

Słowa kluczowe: Kuzańczyk, *philosophari in Maria*, postawa fundamentalna, wyuczona ignorancja, filozofia chrześcijańska

Keywords: Cusanus, *philosophari in Maria*, fundamental attitude, learned ignorance, Christian philosophy

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IS THE 'DOCTA IGNORANTIA' A FORM OF 'PHILOSOPHARI IN MARIA'?¹

LEARNED IGNORANCE AS A SAPIENTIAL ITINERARY

Learned ignorance is not an ambiguous but rather a splendidly polysemous term, far beyond what Cusanus's both rigorous and poetical explications can illuminate. The apparent oxymoron of the composite term invites us to enter into a field of tensions and to delve into an exploration of the paradoxical relationship it refers to. Cusanus's fundamental assumption is that since this tension between ignorance and knowledge essentially characterizes the Divine-human relationship, we can come closer to the mystery of Who God truly is by way of a careful theo-philosophical analysis.

1 I wholeheartedly thank Prof. Dr. Matthias Vollet, Prof. Dr. Tim Mosteller, Dr. Greta Venturelli and Prof. Dr. John Milbank for both encouraging me on this essay and critiquing it. I am very much indebted to the Kueser Akademie für Europäische Geistesgeschichte for inviting me to present an earlier version of this paper at their "Internationale Tagung: Mensch und Gott im Gespräch bei Cusanus" which was held in 2018 in Bernkastel-Kues.

The purpose of the following deliberations on what the term *docta ignorantia* may suggest for contemporary philosophers is to point out that *dramatically*² living the tension between the two terms (learned and ignorance) helps to overcome the limitations set by approaching God's nature primarily in epistemological terms.³

Cusanus's key expression, "learned ignorance," suggests more than an ironic play with words and entails even more than a fair description of the Socratic attitude, although it is true that Cusanus mocks the vainglorious tradition of "ignorant expertise and proficiency." His irony is addressed to those who mistake the truth compressed into scientific, philosophical or even theological terms as reality itself.⁴ Cusanus discredits this rather self-contented and illusionary form of thinking. That he was right to do so might be judged on his prophetic capacity when thinking about the later developments that this attitude gave rise to. The modern versions of nominalism⁵ which paved the way for empiricism come to mind, as well as idealism, not to mention logical positivism and deconstruction.

Thus, the complex claim of upholding "learned ignorance" entails a judgment on the history of philosophy; it is at the same time a powerful endorsement of a certain sapiential heritage⁶ and the rejection of any form of nominalism. Considering that all philosophy can achieve is "learned ignorance" is a sign of great creatural humility expressed not only through an act of judgment but also manifested in both a specific *fundamental philosophical attitude* and in applying a *theo-philosophical methodology*.

2 By living dramatically the tension of "learned ignorance" as a philosopher, I refer to a series of distinctions that cannot be explained here but that include and perhaps start with the existential and personal familiarity with the humbling experience of being devoted to deciphering mysteries rather than resolving mind boggling problems. The distinction hinges on participation. As Marcel affirms: "A problem is something which I meet, which I find completely before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I am myself involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and initial validity." (See Marcel 1949: 117; Marcel 1950: 38–45.) Without this personal *disponibilité*, this radical openness and willingness to affirm the truth, without this absolute hope – as Marcel calls it – that allows for a dramatic involvement that transforms the subject, it is pointless and meaningless to talk about learned ignorance. At its culmination this dramatic relationship is a personal involvement or participation in the Theodrama as displayed in the inter-Trinitarian relationship. Ignorance receives its full meaning, for example, within the Trinitarian theo-drama as kenosis when the omniscient divine person, the Son, accepts to be humanly ignorant as to how exactly His mission is going to be carried out. Learned ignorance, ultimately speaking, is how humans *in secula Christi* became versed in the acceptance of ignorance by giving utmost priority to divine love: for we only know whom we love, or better, Who reveals Himself through His love.

