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The Hermeneutic of Faith: Surpassing Phenomenology in Andre Wiercinki's Homilies

It is my pleasure and privilege to write and reflect on the theological philosophy of someone who is both a friend and mentor to me. Rev. Prof. Dr. Andre Wiercinski is well-known as a philosopher and hermeneutician. In the past several years, I have spent much time with his hermeneutics through the medium of his homiletics, that is, the pastoral homilies that he gives while functioning as a presbyter for the Roman Catholic Church. These homilies are quite distinct from perhaps typical homilies you might encounter in a parish on Sunday, as they are richly steeped in philosophy, theology, and, most importantly, spiritual insight. Indeed, even those not trained formally in philosophy or theology can from them draw much wisdom. In what follows, I would like to reflect along with “Fr. Andre” and attempt to highlight some central themes and thru-lines that I hope will convey the wisdom (*Sophia*) and prudence (*Phronesis*) that these homilies have given to me. I will focus mainly on his Christmas and Easter homilies from the Gospels of the New Testament, as it is there central and recurring themes present themselves.

First, a comment on the methodology and scope, that is, the hermeneutics of Fr. Andre's homilies. An inquiry into the hermeneutics of Fr. Andre at the same time must be a meta-hermeneutics, that is, an inquiry into the interpretation (“hermeneutics”) of such hermeneutics. What key or method or even “frame” does Fr. Andre bring to (or perhaps draw from) the Gospel texts? Moreover, what hermeneutics ought a reader to bring to such hermeneutics? In other words, how ought we to interpret these interpretations? What can one even bring to bear on such consummate interpretations from a life-long hermeneutician as Fr. Andre? This much can be said

at the outset: our meta-interpretation is itself already contained within and brought out of Fr. Andre's interpretation of the Gospels. Thus, the revealing of Fr. Andre's interpretation is, at the same time, a revealing of our own. In what follows, it will hopefully become clear as to exactly what I mean.

As for Fr. Andre's hermeneutic key, we begin by noting that Fr. Andre's homiletics are saturated in phenomenology, a phenomenology, in my estimation, thoroughly informed by Martin Heidegger. Recall, therefore, Heidegger's original presentation of the phenomenological method in the introduction of *Sein und Zeit* that sought to disclose and illuminate *that which self-discloses* or *self-illuminates* (Heidegger argues his method is none other than an exposition of the etymology of the Greek word φαινομενολογία).¹ Heideggerian phenomenology is to *let* appear that which appears already; phenomenology is a letting-be illuminated of that which itself illuminates. Later, in his essay on Artwork from the 1930s ("The Origin of the Work of Art"), Heidegger applies his phenomenological method not only to self-illuminating entities, but to illumination itself.² Phenomenology then doubles back upon itself so as to disclose illumination itself. Furthermore, this "illumination of illumination" or "disclosure of disclosure" (what Fr. Andre will call the revelation of revelation) is, for Heidegger, synonymous with beauty. It my sense that it is precisely this doubling and self-reflective illumination that is present in Fr. Andre's phenomenological hermeneutics. For this reason, his readings of the Gospel texts are not solely concerned with the mere conveyance of information, but rather, are indeed poetic and thus aesthetic experiences as they are phenomenological descriptions. The aesthetic nature of Fr. Andre's readings are not "experiences" in the maudlin form of momentary feelings or "lived

¹ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1927) 27-39

² Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993) 178-181

experiences” in any pejorative sense. Rather, as are all Artworks in the Heideggerian sense, they are “disclosures of meaning” and thus themselves “events” (a central term for Fr. Andre and one to which we shall return momentarily). Fr. Andre’s way is then not so much to put forth carefully crafted syllogisms or even explicit arguments as to the texts’ meanings, but rather in a spirit that fuses Heideggerian phenomenology with Kierkegaardian witnessing (*martyros*), these readings, like Kierkegaard and Heidegger’s, *infect* you with the very mood of the text itself. As Fr. Andre writes, in the context of speaking about Mary’s own reflections on Christ:

