

Article

The Holy See and Fyodor Dostoevsky: Mutual Attraction and Repulsion

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Abstract: The article analyzes the attitude of Fyodor Dostoevsky toward the Roman Catholic Church. The author shows how Dostoevsky comes to the Slavophile idea of unity and the impossibility of salvation outside church communion, while speaking of the Church as an *ecclesia*, that is, an assembly of believers. At the same time, the reception of Dostoevsky from the side of the Vatican is presented. In the article, special attention is paid to the perception of Dostoevsky's ideas by Pope Francis. The author notes that the point of attraction and repulsion between Dostoevsky and Catholic culture lies in the plane of his understanding of the concepts of nationality and universality. Dostoevsky's Russian idea and his view on the essence of Christianity grows from the synthesis of these concepts. The author emphasizes that only in this perspective it is necessary to interpret Dostoevsky's ideas.

Keywords: Dostoevsky; The Holy See; Russian idea; Catholic idea; Christian community; Pope Francis; Christian unity

1. Introduction

The understanding of Christian unity by Fyodor Dostoevsky has a deep connection with his spiritual evolution. He evolved from being a revolutionary punished by hard labor for his ideas, to his perception of Christianity and the idea of the Church as the best social structure. Dostoevsky had a brush with death¹, spent four years of hard labor among murderers and criminals in Siberia, then a remote settlement in the harsh environment of North Kazakhstani Semipalatinsk, the illness of his first wife, addiction to gambling, love passions, a complete lack of money, the death of his brother, and the death of his youngest and beloved son, Alyosha. Nevertheless, he retained faith in man and humanity.

1.1. Roman Catholic Church in the Dostoevsky's Philosophical Reflection

Dostoevsky formulated his creed in the thesis "even if the truth is outside of Christ, I will still remain with Christ" (Kasatkina 2018). He concluded that the Divine love is incomprehensible to the human mind; a person can only show humility and strive for the Christian ideal. However, at the same time, Dostoevsky did not reject the possibility of "truth outside of Christ". The writer, recognizing faith in Christ as the basis of his existence, turned to alternative options. He offered his own solutions and his own approaches to understanding the world order. Raskolnikov, the protagonist of the novel *Crime and Punishment*, comes through pangs of conscience to spiritual resurrection. There is an idea of forgiveness in the novel *The Devils*. In the chapter "At Tikhon", Stavrogin admits to the worst of sins—child abuse. Tikhon, who accepted his "confession", assures the protagonist that he could be forgiven for the mere desire for repentance. In his latest book, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky developed his Christian idea into the idea of Universal Church. In the novel, elder Zosima sends Alyosha into the world and commands him to be close to both brothers for their salvation. Paul Contino notes that Alyosha takes up the mantle of his elder and develops as a "monk in the world" (Contino 2020). However, the Orthodox monastic tradition involves renunciation of the world and concentration on communion



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with God. Zosima commands Alyosha to have active love for the world and to care for it. Alyosha was ordered to reveal himself as a Christian associate, changing the world with his faith. Russian thinker Leo Tikhomirov saw in this gesture of Zosima the mission of the Church to transform the world being (Serbinenko 1999). Russian researcher Sergey Kibalnik, in his analysis of the novel, introduces the term “social Christianity”, noting, “the motives of “social Christianity” are clearly visible in the chapter, “So Be It! So Be It”, from *The Brothers Karamazov* (Chapter V, Part 1, Book 2), in which the protagonists discuss Ivan Karamazov’s article on the church-public court (Kibalnik 2018). For Dostoevsky, “social Christianity” is based on faith, which is determined by moral, cultural and national traits. Only development in accordance with religious ideas about morality and duty can lead to social transformation. Moreover, in this chapter, the writer argues for the key idea that the Church is the best social structure. The search for a solution to social contradictions leads Dostoevsky to the idea that true social justice is feasible only in the format of the Church. Dostoevsky generated his own version of true socialism, Russian socialism, which is based on the Orthodox faith. The writer perceived Orthodoxy as a deep spiritual phenomenon. It gives a person soil, not literally soil as a support under their feet, but metaphysical soil that connects the reality of human life with the divine reality. The rebirth of man through the power of Divine love is expressed in the chapter, “Cana of Galilee”. Alyosha Karamazov, who experienced doubt after Zosima’s death, hears the Gospel reading at the tomb of the elder. This is precisely the story of the marriage in Cana and the miracle of turning water into wine, performed by Christ. Under this reading, Zosima appears to Alyosha, and his words about Christ, about the joy of love, return Alyosha to faith.