3 On this point, see especially Casarella 2006.

4 As Shakespeare wrote: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Shakespeare 1904.

5 "Cusa offers an alternative modernity that enables us to recover the pre-modern middle path between univocity and equivocity without losing sight of the emancipatory legacy of the modern age." Hoff 2013: xv.

6 This concept is based on the complex notion of "sapientia" in the work of Balázs Mezei. See Mezei 2004.

Cusanus's claim suggests that those who are truly wise are aware of their ignorance precisely because of the way they relate to the object of knowledge. The methodology thus is based existentially and ontologically on a fundamental attitude (of faith) and not the other way around. This point is especially interesting in the light of modernity's insistence (Descartes, Kant, Husserl, etc.) on the unique importance of methodology.⁷ The correction offered by Cusanus to our contemporary understanding is based on the recognition that there is an already existing love-relationship between the divine and the human that allows for philosophical reflection, and it is not philosophy that is called to establish this relationship, and even less to censor it.

Cusanus's proposal of "learned ignorance" as both the adequate attitude and methodology applied to a flourishing love-relationship thus defines it as a sapiential journey, i.e., as a gradual deepening of divine knowledge (knowledge of the divine and the knowledge that the divine reveals to us). Even though the pilgrim on this route receives knowledge through and in the conceptual language of a certain epoch and style, the relevance of what is communicated to him goes beyond the restrictions of the given historical and cultural dimensions.

Let us now explore this sapiential way of divine knowledge by tracing how the meaning of "learned ignorance" acquires increasing depth. Proceeding from chapter to chapter has to be understood here not only in terms of an intellectual endeavor; the "Hercules of Eugenians" wrote this introduction to Christian wisdom in order to restore the unity of Christendom.⁸

SHADES OF MEANING IN "LEARNED IGNORANCE"

In the introductions to each chapter, Cusanus defines in three mayor steps what he means by learned ignorance. The three approaches, first to God, then to creation, and finally to Jesus Christ, lead to a complex and rich knowledge of the divine that entails a series of reflections not only on the right attitude and methodology but also on the finality of such meditations, as well as the possible benefits that Christians might hope for. Cusanus's ambition is not less than to radically rethink and renew Christian philosophy according to this complex idea that he claims to have received by personal divine inspiration.

7 Hoff 2013.

8 Harries 2015: 13.

As any serious philosophical attempt to describe the recreated reality from its own origin, so Cusanus's work also proposes a new synthesis;⁹ in his case it is the Neo-Platonic philosophy that has to be reconciled with Christian revelation and especially with its Christo-centric approach to reality. The radical theo-centrism can only be fully reconciled with renaissance humanism through a Christo-centric vision. Cusanus focused on Neo-Platonism (more specifically, on the philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite and Proclus on the one hand and Meister Eckhart and the Rhein mystics on the other hand) because from the tradition he had access to, these sources were the most keen on arguing for the necessity and legitimacy of an apophatic theology. Cusanus needed a conceptual network as well as elaborate arguments so that he could metaphorically revise them in order to give a better account of the paradoxical interrelationships of divine nature, creation and humanity that for him boiled down to the double claim of: (1) we desire to know that which we do not know, and (2) the more one is aware of his ignorance, the wiser one becomes.

These two insights are more than simple philosophical claims; they do not describe one characteristic or essential feature of the knowledge of the divine, but rather illuminate the dramatic nature of the divine-human relationship that the nominalism of his time and the philosophy based on the insight and methodology of natural and critical sciences were unable to sufficiently scrutinize. Cusanus's concern was that this deficiency of the cultural and intellectual life weakened the faith inasmuch as it deprived humans of fully acknowledging and living through the paradoxical and dramatic character of the divine-human relationship. Cusanus experienced how faith, when its dramatic character is sublimated into philosophical claims, becomes disoriented from its living center that is Christ and thus quickly transforms into simplified, impersonal and yet belligerent moralism and politics. He witnessed how the Church becomes divided in this process, for those groups that lose sight of one pole of a given paradox of faith engage in destructive fights against their apparent opposition. Philosophy can contribute to peace by demonstrating that these half-truths, when united in a vision of dialectical synthesis, can illuminate its origin within the mystery of revelation. When Cusanus thus restored the original divine-human drama by upholding these fundamental paradoxical claims, he once again, like so many times in his lifetime, fought for the unity of the Church.