“understanding is not a matter of mere rationalization and comprehension of information, but predominantly a question of grasping the logic of that which only slowly develops in front of us as reality....Pondering is not the mere result of an intellectual operation, but a matter of the way of being as a human being.”³

Now, as noted above, Fr. Andre’s primary way of speaking about the Incarnation is in the language of the event (*Ereignis* – a Heideggerian term loaded with nuance and meaning); we would do well if we summarized Fr. Andre’s homilies as an attempt to *think* this very event from all its various perspectives and valences. The Incarnation, for Fr. Andre, is the *Christ event*, the happening of the truth qua *alēthēia* (illumination, revelation, disclosure, etc.) of Christ; that is, the disclosure and illumination of Christ in the world, and in turn, that which discloses and illuminates the truth of the human condition in all its vulnerability.⁴ In reading Fr. Andre’s reflections, you cannot help but be *infected* with the mood of this event, which Fr. Andre tells us is quite the same mood that Plato and Aristotle believed to occasion the inception of philosophy itself – wonder.⁵ You cannot help but *feel* the reality of the event about which Fr. Andre speaks

³ Wiercinski, *Homilies: The Indwelling Presence of God*

⁴ Wiercinski, *Homilies: The In-Spiration of the In-carnation*

⁵ *Ibid.*

when he refers to such as the *gift that gives itself* – the self-giving gift – and the proper human response simply being that of letting-be (*Gelassenheit*) where the human being is asked – and tasked – to let oneself be loved by God.⁶

There exists then, again, a strange reflexivity, or doubling, in Fr. Andre’s hermeneuticianics, and thus in our interpretation of such hermeneuticianics, in that you are, as Heidegger noted of the thinking of being, “drawn along into” the very activity of interpreting, into interpretation itself.⁷ Thus the proper way into understanding these reflections of Fr. Andre –perhaps the only way – is to permit yourself *to be interpreted*. As you read these interpretations that attempt to illuminate illumination itself, one is called to release oneself into self-illumination that is nothing short of the activity of the truth of being itself, or, as Heidegger calls it: the beautiful.

This reflexivity is precisely how we ought to understand Fr. Andre’s thinking of the event, both the event itself, and as the event presents itself in the Gospels. Heidegger wrote that the word *Ereignis*, much like the Greek *Logos* or the Daoist *Dao* resists translation, for in the word *Er-eignis*, we are to hear event as both “occurrence” or “happening,” as well as “appropriation” and “owning over” (*eignen*, “to own,” in German). *Ereignis* is thus often translated into English not simply as “event,” but as “event of appropriation” or even solely “appropriation” itself. It is precisely the event *qua appropriation* that Fr. Andre unpacks in and through the Incarnation, an appropriation of God to human beings, and of human beings to God. As we encounter the event of the Incarnation, humans are, as Fr. Andre puts it, “illumined by the face of the incarnate God” and therefore appropriated over not only to God but to ourselves,

⁶ Wiercinski, *Homilies: A New Beginning*

⁷ Cf. Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 18.

insofar as it is in this event of encounter, where illumination is illumined, and revelation revealed, that we come to terms with our own humanity, namely as the being who is vulnerable, in its having its being “to be,” and is thus always and continually a question to itself – *questio mihi factus sum*.⁸

Yet how exactly does the event lead to a confrontation (and appropriation) of the human being with itself, in its own vulnerability, and with itself in its own capacity as the being that is itself a question to itself? Answering these questions requires a brief excursion further into Heidegger’s perhaps most explicit thinking of the event in his *Contributions to Philosophy*. For Heidegger, in *Contributions*, the event tautologically names and thinks several distinct occurrences of being that are, in the end, all the same, namely (1.) the event of the (2.) truth and (3.) essence of (4.) being (or beyng – *das Seyn*). The event, the truth of being, the essence of being, and being itself all refer to the same thing, which is quite simply the coming to be of meaning by way of the illumination of beings in their being.⁹ This coming to be of meaning is at the same time a disclosure and illumination of meaning (i.e., “truth”) that Heidegger terms the “essencing” (*Wesung, west*) of being, which simply put means, again, that beings coming to have meaning in a world qua an open-relation context of meaning. The event is then the illumination of meaning, the occurrence of the meaning of meaning (being) and of beings. Yet this entire process hangs on the occurrence of beyng as that which enables the opening of up of a space, a difference, between beings and their being. In other words, beyng – here thought as *difference* itself, the ontological difference, or even Nothing itself (*das Nichts*) – allows for a differentiation

