



CONFERENCE OF THE GENERAL MINISTERS  
OF THE FRANCISCAN FIRST ORDER AND TOR

**JOHN DUNS SCOTUS: INGENIOUS AND DARING**

*To all Franciscans on the closing  
of the 7<sup>th</sup> centenary of the  
death of Blessed John Duns Scotus*

Dearest Brothers and Sisters,

on the occasion of the conclusion of the celebration of the 7<sup>th</sup> centenary of the death of Blessed John Duns Scotus (1308-2008), after many of the celebratory events, cultural and scholarly that took place all over the world, we the Ministers General of the First Order and of the TOR also take this opportunity to write this letter to you. With it we wish only to increase in all Franciscans and lovers of Franciscanism the desire to commemorate and recover the remarkable personality of the *Subtle and Marian Doctor* and to deepen the understanding of his rich philosophical and theological thought. Holy Franciscan and distinguished teacher (*magister*), original and creator of scholarly learning in response to his time, faithful son of St. Francis, he succeeded to incarnate the Gospel and to be attentive to the socio-cultural realities of his epoch, which he never evaded and for which he offered his contribution, parting from the philosophical and theological ideas of his day.

Thanks to recent research and a series of studies prejudices about little clarity in Scotist language and the notion that a subtlety of thought that tends to an extreme abstraction have been eliminated. As Fr. E. Longpré<sup>1</sup> has demonstrated, the Scotist subtlety is an exigency of

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<sup>1</sup> Longpré, E., *La philosophie du B. Duns Scot* (Firmin-Didot, Paris 1924).

intellectual rigor placed at the service of the primacy of charity, the sublime virtue in daily Christian praxis. The full force of Scotist speculative penetration is at the service of a practical intention: God, Jesus Christ, the human person, the Church, creation, to give direction to the human person and to avoid what deviates in love: *errare in amando*...

Scotus is in favor of a praxis, but not in an impatient and superficial evangelism, allergic to speculation and to profound and meditative reflection. “In this time- according to Fr. P. Vignaux- in which many believers demand a prophetic Church, the *subtilitas* invites one to remember the great affirmation of Karl Barth in the first volume of his *Dogmatics*: “The fear in confronting Scholasticism is the characteristic of the false prophets. The true prophet accepts to submit his message to this test as to others.”<sup>2</sup> Of the rich and fertile Scotist message we propose to highlight in this letter some central points in response to the most urgent problems of our day.

## **God according to Scotus and Contemporary Atheism**

In composing his natural theology Scotus parts from two biblical principles: “I am the one who I am” (*Ex* 3:14) and “God is love” (*1Jn* 4:16), to arrive at the One who is “Infinite truth and infinite goodness.”<sup>3</sup> The existence and essence of God are clarified by theology but at the same time metaphysics considers them as its most elevated proper object. The two forms of knowing correspond to one another (metaphysical theology) and the divine order of the human (revealed theology), as Scotus affirms at the beginning of *The First Principle*: “You, knowing that which of you the human mind can know, respond, revealing your holy name: “I am the one who I am.”<sup>4</sup>

Among all the divine names, the most appropriate is that of the *One who is*, since it expresses “a certain ocean of infinite substance,”<sup>5</sup> “the ocean of every perfection,”<sup>6</sup> and “love by essence.”<sup>7</sup> In the infinite being is found three primacies: the first efficient, the first end of all and the most

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<sup>2</sup> Vignaux, P., “Lire Duns Scot aujourd’hui”, in *Regnum hominis et regnum Dei* (Congr. scot., vol. VI, Roma 1978) 34.

<sup>3</sup> *Ordinatio* I, d.3, n. 59 (ed. Vat. III, 41).

<sup>4</sup> *Tratado acerca del primer principio* (BAC, Madrid 1960), 595.

<sup>5</sup> *Ordinatio* I d. 8, n. 198 (IV, 264).

<sup>6</sup> *Ordinatio* I, d. 2, n.57-59 (II, 149-167).

<sup>7</sup> *Ordinatio* I, d. 17, n. 171 (V, 220-221).

eminent in perfection, that Scotus sought to prove with his incomparable and profound proofs of the existence of God.