Dostoevsky opposed the Orthodox idea to the Western ecclesiastical project. In the chapter, “So Be It! So Be It!”, elder Zosima pronounces: “the Christian society now is not ready and is only resting on some seven righteous men, but as they are never lacking, it will continue still unshaken in expectation of its complete transformation from a society almost heathen in character into a single universal and all-powerful Church. So be it, so be it! Even though at the end of the ages, for it is ordained to come to pass! In addition, there is no need to be troubled about times and seasons, for the secret of the times and seasons is in the wisdom of God, in His foresight, and His love. And what in human reckoning seems still afar off, may by the Divine ordinance be close at hand, on the eve of its appearance. And so be it, so be it!”, and then Fr. Paissy adds, “Understand, the Church is not to be transformed into the State. That is Rome and its dream. That is the third temptation of the devil. On the contrary, the State is transformed into the Church, will ascend and become a Church over the whole world—which is the complete opposite of Ultramontanism and Rome, and your interpretation, and is only the glorious destiny ordained for the Orthodox Church. This star will arise in the east!” (Dostoevsky 2009b).

The double thread that talks about socialism and the church-state as the main temptation of humankind could be found in the chapter, “The Grand Inquisitor”. Dostoevsky portrayed both socialism and Rome in the historical period when the Roman Catholic Church declared its own ideological war on socialism (Besschetnova 2021). In 1878, Pope Leo XIII published the encyclical “Quod apostolici muneris”, which he devoted to the critics of European socialist movements, designating them as contrary not only to moral laws, but also to natural laws. He stated that the Catholic Church authority, unlike the socialists, respected private property and recognized social differences, but also called for help to the poor and needy people.

The attitude towards Catholicism is an important part of Dostoevsky’s philosophical reflection. Elizabeth Blake notes in her book, *Dostoevsky and the Catholic Underground*, that the writer saw in Catholicism not just an inspirational source for the Grand Inquisitor but a political force, an ideological wellspring, a unique mode of intellectual inquiry, and a source of cultural production (Blake 2014). An historian of the church, Aleksandr Yudakhin, in his article, “Dostoevsky and the Roman Question (1862–1865)”, demonstrates that the writer in the 1860s paid considerable attention to the struggle of the Roman pontiffs for the secular power preservation (Yudakhin 2019). The intricacies of the Roman Question were

an important part of Dostoevsky's views summarized in the poem "The Grand Inquisitor". It is worth noting that his interest in the Roman question evolved under the influence of Slavophiles, in particular, that of Aleksey Khomyakov. In the 1860s, he was primarily interested in two topics dominating the Catholic politics at that time:

(1) The Polish question, which was actualized by the Polish uprising of 1863–1864, after the suppression of which the position of the Catholic Church in Poland and other Western provinces of the Russian Empire were significantly curtailed, which naturally caused discontent on the part of The Holy See. The encyclical "Levante" (1867) was published with a sharp condemnation of the actions of the tsarist government and, as a result, the rupture of diplomatic relations between Russia and the Vatican, which were previously established in accordance with the points of the concordat of 1847, signed by Nicholas I;

(2) The Roman question itself—that is, the speech of Pope Pius IX against the unification of Italy and the struggle of The Holy See to preserve the Pope's secular power and the territorial integrity of the Papal State. (Yudakhin 2019)

The heroes of Dostoevsky's novels talk about the betrayal of Christ, the rapprochement of the papacy and *papism*², Catholicism and atheism, Catholicism and socialism, and the Pope's secular power. For Dostoevsky, the Roman Catholic Church went down the wrong path of achieving ecclesiastical unity as it did not contribute to the elevation of society to the level of the Church. As a result, the state usurped Christian truth, and in the process, the Church itself became a state. Dostoevsky was both frightened and outraged by this historical fact.

In the article "Three Ideas" from *The Writer's Diary* (January 1877), Dostoevsky considered three key European ideas: Catholic, Protestant, and Slavic. Russian philosopher Nikolay Lossky wrote that the Slavic dimension pre-supposes the Orthodox idea, mainly in the form in which the Russian people developed it (Lossky 1951). For Dostoevsky, the idea of Catholicism is "the forced unity of man", "an idea dating back to ancient Rome" (Yudakhin 2019). He saw the embodiment of this idea in France and not only in Catholic France, but in socialist France. It abandoned religion and set itself the goal of achieving forced unity for the alleged good of humankind. Dostoevsky did not see the difference between the agendas of the Roman Catholic Church and socialism. Both violated the metaphysical law of freedom and Divine grace, seeking to save humankind by earthly means (Kasatkina 2012). Dostoevsky wrote, "Both of these enemies have always had an organic connection with France. Catholicism, until almost recently, was her unifying and fundamental idea. Socialism was also engendered within it" (Dostoevsky 2009a).