⁸ Wiercinski, *Homilies: A New Beginning*; Wiercinski, *Homilies: The Incomprehensible Reality of Divine Logic*

⁹ Cf. John Sallis, “Grounders of the Abyss” in *Companion to Heidegger’s Contributions to Philosophy*, edited by Charles E. Scott, Susan M. Schoenbohm, Daniela Vallega-Neu, and Alejandro Vallega (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) 181-197.

between a being and its being, a thing and its meaning; furthermore, this space of nothing or difference also occurs and infects human beings insofar as this space also lies within ourselves. That is, the self is divided from itself such that it can exist temporally (e.g., by projecting itself into the future as already having been in the past). Being qua difference then differentiates the self from itself or enables and conditions this differentiation, and thus enables us to question ourselves, and, by questioning ourselves, project ourselves to future possibilities, to future possible ways to be. In short, the difference, the difference that being itself *is*, in the event, enables our very freedom.

It is imperative to keep all of this together in mind then when Fr. Andre refers to the Incarnation as the Christ *event*. In the Christ event, in illuminating the world by self-illumination and disclosure, the human being first finds its freedom *to be*, not only in that new possibilities are opened up, but perhaps more so in that the ordinary makeup of the human being is revealed to itself – gifted, as it were – as illumined in Christ. For Fr. Andre, then it is through the Christ event *qua event* that the human being comes to interpret itself truthfully (with both senses of truth in mind) as the being who self-interprets. Christ thus opens the possibility for the interpretation of the human being as the being who self-interprets (and self-questions) and is therefore free in any real sense – “if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed...[for] the truth shall set you free” (Jn 8:36, 31).

In sum, for Fr. Andre, the Christ event is not only then the revelation of God, the revelation of revelation itself, but also the revelation and illumination of the human being, as we are appropriated and owned over into the very freedom of our humanity. Moreover, for Fr. Andre, this event did not happen once 2000 years ago, but rather happens continually, insofar as

the human being is confronted with the reality of God in Christ.¹⁰ We are continually experiencing a beckoning (*ein Ruf*) to this confrontation, out of our lostness and complacency, to confront our humanity, which is ultimately not only about the recognition of our freedom but, perhaps more importantly, a recognition of our weakness and vulnerability, and, in turn, the weakness and vulnerability of the other.¹¹ This vulnerability of ourselves and the other is, again, steeped in Heideggerian ontology and anthropology, albeit with Fr. Andre's own unique hermeneutic twist. For Heidegger, the human being, as Dasein, remains a "non-ground of Nothing," (*der nichtige Grundsein der Nichtigkeit*) insofar as it is a thrown-projection and thus always "lagging behind" its possibilities; in other words, Dasein, constituted and shot through with Nothing or non-being – difference itself even, is inherently powerless, weak, and vulnerable.¹² For Heidegger, this inherent vulnerability of the human being, due to our "nihilistic constitution" (in the non-pejorative sense), is termed Dasein's existential "guilt."¹³ Dasein is always permeated with Nothing and, as such, is guilty; however, it is precisely because of our fundamental guilt that we are free, for, as we saw above, the non-being or difference within is what conditions Dasein's freedom qua its existential projects. Therefore, we could say, because Dasein is guilty and vulnerable, it is distinctly free and human. Fr. Andre, continually in his homilies on the Incarnation, as well as on the death and Resurrection of Christ, teases out the meaning of this inherent vulnerability of the human being, as reflected not only in our encounter, self-encounter, with Christ, but in Christ himself. That is, Christ becomes utterly vulnerable on the cross and, in turn, again, illuminates the true meaning of humanity. It is in this sense

¹⁰ Wiercinski, *Homilies: The Inspiration of the In-carnation*

¹¹ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 274ff.