Scotus presents infinity as the most proper and configuring characteristic of God. Infinity is a way of being of God that radically differentiates him from all other beings. The *Subtle Doctor* exceedingly accentuates the infinity of God. It is the simplest and most perfect concept of any other divine attribute because the infinite being includes virtually infinite love, infinite truth and all the other perfections that are compatible with infinity. Although every perfection of God is infinite, without doubt, “it has its formal perfection in the infinity of essence as in its roots and its foundation.”<sup>8</sup>

Scotist radical infinity is of perfection and spirituality. The exultation of the infinite is necessarily linked to the exultation of the human person over all finite creatures, which constitutes one of the most characteristic expressions of Christian humanism. The Scotist reflection highlights the spirituality of the infinite and implies a critique of pantheism and materialism, in any of their manifest or confused expressions.

Scotus proposes the intellectual necessity to carefully examine the concept of experience. Not however any experience, (sensible, scientific, intellectual), but the experience of the necessary, because only this type of experience brings us to the experience of the possibility of the absolute being.

The God of Scotus manifested in his intellectual exercise of the idea of the possibility of beings, personalizes in every human being the idea of God. God is for every human being that which the same person permits him to be and according to his own exigencies of searching and of encounter. Scotus knows and recognizes the concealing and the silence of God in the human person, not however because God withdraws himself, but because the human persons themselves withdraw from the exigencies of the absolute and the imperatives of deepening their own intellects. The comprehension of God depends on the will that moves or leads the intellect for investigations in oneself and in the reality of life.

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<sup>8</sup> *Opus oxoniense* IV, d. 13, q. 1, n.32 (ed. Vivès XVII, 689).

God is no longer “there” but more “here” in this place, as the foundation of all of reality that is possible. God is made incomprehensible when one abdicates to the intellect. Atheism is not the effect of intellectual acumen or the result of profound intellectual penetration of the world, but the exact opposite: it is a non-reflection, a non-attentiveness toward reality. Scotus invites us to radical thinking, presenting God not as an objective reality of knowledge, but as the reality-foundation of existence. God is the solution to the problem of human and worldly existence.

The hiddenness or silence of God, answerable or unanswerable, conscious or unconscious, is a consequence of the fact that we do not dare to think of God and that there exists this lack of an intellectual foundation to view God as a problem. At the end of the history of metaphysics it seems that God has arrived at being unthinkable. Paul VI, in his Apostolic Letter *Alma parens* (7-14-66), states that “from the intellectual treasure of John Duns Scotus one can obtain lucid weapons to combat and distance the dark cloud of atheism that clouds our age.”

### **Christocentrism as mystical vision of the universe.**

Blessed John Duns Scotus did theology out of spiritual and scientific needs, not simply out of intellectual curiosity or tickling of the intellect. Faithful disciple of St. Francis of Assisi, he concentrated his efforts in a special way on the historical Jesus, on his birth, life, passion, death and resurrection, which he assumes in his own faith life and his religious commitment. From this lived experience he does theology and seeks to offer a vision of Christ from within the salvific plan of God. The real and historical life of Jesus of Nazareth was his existential meditation that placed his thought in motion toward the great vision of christocentrism as a theological postulate for a harmonious and symphonic understanding of the whole world, of life and of history.

The Subtle Doctor, very attentive to the reality of history, highlights the humanity and radical creatureliness of Jesus Christ, his being human, his human limitations, his historical existence, his growth in knowledge and its gradualness. “One says that, in this way, Christ, through his experience, learned many things, that is, through intuitive knowledge, or rather, in regard to objects known from his experience and through remembrances left by them.”<sup>9</sup> If the Trinitarian

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<sup>9</sup> *Ordinatio* III, d.14, q.3, n. 121 (IX, 472).

mystery represents the supreme unity in the intra-divine life, in the ad extra-divine world the maximum unity is constituted in the hypostatic union of the two interwoven natures in Christ and qualified by Scotus as “the greatest union after that of the holy Trinity.”<sup>10</sup>

If God is infinite love, he asks that he be freely loved by another who can correspond with these infinite exigencies. With this he foresaw who could do this, that is, Christ, the Word, who assumes human nature and in it, all men and women so they can participate in his glory in heaven. And since this special man reassumes in himself all of creation, it terminates in God through Christ<sup>11</sup>. Making Christ the reason for all of creation, Scotus aligns himself perfectly to the Pauline perspective (Col 1: 15-17).

The Subtle Doctor underscores that Christ is the primordial center and interest of the manifestation of divine glory *ad extra*. Scotist christocentrism sustains and defends that Christ is the archetype and the paradigm of all of creation. Christ is the supreme work of all creation, in which God can adequately reflect himself and receive that glorification and honor that he merits. Christ is the pinnacle of the cosmic pyramid, a conclusive synthesis and the perfecter of all creation.