After these introductory thoughts, let us now see how the first of the three formulations of *learned ignorance*, concerning God, is articulated. It is not my task here to reconstruct the whole train of thought; instead, I only focus on one key notion from each chapter that highlights *the paradoxical and dramatic character*

9 On this aspect, see especially Moran 2007: 173–192.

of the divine-human relationship. I consider these two features to be a central contribution to the renewal of the disoriented contemporary academic philosophy that has a tendency to be both impersonal and fragmented.¹⁰

FIRST CHAPTER: GOD AS COINCIDENTIA OPPOSITORUM

Cusanus's starting point is the notion of the 'Maximum,' which he interprets following the Pythagoreans and the Peripatetics as well as the examples of Aristotle and Augustine in mathematical terms, for it is this symbolic language that can most clearly, i.e., analogously, communicate the otherwise inaccessible realities of the divine-human relationship to us.¹¹ Through considering geometrical figures such as the line, the triangle and the circle, Cusanus takes several steps to arrive at the formulation of his central claim, according to which the Maximum relates to everything else analogously to how the greatest line relates to other lines. Concerning the relationship between the Absolute Maximum Infinity (God) and the finite (creation), Cusanus makes some further affirmations by exploring this threefold geometrical analogy (between the line, triangle, and circle/sphere).

a) On the one hand, he highlights that the infinite line is everything that the finite line has as potential. The Absolute Potentiality itself in infinity is nothing else than what is factually the Maximum. Following the example of Pseudo-Dionysius Aeropagita and St. Bernard (who called God the smallest and the Maximum at the same time), he stresses that in God the smallest and greatest coincide by going beyond all opposition found in the created world. Divine nature goes beyond that dimension of being in which opposites exclude each other. Therefore, when aspiring to know God, we need another attitude and methodology than that applied to the world.

Recognizing the need for a radically different approach is all but giving up on logic; the epistemological process is guided more than ever by rational analogies and argumentation. On the other hand, one has to get used to encountering paradoxical claims. This does not mean that rational discourse is shipwrecked, but rather that we left the safe harbor and have finally arrived at the open and infinite sea. The limits of human reflection that Revelation invites us in different ways to recognize and then to expand upon are not the same as the limits of philosophical dialectics. This latter serves rather as an introduction to contemplation, often precisely by patiently dwelling in the field of tension of carefully maintained paradoxical claims.

¹⁰ On this point, see especially MacIntyre 2011.

¹¹ Bellitto 2007: 641–642.

Nonetheless, what allows for this kind of contemplative deepening of reflection is not so much the fact that God is simple over and beyond oppositions extracted from the created world, but rather that these seemingly contradictory claims are ultimately and in an all-encompassing way based and reconciled in God. Thus, the principle of “learned ignorance” cannot be confounded with resignation over or surrendering to the endless fight of diverse opposing claims. Opposites, which certainly reflect the limits of our fallen human perspective more than anything, are reconcilable to those who are able to see the simplicity of divine nature. The real difficulty for the human mind is not grasping an overwhelming complexity, but rather, being humble enough to be converted to the One and Triune God. Only the *poor in spirit* who are accustomed to perceiving creation from the divine perspective can see through the order of humanly contrary claims and forge ahead to utmost simplicity. (By poor, I mean those who receive everything as a gift and have nothing they regard as their own. Conversion enables us to receive from the One in an act that is Trinitarian in structure.)

b) Cusanus explains another idea through a mathematical analogy, according to which the world consists in whatever falls between the two extreme poles of the smallest and the greatest and is hierarchically ordered depending on the grade of participation in the divine essence.