¹² Ibid. 285

¹³ Ibid. 280-289

precisely that God is revealed as love itself.¹⁴ Fr. Andre writes, regarding the death and Resurrection of Christ and the Incarnation as event,

The greatness of Jesus consisted in his deliberate acceptance of this obscuration. By immersing himself in the abyss of darkness and disguise, Jesus got intimate with every human being in their vulnerability, loneliness, and helplessness. His question of why God had abandoned him is neither an accusation of God nor an excuse for his obscuration but a definitive confirmation of God's presence, which has been concealed by human wickedness capable of assaulting the incarnate God. Jesus responded on the cross by delivering himself into the Father's hands. Entrusting himself to God manifests maximal trust, in which "as you wish" (ὡς σὺ θέλω) expresses prodigal love in its most radical form. Therefore, the cross becomes the origin of human growth (*origo*, from *oriri* to rise) as the most compelling and powerful source of our rising to God. However, the cross and Resurrection cannot be separated from the Incarnation. The Word of God took up flesh and became a human being to express how God loved the world (Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, Jn 3:16). The Greek verb to love, ἀγαπάω voices God's strong preference for the world, his delight in the creation, and his will never to abandon it, but bring it to final communion with him."¹⁵

And again, concerning the Incarnation,

"Our self-understanding, and, thus, our understanding, will always be provisional, fragmentary, and incomplete because we are finite beings. The hermeneuticianic existence is a vulnerable existence. Living life with our human fragility means to

¹⁴ Wiercinski, *Homilies: The Time of Love*

¹⁵ Wiercinski, *Homilies: The Time of Love*

embrace incompleteness not as a defeat in life but. as an inspiration, a learning experience, and an opportunity to arrive at a richer and subtler grasp of our own inner world. Incarnation as an event (*Ereignis*) escapes our perception but also exceeds it. God becomes our God, Emmanuel, God with us. He gives Himself to us. He empowers us to understand what we cannot understand ourselves.”¹⁶

Here, we see then each various theme – event, Incarnation, freedom, vulnerability, etc. – thought together, tautologically, as saying the same of the same.

Perhaps most insightful, for our purposes, remains Fr. Andre’ stress as to the fundamental *uncertainty* into which Christ enters in his death but also in his Incarnation,

“Did Jesus choose to be born in such humble conditions? Or did he rather come into the world just as it happened, in the middle of everyday action, worries about the provision for the next day and night, and concerns about virtually everything. Maybe he really wanted to share the doubts, anxieties, and uncertainties of a human being...He willingly accepted the realities of everyday life, which are difficult enough for every human being but are particularly demanding for the lowly, lonely, and the oppressed...God comes into the world in the middle of everydayness.”¹⁷

Indeed, Christ entered our vulnerabilities and weaknesses, but even more so into the everyday uncertainties and anxieties of human life. It is the everyday and ordinary that perhaps makes the Christ event most relatable, and most able to be appropriated and owned by human beings, as it is precisely here that the vast majority of human beings struggle. It is in the ordinary that we “realize how important it is to be in the real world, to recognize the demands of everydayness,

¹⁶ Wiercinski, *Homilies: A New Angel*

¹⁷ Wiercinski, *Homilies: The Blessings of Everydayness*

and to be responsive to the call, which comes to each of us differently. This is exactly the core of our responsibility: to listen to the call attentively....”¹⁸