Scotist christocentrism offers a mystical vision of the universe. The world presents itself as a diaphanous sacrament of divinity, a great altar on which is celebrated the Liturgy of the Eucharist, because the great presence of Christ is in both. This connection and communion between the cosmic liturgy and the Eucharist was lived by Francis of Assisi in perfect harmony, transformed in song. But his Scottish son succeeded to transcribe this Christic mystery in a marvelous page of mystical theology. The entire cosmos is a great image of the divinity, because everything in it is the presence of its author and his evocative language. The whole universe glorifies God because it tends toward Him, efficient cause and certainly final cause, but above all, it is given an intrinsic impulse that places it in motion toward a converging end, Christ the Omega.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ordinatio* III, d.6, q.1, n.45 (IX, 247).

<sup>11</sup> *Reportata parisiensia* III, d.7, q.4, n.4 (ed. Vivès XXIII, 303).

## The human person as interiority and otherness

Boethius's classic definition of the human person, "an individual substance of a rational nature" did not satisfy Scotus who preferred that of Riccardo di San Vittore which presents the human person as "incommunicable existence of an intellectual nature."<sup>12</sup> For the Subtle Doctor the person is characterized as "ultimate solitude." "The personality demands the *ultimate solitude*, to be free from any real or derived dependence of the being in respect to the other person."<sup>13</sup> A certain incommunicability is tied to human existence. Personal independence is "the most"<sup>14</sup> that one can achieve for the self in his existential and itinerant state. In this way aloneness is the profound encounter with oneself. It is not emptiness, but fullness.

In the most intimate depths the human person experiences and lives the mystery of every human person, of all people, and with them, communicates. Because of this, one can affirm that the one who is truly alone is several, that solitude is solidarity. The I, in the depths of aloneness, is always solidarity with a you, an us. Through this, Scotus does not content himself to underscore the apparently negative category, that is, incommunicability, but accentuates the other clearly positive dimension, consisting in a dynamism of transcendence in a bonding relationship since "essence and relation constitute the person."<sup>15</sup> The person then is structurally relational and creator of connections, since the person is constitutionally referred to and open to God, to others and to the world.

The Scotist person is not closed in a metaphysical solipsism, a constant danger for idealist philosophy, but appears clearly as opening and relation, as being indigent and creator of connections. The Scotist person carries in himself a great impulse and dynamism that expresses itself as insatiable desire or as longing reason and through this, in an attitude that is always open.

The person needs to discover his own proper subjectivity and to deepen it. However, the person cannot close in on his subjectivity, but must open the self to otherness. Belonging and reference are two existential categories that presuppose the "*ultimate solitude*" and transcendental relation.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ordinatio* I, d.23, n.15 (V, 355-356).

<sup>13</sup> *Opus oxoniense* III, d.1, q.1, n.17 (ed. Vivès XIV, 45); *Reportata parisiensia* III, d.1, q.1, n.4 (ed. Vivès, XXIII, 236).

<sup>14</sup> *Opus oxoniense* III, d.1, q.1, n.5 (ed. Vivès XIV, 16-17).

<sup>15</sup> *Quodlibet*, q.3, n.4 (ed. Vivès XXV, 120).

With ingenious intuition Scotus anticipated dialogical philosophy that so much importance is accorded to in contemporary anthropologies.

### **Knowledge to live well**

Scotist thought is very far from being an artificial whole of courageous subtlety as his adversaries accused him. To the contrary, it is eminently practical in that it seeks to know and clarify the ultimate end of the human person and providing him the adapted instruments for achieving that end. All of his philosophical-theological speculation broadens in an existential attitude and in a practical order. It is not an ethic of talking, of which so many speak of today, rather it is an ethic of action. He treats an ethic of encounter and of communicative existence.

Scotus parts from the theological principle that divine love has transcended the infinite by uniting itself to the finite. As a counterpart only human love born of the free will can transcend the finite to unite itself to the infinite. He treats in a definitive way, an ethic of love. The Subtle Doctor thought profoundly because he loved profoundly, a concrete love as he himself says: “It is demonstrated that love is truly praxis.”<sup>16</sup> From this praxis one understands and explains that man must act and live in his own being and existing in the world and society.