The relationship of created beings and the divine essence is also illustrated by a geometrical image when Cusanus claims that the infinite curvation is identical with the infinite straightness when analogically applied to the simple and infinite essence of the Absolute Maximum. “[We see] (1) that this Essence is the most simple Essence of all essences; (2a) that in this Essence all the essences of past, present, and future things are – ever and eternally – actually this Essence.”¹²

The essential core of the finite world is the infinite divine essence itself that is undividable and incorruptible. God is not simply the Maximum but also the smallest; the divine thus embraces and permeates all dimensions of creation from the smallest to the greatest. By referring to Aristotle, Cusanus stresses that the One is the grounding principle and the measure of everything – for it is an essential element of all.

Infinity takes part in everything, although it is not to be found in anything, as far as it is only partaking in everything in a limited way; as a Maximum, it is *in itself* only and it is the only thing that is in itself, for everything else can only subsist in the Maximum. To put it in other words: God permeates the world, but in the end

12 Cusanus 1985c: 45.

differs from it by infinitely superseding it.¹³ These two claims are inseparable, and their ultimate meaning can only be explained in reference to one another. Human reflection, when approaching God's infinite nature by way of analogies, at the point where analogies become opaque and even inadequate and the alleged similarities point to the contrary, is faced with the infinite distinctness and thus nothingness as the manifestation of the *ontological difference*.¹⁴ Yet, this nothingness is surprisingly meaningful, for it is a negative moment of God's self-revelation and, as such, it speaks more eloquently than *any comprehension* of any concrete knowledge about *the inexhaustibility* of divine nature. This kind of nothingness as a regulative idea and immeasurable measure of all that there is to be measured is certainly closer to the "*phénomène saturé*"¹⁵ of Jean-Luc Marion than to the "*néant*" of Sartre. The specific type of nothingness given in this experience is a relational term; it only appears as the fruit of hard work on whatever appears to be real, and thus serves as material for analogies.

According to Cusanus, gaining awareness of this "negative sublime of meaning" happens through bracketing in the soul everything that participates in being. The remaining nothingness is not nothingness in itself, but the difference between the comprehended and the not-yet-grasped meaning: the learned ignorance (in this sense, "*belehrtes Nichtwissen*" rather than "*gelernte Unwissenheit*") is not the same as ignoring nothingness. As Cusanus puts it: "But sacred ignorance teaches me that that which seems to the intellect to be nothing is the incomprehensible Maximum."¹⁶

The first dramatic lecture of learned ignorance can be summarized like this: in a paradoxical way it is the nothingness of being and the world that reveals to us the infinite meaning of its foundation.

SECOND CHAPTER: *COMPLICATIO/EXPLICATIO*

In order to characterize the relationship between God and creation, Cusanus introduces the notion of the *infinite universe* in the second chapter. The

13 Against unjust accusations, there is no pantheistic tendency in Cusanus's reflection. As is well known, Cusanus defended his views in his *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (1449) against the charges of heresy and pantheism made by the Heidelberg scholastic Johannes Wenck. See on this point Karsten Harries's aclaratory arguments in Harries 2015.

14 "Now, our intellect, which cannot leap beyond contradictories, does not attain to the being of the creation either by means of division or of composition, although it knows that created being derives only from the being of the Maximum." Cusanus 1985a: 100.

15 Marion 2002; Mackinlay 2010.

16 Cusanus 1985c: 51.

infinite universe, which encompasses everything besides God and stems from God (understood here in terms of the absolute Maximum), is infinite in a different way from God. Cusanus writes, “Therefore, a created thing has from God the fact that it is one, distinct, and united to the universe; and the more it is one, the more like unto God it is. However, it does not have from God (nor from any positive cause but [only] contingently) the fact that its oneness exists in plurality, its distinctness in confusion, and its union in discord.”¹⁷

God composes the whole universe, which is nothing more than the unfolding of the divine essence. The universe comes to existence not by some mechanical causation or emanation. Despite the Neo-Platonic tone of Cusanus’s vocabulary and thinking style, he wants to explore the deep mystery of creation. Unfolding means here not that the existence of the world is in any way deducible from the existence or the nature of the Divine, and although it unfolds in hierarchical order from the greatest to the smallest, it reflects infinite sustaining power and perfection on all levels. God is not simply the initial reason for the world, the point from which the divine effect diminishes over distance, but rather, the divine effect outflows from Him concerning each and every species that are therefore perfectly what they are. This is the primary reason why “...the mode of enfolding and unfolding surpasses [the measure of] our mind. Who, I ask, could understand how it is that the plurality of things is from the Divine Mind? For God’s understanding is His being; for God is Infinite Oneness.”¹⁸