Returning to the question that has guided our reflection on Fr. Andre homilies: What is the hermeneutics operative in these homilies? Furthermore, how are we to interpret such a hermeneutics? That is, what is then our hermeneutics of hermeneutics here? We said that whatever our interpretative framework may be, that it remains present itself within the hermeneutics to be interpreted. We noted how Fr. Andre’s interpretations are steeped heavily in Heideggerian phenomenology, in the illumination of that which self-illuminates and in the disclosure of illumination itself (“the beautiful”), and, most importantly, in the “appropriative event” where our humanity is given over to us as the very being that interprets not only the world and God, but also ourselves. However, the essential element to these interpretations has until now only been tacitly assumed: *faith* – a particular kind of and understanding of faith. A faith that is not faith *simpliciter*, but a faith that reflexively again doubles back upon itself, one that is both assumed and presupposed, and yet deepened, enlivened, and even created, in the very activity of interpreting. As St. Paul notes, the Gospel has been revealed (ἀποκαλύπτεται: uncovering what is hidden, especially what is immaterial) “*from faith for faith*” (ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν, Rom 1: 19) in that it is toward and for the purpose of leading to faith, and yet, paradoxically, it can only be toward that purpose (of faith) if one already has such faith (Rom 1:17). Fr. Andre’s hermeneutics operates within this very same “faith cycle,” saturated with faith “out of faith” (ἐκ πίστεως) and directed “for faith” (εἰς πίστιν). One can only enter into the

¹⁸ Ibid.

understanding and interpreting of Fr. Andre's interpretations if one already has what such interpretations, at least for me, have helped to create.

It is in the hermeneutics of faith then that Fr. Andre's hermeneutics exceeds and surpasses mere Heideggerian phenomenology. It is faith then that grants access into, and illuminates, the hermeneutics of faith, which, in turn, illuminates the Gospel texts of the Christ event, the Incarnation, and, again, further illumines the originary faith that granted it access. In this sense, faith grants access to the hermeneutics of faith, which then unveils the depths of the Gospel texts and, in turn, further nourishes the very faith that enabled this hermeneutics lens. All that is required to enter this hermeneutics is an openness to and willingness to remain *within* the uncertain. As F. Andre writes,

The openness to the mystery is a condition *sine qua non* of faith. As such, it situates us in the horizon of infinite uncertainty, even the dark night of the soul (*la noche oscura del alma*). But it is also incomparable and everlasting fascination. It is, in itself, the journey toward union with God, when the experience of awakening and rejoicing in the presence of the Lord is the way (μέθοδος) toward and with God, and thus, the art of love.¹⁹

Fr. Andre's homilies have been, for me, a source of consolation during my own trials of uncertainty. Continually reading – and praying – with Fr. Andre's hermeneutics of faith has confirmed for me that interpretation is not merely an intellectual exercise. As I have prayed along with Fr. Andre, I found myself not just interpreting but, in a very real sense, as mentioned above, “being interpreted.” That is to say, I have begun, or at least attempted to begin, to comport myself differently toward the uncertainties of my own life, in particular the fragility of my own existential choices and freedom (i.e., my capacity for self-interpretation), which, in turn,

¹⁹Wiercinski, *Homilies: A New Beginning*

have begun to open up different possibilities of meaning for me, all of which are united by faith in Christ and the transformative power of the Gospel. In many ways, these homilies have, for me, become mirrors into my own faith life amidst my anxiety, my vulnerability, and especially my own uncertainty. Moreover, these homilies continue to remind that faith is never static but constantly uncertain, vulnerable, in flux, and shot through with angst. Most importantly, I am reminded of my need to nurture and “prune” my faith by continual interpretation and reinterpretation. Uncertainty, again, in particular, has become an invitation to deepen my faith by reimagining it through my own experience with Christ and his “event.” Fr. Andre’s texts then, for me, have been interpretations that invite me to join the reappropriation and reinterpretation of my own humanity via faith.

Fr. Andre’s homilies have become much more than sermons for me. As his friend, I have had a privileged *witness* firsthand to the transformative power of his words, words that weave philosophy, theology, and spiritual wisdom that prove to be so very applicable to real existential questions. As the Psalmist says, “In your light do we see light” (Ps. 36: 9); indeed, these interpretations, as I have repeated, “illuminate illumination” and therefore reflect and image the transcendent, all by way of the hermeneutics of faith. Fr. Andre is not only a consummate hermeneutician but also a humble witness whose gaze of faith has allowed me to access the very “sight of God embodied in the face of Christ.”²⁰

²⁰ Wiercinski, *Homilies: We Have Arrived at Christmas Eve: The Gift and Risk of the Incarnation*