It is practiced in every act that comes from the desire of the will, but on the condition of conforming itself to correct reason. This clearly implies the conformity of the will to a law, thus giving an identity between the practice and the normative.<sup>17</sup> The will is an undetermined power that determines itself by itself. Without doubt, freedom is not arbitrary or irrational. In fact the will is the summit of the rational intellect. Freedom realizes itself in self-determination of the natural will and rationally oriented towards the good. Good action corresponds to an act of the will that conforms to correct reason.

The Scotist will is able to determine itself above and beyond any interest and utilizes an ethic of disinterest. Scotus offers a philosophy of freedom in the interior of a theology that admits the natural possibility of loving God for himself and beyond any egoistic desire.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ordinatio*, Prol. n.303 (I, 200).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Ordinatio*, Prol. n.353 (I, 228).

The Subtle Doctor offers us the splendid articulation of Christian humanism in which knowing is at the service of living well and of living well together, that is, in a just, peaceful and fraternal society.

## **Conclusion**

John Duns Scotus, faithful and consistent follower of St. Francis, offers profound, illuminating and vital doctrinal presuppositions for an authentic and robust Franciscan spirituality, as is evident in his beautiful and at the same time useful treatment of the theological virtues, that he knew how to incarnate in daily life with simplicity and great humanity.

The Subtle and Marian Doctor enters thus to take part fully in the rich current of Franciscan spirituality around which he lives, inspires and conceives his philosophical-theological thought. Like the founder of the Franciscan Family, Blessed John Duns Scotus succeeded in harmoniously synchronizing life and thought, mysticism and work, contemplation and action, person and community, being and doing.

Scotus, with great humility and daring, placed the subtlety of his thought at the service of the cause of God, of humans and of life. His grand vision of the history of salvation with its dynamism of perfection and of consummation in Christ the Omega, can be the philosophical-theological foundation to develop a mystical cosmology, a planetarian ecology and a theology of the future.

His ample anthropological and Christological perspectives offer people of today new horizons of thought and action, valid criteria for orienting the self towards a future of hope and fraternal behavior for an integral humanism, civilized and human.

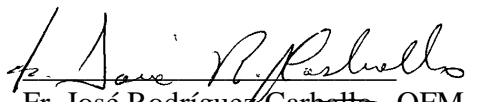
Philosopher and theologian, daring and dutiful, who thinks, reasons and acts based on the concrete context of his epoch; but transcending from his cultural context, he again is contemporary to confront the enduring human problematic with lucidity and without complexes.

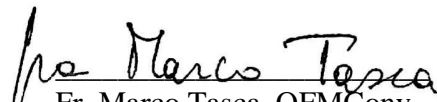
Scotist thought is expressed in the key of hope. Look at the past in order to learn, analyze the present to act, but hope in a future to clarify. With a lapidarian and rich expression he says that in

the “development of human history always grows the knowledge of the truth.”<sup>18</sup> It is all a postulate for interpreting a philosophy of culture as a reality that is becoming.

If Saint Bonaventure was defined as “the second prince of Scholasticism,” Duns Scotus is considered as its perfecter and its most qualified representative of the Franciscan school.<sup>19</sup> We hope that this VIIth centenary of the death of the Subtle and Marian Doctor will incite a renewed interest for Franciscan centers of study so that his message will still have relevance for the future. If John Paul II, in his talk at the Cathedral in Cologne (1980), declared him “spiritual tower of the faith,” this must constitute for Franciscans an invitation to discover in Scotus rich thought for dialogue with the culture of our time.

November 8, 2008 – Rome  
*Feast of the Blessed John Duns Scotus*

  
Fr. José Rodríguez Carballo, OFM  
General Minister  
*President on duty*

  
Fr. Marco Tasca, OFMConv  
General Minister

  
Fr. Mauro Jöhri, OFMCap  
General Minister

  
Fr. Michael Higgins, TOR  
General Minister

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<sup>18</sup> *Ordinatio* IV, d.1, q.3, n.8 (ed. Vivès XVI, 136).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Paolo VI in *Alma parens*; cf. Balic, K. “San Bonaventura alter scholasticorum princeps e G. Duns Scoto eius perfectior”, in *San Bonaventura maestro di vita francescana e di sapienza cristiana*. Atti del Congresso Internazionale per il VII centenario di S. Bonaventura da Bagnoregio, Roma, set. 1974 (Pontificia facoltà S. Bonaventura, Roma 1976, I. 429-446).