Instead of an *effective cause*, Cusanus claims that there is an infinite Oneness. Yet this raises another difficult question concerning how the plurality of nature stems from the One. At this point, Cusanus (rather than arguing philosophically) teaches us *a way of looking at things* and *modes of acknowledging* that the existence and the oneness of things – however independent from our mind – are not *things in themselves* (independent of God) but can only be rightly considered as “coming to us from God”, i.e., as becoming what they are through the unfolding of the divine nature. What Cusanus proposes here as the adequate view of things that allows us to see their existence in a proper light lies between two extreme visions that lead only to nothingness, i.e., do not allow us to see any part of their origin. He writes:

Therefore, no one understands how God (whose oneness of being does not exist through the understanding’s abstracting from things and does not exist as united to, or merged with, things) is unfolded through the

17 Cusanus 1985a: 99.

18 Cusanus 1985a: 109.

number of things. If you consider things in their independence from God, they are nothing – even as number without oneness [is nothing]. If you consider God in His independence from things, He exists and the things are nothing.¹⁹

For Cusanus, these two kinds of encountering nothingness “in being in itself”, i.e., without God, allude to the deficiency of the pre-Christian, classic metaphysics that cannot really account for the radical challenge that lies in the fact of *ex nihilo* creation.

The followers of Aristotle tried to grasp this mystery of the existence of the world as if the relationship between God and the world could be considered analogously to the relationship between substance and accidents. This analogy – as Cusanus points out – is rather inadequate, because while accidents receive their existence from the substance, accidents also contribute so much to substance that they would not exist without it. God cannot be similar to this. “For the creation is not adventitious to God in a correspondingly similar manner; for it does not confer anything on God, as an accident [confers something] on a substance.”²⁰ The universe has no other reason than the will of the Almighty God – and there is nothing that could explain this.

When, however, we comprehend that everything in the world stems from the will of God, then the metaphysical and cosmological question turns out to be an existential issue as well. It is ontologically puzzling that although everything stems from God, the very form of being, it is yet not mingled with being. Cusanus approaches this issue by recognizing an even deeper question to ask: *what does this paradox mean for us* as human persons whose existence is desired by God?

Let us see how exactly Cusanus reformulates the question: “Who, then, can understand created being by conjoining, in created being, the absolute necessity from which it derives and the contingency without which it does not exist?”²¹ The question is not any more centered on *what* we should understand but rather on *who is able to understand it*; ontology becomes existential when it is explained in the context of one’s personal relationship with God. In the dramatic relationship between God and His creatures who (1) cannot confer anything to the nature of God and who (2) are called out of nothingness to exist, the knowledge of being (*Seinsverständnis*) is substantially elevated by the insight that all creatures are

19 Cusanus 1985a: 110.

20 Cusanus 1985a: 110.

21 Cusanus 1985a: 100.

somehow reflections of the divine precisely because everything unfolds from Him and bears His signature.

Cusanus introduces another metaphor at this point: Creatures, like countless mirrors, reflect an infinite number of refractions of the same image, and therefore, despite their fragmentation and finitude, all creatures are somehow perfect.

[It is] as if a face were present in its own image, which, depending upon its repeatedness, is a close or a distant multiple of the face. ... [It is as if] the one face – while remaining incomprehensibly above all the senses and every mind – were to appear differently and manifoldly in the different images multiplied from it.²²

Despite the multiplicity and the difference between images, they clearly refer to the same origin: ultimately speaking, to the Holy Trinity.²³ What distinguishes humanity from the rest of creation is that a self-awakened human person can become aware of the mystery of their origin potentially in the form of experiencing and reflectively understanding the implications of being an *imago Dei*, and can freely give their consent to personally fulfill the whole dramatic motion of *exitus and redictus* in and through their life. Participating in the cosmic drama in perfection (however limited it is) is to be interpreted existentially as one's vocation to unite oneself to the infinite perfection *via theosis*.²⁴

Let me summarize the second chapter here: it is not only the existence of God, but also His will dynamically unfolded in creation that involves us in an even more complex drama that radically challenges the human person and the human intellect.

