risk with him; to entrust ourselves to the God who made the small and the lowly as His sign. Our heart, however, is said to be filled with great joy that night, for despite its appearance it remains true: Christ, the Saviour is here.

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