Dostoevsky was preparing to write an essay entitled, "What Rome Means for the Pope", for the journal *Vremya*. He intended to raise the problem of Roman pontiff secular power. The essence of Dostoevsky's rebuffs to the Catholic Church boiled down to the fact that the secular dominion of the Church was a contradiction. In the 1860s, the Roman Question claimed hundreds of human lives in military clashes and battles. Pope Pius IX was not giving up secular power and was directly involved in the political and military struggle. Later, in the journal *Epoch*, the issue of December 1864, the papal encyclical "Quanta cura"³ and the so-called "Syllabus" (Syllabus errorum) was criticized (Yudakhin 2019). There was the statement in the corresponding note on behalf of Pope Pius IX that resolutely rejected the principles and ideas dear to modern European humanity, and actually demanded admiration for the Roman Catholic Church. It was claimed the Roman Catholic Church should have control not only over specific individuals, but also over entire nations and states. The encyclical condemned the principle of freedom of conscience and religion, and reserved the right to use external force to suppress ideas that were contrary to it.

In the 1870s, Dostoevsky wrote that Roman Catholicism had sold Christ for earthly possession. For Dostoevsky, the Catholic Church transformed into a State. He believed that there was a clash between the State and the Church. The State is the dispensation of humankind based on division, while the Church is based on the idea of All-Unity. In

Dostoevsky's novels, the thread about the anti-Christian beginning of the Roman Church is steadily traced along with the view of the Roman Church as a power. It is opposed to the idea of freedom and the conciliar principle in Orthodoxy. Dostoevsky in his pathos is similar to Fyodor Tyutchev. In 1853, Tyutchev published an article entitled "The Papacy and the Roman Question". The article was written in French and published in the journal *Revue des Deux Mondes*, shortly after Pius IX declared himself an opponent of the unification of Italy. Tyutchev wrote that the crisis of Catholicism had reached its apogee. The central idea of the papacy, or the idea of unification around the earthly power of the church, was collapsing. He believed that the secularization of the Papal State in Italy under the influence of the revolutionary events of the mid-19th century would finally undermine the institution of the papacy and lead to the victory of the revolution. It is worth noting that Tyutchev opposed Orthodox Christianity to Roman Catholicism. He spoke of a Rome that had fallen away from Unity, but at the end of the article, he expressed hopes that Christian Unity would be restored by returning the Roman Catholic Church to the truth of Orthodoxy. Russia, as a Christian kingdom, or the Third Rome, would play a key role in this reunification.

However, Dostoevsky is more radical than Tyutchev. He expressed the idea that Catholicism is a non-Christian faith, and that it was the source of atheism and socialism. This idea sounds very clearly in the novel *Idiot*, mainly in Prince Myshkin's anti-Catholic speech: "Catholicism is like a non-Christian faith!" says the protagonist and then adds, "it is not a Christian religion, in the first place," said the latter, in extreme agitation, quite out of proportion to the necessity of the moment. "Moreover, in the second place, Roman Catholicism is, in my opinion, worse than Atheism itself. Yes—that is my opinion. Atheism only preaches a negation, but Romanism goes further; it preaches a disfigured, distorted Christ—it preaches Anti-Christ—I assure you, I swear it!" <...> "In my opinion the Roman Catholic religion is not a faith at all, but simply a continuation of the Roman Empire, and everything is subordinated to this idea—beginning with faith". <...> "Atheism is the child of Roman Catholicism—it proceeded from these Romans themselves, though perhaps they would not believe it" (Dostoevsky 2003).

