



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM
ON ERIK PETERSON***

Clementine Hall

Monday, 25 October 2010

*Your Eminences,
Dear Brothers in the Priesthood,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen
Dear Friends,*

I greet all of you who have come to Rome for the International Symposium on Erik Peterson. I thank you in particular, Cardinal Lehmann, for your cordial words introducing this Meeting.

As you said, this year is the 120th anniversary of the birth in Hamburg of this distinguished theologian; and, on almost this very day 50 years ago, 26 October 1960, Erik Peterson died, also in Hamburg his native city.

He lived in Rome with his family for several periods from 1930, and then settled here in 1933. He first lived on the Aventine, near Sant'Anselmo, and later in the Vatican district, in a house facing Porta Sant'Anna. Thus it gives me special joy to be able to greet the Peterson family who are with us here, his esteemed daughters and his son, with their respective families.

In 1990, together with Cardinal Lehmann, in the apartment you shared, on the occasion of her 80th birthday I was able to give your mother an autograph with a picture of Bl. Pope John Paul ii and I recall this meeting with you with pleasure.

“Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come” (Heb 13:14).

This citation from the Letter to the Hebrews could sum up Erik Peterson's life. In fact, he never

found in his life a true place where he could obtain recognition and a permanent home.

He began his scientific work in a period of upheaval in Germany after the First World War. The monarchy had fallen. The civil order seemed to be at risk, given the political and social turmoil. This was also reflected in the religious sphere and, in a particular way, in German Protestantism.

The open theology predominant until then, with its optimism and progress, had entered a crisis and was giving way to new and clashing theological trends. The contemporary situation posed an existential problem to young Peterson. With an interest in both history and theology he had already chosen the subject he was to study, as he says, in accordance with the perspective that "when we are left alone with human history, we find ourselves facing a meaningless enigma" (*Eintrag in das Bonner "Album Professorum" 1926/27, Ausgewählte Schriften, Sonderband S. 111*).

Peterson, I quote him again, decided "to work in the historical field and especially to address the problems of the history of religions", because in the Evangelical theology of the time he had not managed "to make headway, hindered by numerous opinions, even things in themselves" (*ibid.*).

On this path he came ever closer to the certainty that no history is detached from God and that in this history the Church has a special place and finds her meaning. I cite him further: "That the Church exists and is constituted in a quite particular way strictly depends on the fact that... there is a well-defined, specifically theological history" (*Vorlesung "Geschichte der Alten Kirche" Bonn 1928, Ausgewählte Schriften, Sonderband S. 88*).

The Church receives from God the mandate to lead men and women from their limited and isolated existence to universal communion, from the natural to the supernatural, from transience to the end of time. In his work on Angels Peterson says in this regard: "The Church's journey leads from the earthly to the heavenly Jerusalem... to the city of Angels and of Saints" (*Buch von den Engeln, Einleitung*).

The starting point of this journey is the binding character of Sacred Scripture. According to Peterson, Sacred Scripture becomes binding and is binding to the extent that it is not only in itself but in the hermeneutic of Apostolic Tradition which, in turn, is brought about in the Apostolic Succession. Hence the the Church preserves Scripture in a living present and at the same time interprets it. Through the Bishops, who are in the Apostolic Succession, the testimony of Scripture remains alive in the Church and constitutes the foundation for the ever valid convictions of the Church's faith which we find first of all in the Creed and in dogma.

These convictions are continuously developed in the Liturgy as a living space of the Church for praise of God. The Divine Office celebrated on earth therefore has an indissoluble relationship with the heavenly Jerusalem: it is there that the true and eternal sacrifice of praise, whose earthly

celebration is only an image, is offered to God and to the Lamb.

Those who take part in Holy Mass stand almost on the threshold of the heavenly sphere from which they contemplate the worship of the Angels and Saints. Wherever the earthly Church intones her Eucharistic praise, she is united with the festive, heavenly assembly, in which, in the Saints a part of her has already arrived and gives hope to all on this earth who are still journeying on towards the eternal fulfilment.

Perhaps at this point I should make a personal reflection. I discovered the figure of Erik Peterson for the first time in 1951. I was then chaplain at Bogenhausen. Mr Wild, director of Kosel, the local publishing house, gave me the recently published book *Theologische Traktate* (Theological Treatises). I read the book with increasing curiosity and let myself be truly impassioned by it because in it I found the theology I was seeking: it is a theology that uses all the seriousness of history to understand and study texts, it analyzes them with the full gravity of historical research and does not relegate them to the past.

Indeed, in his research, the author participates in the self-surmounting of the letter, enters into this self-surmounting and lets himself be guided by it. Thus he comes into contact with the One from whom theology itself derives: the living God.

In this way the discrepancy between the past, that philology analyzes, today is surmounted in and of itself, because the word leads to the encounter with reality and the entire timeliness of what is written, which transcends itself towards reality and becomes alive and active. Thus I learned from him, in a most essential and profound way, what theology really is. And I even felt admiration, because here he does not only say what he thinks, but this book is an expression of a quest that was the passion of his life.

Paradoxically, the exchange of letters with Harnack is the maximum expression of the unexpected attention that Peterson was receiving. Harnack confirmed, indeed, he had already written previously and independently that the Catholic formal principle which holds that "Scripture lives in Tradition and Tradition lives in the living form of the Succession", is the original and objective principle, and that "Scripture by itself" does not function.

Peterson grasped the full seriousness of this affirmation of the open theologian and let himself be shaken, overwhelmed, bent and transformed by it. In this way he found the path to conversion and with it truly took a step, like Abraham, as we heard at the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews: "Here we have no lasting city".

He went from the security of a Chair to uncertainty, to having no dwelling place, and throughout his life he lacked a sure base, a real homeland; he was truly journeying with faith and for faith, confident that by journeying on and possessing no home he was at home in a different way and

was drawing ever closer to the heavenly Liturgy which had impressed him.

From all this one realizes that many of the things Peterson thought and wrote remained fragmented because of this precarious mode of life, following the loss of his teaching post because of his conversion. Yet, although he had to live without the security of a fixed salary he married here in Rome and founded a family. By so doing he expressed in practice his inner conviction that we, though foreigners — and he was so in a special way — nevertheless find support in the communion of love and that in love itself there is something that lasts for eternity.

He experienced this foreignness of the Christian. He had become a foreigner in Evangelical theology and remained a foreigner in Catholic theology too, as it was then.

Today we know that he belonged to both and that from him both must learn the whole drama, the realism and the existential and human need of theology.

Erik Peterson, as Cardinal Lehmann said, was certainly appreciated and loved by many, an author recommended in a narrow circle, but who did not receive the scientific recognition he deserved. It would have been, in a certain way, too soon. As I said, he was both here and there [in Catholic and in Evangelical theology] a foreigner.

Cardinal Lehmann cannot be sufficiently praised for having taken the initiative in publishing a magnificent complete edition of Peterson's works, nor can Mrs. Nichtweiß, to whom he has entrusted this task which she carries out with admirable competence.

Thus the attention given to him in this publication is more than deserved, given that various works have now also been translated into Italian, French, Spanish, English, Hungarian and even Chinese. I hope this will ensure that Peterson's thought, which does not stop at details but always has a vision of the whole of theology, will be more widely disseminated.

I warmly thank everyone present for having come. I extend my special thanks to the organizers of this Symposium, especially Cardinal Farina, the Patron of this event, and to Dr Giancarlo Caronello.

I gladly address my best wishes to you for an interesting and stimulating discussion in the spirit of Erik Peterson. I expect abundant fruit from this Congress, and impart my Apostolic Blessing to all of you and to all those who are dear to you.

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