THIRD CHAPTER: ABSOLUTE/CONTRACTED MAXIMUM

In the third chapter, *learned ignorance* comes to its culmination in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The Christology displayed here is formulated in the terms used in the first two chapters; it also shows the influence of the orthodox teaching of early Christian councils (especially that of Chalcedon). Contemporary

22 Cusanus 1985a: 111.

23 Cusanus explains in chapter VII that "Absolute Oneness is necessarily triune – not contractedly but absolutely." (Cusanus 1985a: 127) Later on, he adds that "three mutual relationships – which in God are called persons – have actual existence only collectively in oneness." (Cusanus 1985a: 127) "The oneness of the universe is three – continues Cusanus – , since it is from possibility, connecting necessity, and union – which can be called possibility, actuality, and union." Cusanus 1985a: 130.

24 "For man does not desire a different nature but only to be perfected in his own nature." Cusanus 1985a: 169.

readers might find the method of Cusanus somewhat peculiar. Instead of deducing namely some revised and renewed notion of the *world* and *humanity* from the facts of Christian Revelation, Cusanus “makes room” for Jesus Christ through a certain interpretation of these two key concepts (God and creation). In a nutshell, Cusanus argues that the paradoxes of God’s mysterious nature and of the world that can only convey contradictory knowledge of God are both illuminated and reconciled by Christ, who incorporates into Himself all of the paradoxes of the relationship between God and His creation.

This is underlined by interpreting Christ’s divine-human double nature as a *contracted individual Maximum*. Here, the paradox is that being contracted does not exclude Christ from being the Maximum, i.e., He is both Creator and created being.

Therefore, what is contracted would exist in what is absolute in such way that (1) if we were to conceive of this [being] as [only] God, we would be mistaken, since what is contracted does not change its nature, and (2) if we were to imagine it as [merely] a creature, we would be wrong, since Absolute Maximality, which is God, does not relinquish its nature, but (3) if we were to think of [it] as a composite of the two, we would err, since a composition of God and creature, of what is maximally contracted and of what is maximally Absolute, is impossible.²⁵

It is at this point that, by concentrating on the double nature of Christ, the definition of *learned ignorance* reaches its plenitude: it captures the unity in the plurality and discovers the plurality in the unity (“*ut in unitate diversitatem et in diversitate unitatem concipere*”²⁶). The seemingly abstract ideas introduced in the two previous chapters suddenly become alive when their content becomes related to the person of Christ and the account of the Gospels. The paradoxes concerning the existence and the will of God manifested in creation reveal their fully-fledged existential relevance when rediscovered in the very nature of Christ. They are certainly not going to be simply dissolved; rather, they acquire an even more intense dramatic tension: in Christ, the Son of God, the Father gave us all through the Holy Spirit. The intellectual endeavor of humanity does not consist any longer in finding some alternative ways of elevation, but rather reinterpreting everything in light of the *logos* that has been fully conveyed to us.

25 Cusanus 1985b: 194. I think the translation provided by Germain Heron is clearer on this point. See Cusanus 2007.

26 Cusanus quoted in Miller 2003: 57.

Therefore, rather than some contradictory forces annulling each other, we are admitted to enter into the realm of one truth (e.g., the divinity of Christ) to better understand the other (e.g., the humanity of Christ) and vice-versa in and through Christ as a sign of living contradiction.²⁷ It is not the human intellect here that is challenged; it is us, the whole person as such who is prompted to answer whether or not he accepts this path, for it is only through that *consent* that this double truth in its simplicity can be revealed and fully embrace us.

