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Doctorate Honoris Causa for H. E.
Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi : the John
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Doctorate *Honoris Causa* for H. E. Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi

(The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, September 27th 2012)

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On the 27th of September 2012, the chairman of the Pontifical Council for Culture, Card. Gianfranco Ravasi received a doctorate *honoris causa* from the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. The ceremony was attended by the university senate, local bishops, representatives of the local authorities, and guests of honor coming from Poland and from abroad, among others the apostolic nuncio Celestino Migliore and the vice-chairman of the Italian parliament, Prof. Rocco Buttiglione. The official document issued by the university senate stated that the honorary degree was granted to Card. Ravasi as a sign of acknowledgment for the scholar and shepherd of the Catholic Church, who, while listening to the Word of God, generously shares its salvific and sanctifying riches with others, including those who do not believe.

In the eulogy performed by Prof. Henryk Witczyk (the chairman of the Institute of Biblical Studies at the Catholic University of Lublin), Card. Ravasi was called “a great ambassador and witness of Christian culture and mentor of the dialog between believers and secular humanism philosophy”. Prof. Witczyk stressed the multidimensional character of the testimony to the Truth given by Card. Ravasi. In the field of exegesis, the Cardinal, with his expertise in ancient languages, is a continuator of the traditions started by Saint Ambrose in the Church of Milan. Proof of this are his commentaries on the Psalms, the Song of Songs, Job and Ecclesiastes. In his works, Card. Ravasi gives voice to the Fathers of the Church and opens his heart and mind to the light coming from the wisdom of the saints. As a lecturer, Card. Ravasi for thirty years has been holding classes on the Old Testament exegesis in Milan. He has been invited as a speaker to innumerable events and conferences in Italy and abroad. In 2011 Card. Ravasi participated in the 1st Biblical Congress in Warsaw and presented a lecture entitled “Art and Faith: two windows to God”. Prof. Witczyk reminded also the audience that

the Cardinal, as chairman of the Pontifical Council for Culture, promotes the so-called “Court of Gentiles”. In accordance with the intention of Pope Benedict the XVIth, Card. Ravasi organizes the space for dialog for people for whom religion is a distant reality, but who want to draw closer to God. Meetings of the so-called “Court of Gentiles” were organized in Paris and Stockholm. The project also embraces the relationship with the world of contemporary science, and promotes dialog between secular humanism and the Christian faith.

After the eulogy, the new doctor *honoris causa* presented a lecture entitled “Incarnation and modernity. The analysis of counterpoint”. Card. Ravasi undertook an effort to confront the category of modernity, in which we are submerged, with the Incarnation. The speaker approached the problem in a twofold manner. On the one hand, he showed how the Scripture sheds light on the category of modernity. On the other, Card. Ravasi demonstrated how contemporary sensitivity meets and confronts the Incarnation. According to Card. Ravasi, modernity naturally revolves around relativism. Modernity is pursuing something that is beyond the past; it is a sort of superlative which always implies something more up-to-date. The biblical understanding of time and cultural development is pretty different. “Now” in the Bible (Greek *nyn*) signifies the “modern” world in which we live, but also “the eschatology in the present”; it is the time of salvation (*kairos*), as in 2 Cor 6:2: “Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation”. Similarly, “today” in the New Testament means something which is both relative and absolute, chronology and eschatology. A good example of this is the mention of the historical birth of Jesus announced to the shepherds: “For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (2:11). According to Card. Ravasi, modernity as understood in the New Testament is a combination of the passing (historical) time and the present. The passing time carries in itself a reference to the transcendence which still persists. Life in the present does mean constructing the present, a full and perfect present.

This idea, continued the cardinal, is ultimately enrooted in the central mystery of Christianity, that is, in the Incarnation where the divine, eternal, and absolute Word (*Logos*) is bound to the human, limited and fragile body. Christianity is a valuable alternative both to the extreme Islamic transcendentalism, which rejects any idea of contact between the present modernity and the horizon of the sacrum, and to the Indian doctrine of the avatar, the doctrine on the naturalistic cycles of reincarnation. Incarnation is also a response to the secular immanence theory, which eliminates any steadfast point of reference from human history.

According to Card. Ravasi, the perfect point of balance between history and transcendence is achieved in Christ. Contemporary culture has problems with the historical relativity and divine transcendence combined in one in Jesus. In this way the Cardinal passed to the second part of his lecture in which he exposed the contemporary look at the Incarnation. Modernity does not have any problem with accepting the relativity and corporeity of the Incarnation. At the same time, however, it shows an ambivalent approach to the human body worshiped as an idol and humiliated, or rejected, in drug addiction, sexual depravation and therapeutic impotence.

When it comes to the approach of modernity to the incarnational transcendence, at first glance transcendence seems to be a stumbling block for modern culture. Yet the contemporary world seems to long for it, throwing itself into various forms of magic, mysticism, and New Age spirituality. This search for the transcendental, and at the same time the distortion of the sacrum, proves that contemporary man remains uneasy, watching what is beyond the things experienced in a direct, and often superficial, way. At the same time, a person used to the relativism feels perplexed when trying to think of the horizon of the “ultimate” and persisting reality like God, truth, good and evil, pain, life, death, and life after death. The shadow of mortality makes modernity dizzy. In effect, post-modern culture either narcotizes the thought of death, submerging it in the solvent of superficiality and entertaining temporality, or gets carried away by the illusionary current of life without aging—the life of technological “immortality”. Death in contemporary culture appears stripped of any dignity, or else remains shamefully hidden. At this point one can understand both the perplexity of modernity faced with the transcendence, and the subtle fascination it shows towards the Absolute. The double dimension of the Incarnation, comprised of humanity and transcendence, historicity and spirituality, life and death, opposes both the alienating gnosis and fundamental materialism. The unity of the Incarnation gives sense to both dimensions of our reality. This unity can create a heaven for questions, doubts and superficial post-modern sensitivity, concluded Card. Ravasi.