Cusanus is clear that it is faith (rather than our own autonomous reason) that opens the way for us to reach the mystical exaltations of *learned ignorance*; he regards faith and reason to be distinct but inseparable ways of approaching God that are essentially intertwined:

All our forefathers unanimously maintain that faith is the beginning of understanding. For in every branch of study certain things are presupposed as first principles. They are grasped by faith alone, and from them is elicited an understanding of the matters to be treated.²⁸

The sapiential itinerary of Cusanus may easily be connected to those tendencies of the 20th century that aspired to find the leeway to avoid leading us to a dead end of philosophical (metaphysical) reflection through the reformulation of the relationship between faith and reason. Their novelty was their originality and orthodoxy in the radical recovering of the absolute origin of everything in Christ. A paradigmatic example of this can be seen in the Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio* by John Paul II²⁹. This train of thought was further developed in other papal documents by Benedict XVI³⁰ and Pope Francis.³¹ The core idea has not changed. It can be summarized by the somewhat mysterious expression “*philosophari in Maria*”.

One can evaluate the “*sapiential*” relevance (the relevance of wisdom expressed or unfolded in it) of the concept and argumentation of learned ignorance from very different perspectives. One of these, however, is clearly distinctive: to which extent does this idea of learned ignorance help to deepen contemporary dis-

27 “In Christ and through Christ God has revealed himself fully to mankind and has definitively drawn close to it; at the same time, in Christ and through Christ man has acquired full awareness of his dignity, of the heights to which he is raised, of the surpassing worth of his own humanity, and of the meaning of his existence.” John Paul II 1979: n. 11.

28 Cusanus 1985b: 244.

29 John Paul II 1998: n. 131.

30 Benedict XVI 2005: n. 41-42.

31 Francis 2015: n. 241-42.

cussions on the philosophy of religion? Even though “*Philosophari in Maria*” is a kind of umbrella term for Christian philosophical dialogues according to the Papal desideratum, it is far from being a value-neutral summary – rather, the very term implies already clear indications and alludes to grounding principles, insights and aims along which the discussion can develop.

Let me unfold this briefly in just three points.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF LEARNED IGNORANCE TO CHRISTIAN WISDOM

By reviewing the train of thought of *De docta ignorantia*, I highlighted those ideas that indicated both the paradoxical and the dramatic nature of divine knowledge. I also explained some aspects of how these two characteristics are related: where the truth of the doctrine reveals itself as a mystery for the limited human intellect, acquiring knowledge is tantamount to penetrating into aspects that are in tension and even in apparent contradiction to each other. Resolving the puzzle is far from being just an intellectual challenge – the vision of God (*visione Dei*) requires a fundamental disposition and readiness to consent and testify to the truth in our own lives. The demand of the whole of reality requires the full involvement of one’s whole life. The pattern of divine knowledge is not accumulating knowledge; the ones who receive knowledge are those who, by giving their full consent, are capable of recognizing the source that enfolds it. Giving one’s full consent and “amen” is hardly possible without a full conversion. This entails a revision of the whole realm of knowledge in the light of the truth that appears as both the foundation and the culmination of everything one knows.

The primary relevance of *learned ignorance* comes to the fore and is unfolded within the context of one’s vocation. The way of unfolding therefore is *conformed* by way of appealing to the person: since God approaches us through and with His love, the relevance of *learned ignorance* becomes visible by the extent that this kind of knowledge helps to transform one’s whole life by turning it into a loving response.

Because of the personal nature of the response to God, who gives Himself completely away in Christ, our answer is not just ours (the person is what he is in his relationships), for one responds only as a member of different communities. Ultimately speaking, there is a nuptial relationship in which the Church answers through and in us as Mother and Bride who gives her full consent to the will of the Bridegroom. The notion of *philosophari in Maria* certainly refers to this nuptial dialogue in which the reality and the will of the eternal Bridegroom is communicated and reflectively understood in a way that transforms the self-vision of the Bride as well.

Let us see then how learned ignorance illuminates some essential aspects of this fundamental relationship.

1. *Philosophari in Maria* as *learned ignorance*: All forms of *philosophari in Maria* are based on the double assumption that, on the one hand, it is possible to know God while, on the other, this knowledge is far from exhaustive. God's nature is an infinite mystery precisely because it is infinite love: the more we love, the more we know Him, and the more we know Him, the more we are aware that His reality infinitely exceeds all finite human knowledge. Thus, it cannot be a legitimate purpose of philosophy to create a closed system of acquired knowledge. When philosophy decides to remain as a fragmented attempt to give a response at a certain historical moment, she does not give up her dignity, for she still aspires "to constantly move forward to the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her."³²

The expression "learned ignorance" does not indicate any concrete grade of knowledge and does not refer to a specific restriction or limitation that could be moved away (by transhumanism or otherwise); it stands rather for a humble relationship to the "whole wisdom" which is proper to the human person endowed with a vocation, i.e., a divine call and mission. Those aware of this fundamental constitution of their existence are not mistaken about the fact that the divine pro-vocation precedes any answer and *con-forms* to even our most radical rejections. "Learned ignorance," when considered in this responsive way, reveals itself as a "radically open disposition," or more precisely, as a readiness to give full consent to being. "*Fiat*" to what is revealed within the realm of learned ignorance thus becomes the shortest credo of *Philosophari in Maria*.

2. *Philosophari*: Learned ignorance redefines philosophy by stressing that she is inseparable from theology in particular and revelation in general. The freedom of philosophical reflection is not so much realized by aspirations to autonomy as it is manifested in a freeing of oneself from all kinds of cultural, historical, etc. burdens in order to devote oneself fully and wholeheartedly to mapping and responding to the paradoxes of Revealed truth that are explored by theological reflection without reducing them. The methodology of "learned ignorance" requires the strength to freely dwell in theological tension by both avoiding all hasty simplifications and all pressure to create

32 Paul VI 1965: n. 8.

systems. Acknowledging philosophy's genuine ignorance prompts us to obediently listen to the voice of the phenomena and proceed by letting them speak. I wonder whether this tactful and eloquent silence of *philosophari in Maria* does not oblige philosophy to directly learn the virtue of Mary, who at times, even when not fully understanding her own sun, "kept all these things in her heart."³³

3. *In Maria*. The sobriety of learned ignorance affects the subject of philosophical dialogue as well as its self-understanding. The human person as the receiver of a divine vocation cannot consider themselves worthy of such a distinction, and yet, they have to say at least something in service to and on behalf of their community, something comforting, hopeful and true, something that cures and orients. *Extra comunione personarum nulla philosophia*.³⁴ The place where Christian philosophy occurs and its proper subject is Mary in the sense that Christian philosophy is part of the reflection of the Church on the mystery of Christ, the *Logos* that the Church both receives and gives birth to. Thus, everything that represents the wholeness – in its fragmented way, in its cultural, historical and linguistic relativity – is the renewal and the reformulation of the answer that is expected from the beginning of times *hic et nunc*: it is a response to the One who is eternal.

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³³ Luke 2:51, RSV.

³⁴ Grygiel 2015.

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IS THE 'DOCTA IGNORANTIA' A FORM OF 'PHILOSOPHARI IN MARIA'?

SUMMARY

Cusanus' learned ignorance is a complex notion that is explained as a form of introduction into Christian wisdom. The different meanings of how God exceeds our conceptual reach and remains ineffable despite all metaphorical approaches are laid out in three steps: the first is devoted to God (*concidencia oppositorum*), the second to the Universe (*complicatio/explicatio*) and the third to the God-man, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is represented here as an intermediary, as measure and mediator between God and creation, the finite and the infinite. Along these lines I highlight three main aspects of *docta ignorantia* as especially relevant for contemporary thinking.

These aspects will be used to evaluate the extent to which Cusanus' powerful proposal to reinterpret Christian reality can help us respond to Pope John Paul II's exhortation in *Fides et ratio* to understand and to exercise Christian reflection as *philosophari in Maria*.

Article submitted: 6.04.2020; accepted: 14.04.2020.