1.2. Reception of Dostoevsky's Ideas in the Vatican

The research fellow at the Vatican Apostolic Archive, Giovanni Coco, noted that Dostoevsky had a distorted vision of Catholicism, filtered by national passions, his messianic conception, and a unilateral and non-objective reading of the Catholic world. This point of view on Dostoevsky's heritage represents his general take on behalf of The Holy See (Coco 2022). Unlike today, the ideas of the Russian writer were not authoritative for the Catholic environment at the beginning of the 20th century. However, Dostoevsky's anti-Catholic ideas did not represent the major problem for the Roman Church regarding his thought, which seemed to reflect ancient anti-Catholic stereotypes, which were already widespread in Eastern Christianity. On the contrary, it was the vision of humanity torn between good and evil that aroused the interests of Roman theologians, because Dostoevsky's novels presented the portrait of a sinful humanity in its need of the intervention of Divine Grace (Garcia Sanza and Nzew 2017). Nevertheless, in the 1920s, some of Dostoevsky's novels were translated and published in Italy. The Carabba Publishing House prepared the novels *Crime and Punishment*, *Poor People* and *The Adolescent*, translated by Federigo Verdinua. An excerpt from *Brothers Karamazov* was boldly included in the *Classics for Children* by the publisher, Carabba. In 1927, the novel *Demons* were translated into Italian. In addition, the Morcelliana publishing house (close to the future Pope Paul VI), the circle close to the Comunità editions, had shown a strong interest in Dostoevsky since the mid-1920s. However, the public was not interested in Dostoevsky. Piero Gobetti, Italian journalist, intellectual and anti-fascist, in the article "Dostoevsky Classic" noted, "Dostoevsky as a writer was not successful in Italy. Few people are familiar with his masterpieces. Only a certain myth about Dostoevsky is widespread; it came to us from France, which read Merezhkovsky⁴" (Gobetti 2016).

As Coco noted, the wave of interest in Dostoevsky began in the mid-forties of the 20th century. This evolution was due to the transformation of the view of Russian culture in European society after the USSR made a key contribution to the victory over Nazi Germany. At the same time, it should be noted that Dostoevsky was known in the Catholic environment, primarily owing to the work of Romano Guardini. In 1946, the review on the new Italian edition of Nikolay Berdyev's book, *Worldview of Dostoevsky* (1923), was published in *Civiltà Cattolica*. This book review not only praised a work by Berdyev for the first time, but also welcomed his interpretation of Dostoevsky's ideas, concluding that the real Dostoevsky was the one who communicated a new revelation about man and freedom. From this moment, the heritage of Dostoevsky appeared in a different light in the Catholic world. The following year (1947), *Civiltà Cattolica* reviewed the Italian translation of the work by Leo Zander, "Dostoevsky: The Problem of the Good" (1946). The book review highly appreciated the ethical views of Dostoevsky as a true Christian humanist.

The attention towards Dostoevsky's heritage was also demonstrated in the following years. In 1951, in *Civiltà Cattolica*, the review of Carlo Cappello's book, *Conscience Morale in the Work of F. Dostoevsky*, appeared. The book review defined Dostoevsky's ideas as Christian philosophy. In 1994, the Vatican activist Tomasz Shpidlik wrote the book, *The Russian Idea: A Different Vision of Man*. The work was published in Italian and French. It focused on the key mission of Dostoevsky in shaping the Russian Christian worldview.

Currently, The Holy See actively publishes the works by Dostoevsky and about Dostoevsky. As the latest initiative, we can point at the publication of Vladimir Solovyov's work, *Three Speeches in Memory of Dostoevsky*⁵. Its presentation was held in the Vatican with the participation of Metropolitan Hilarion and Vatican State Secretary Cardinal Pietro Parolin in 2021. In addition, the journal *Civiltà Cattolica* published a collection of articles for the anniversary of Dostoevsky, noting that his heritage is striking in terms of its topicality, density, depth of thought and prophetic power. However, the main topic of constant interest is certainly the faith of the Russian writer (*Dostoevskij* 2021).

The most interesting case is the admiration for Dostoevsky's heritage exhibited by Pope Francis. In his speeches, he repeatedly emphasizes that Dostoevsky is his favorite writer and that the novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, is his reference book. This is curious, because Dostoevsky could hardly imagine that the Roman Pontiff, and especially the Jesuit, would repeatedly confess his admiration for his ideas. The most interesting thing is that Francis most often refers to the poem, "The Grand Inquisitor". For example, in his Speech in Slovakia (13 February, September 2021) to the members of the Ecumenical Council of Churches, Francis notes that every effort must be made to prevent the church from becoming the Grand Inquisitor described by Dostoevsky (*Conferenza Stampa* 2021). Pope Francis also refers to the poem, "The Grand Inquisitor", in his interview "Against the war: The courage to build peace" with *Corriere della Sera* (*Papa* 2022). Pope Francis, once again, quotes Dostoevsky in Angelus on 13 November 2022, noting the need for love and mercy for a person despite their sinfulness, since this principle is the basis of true social life (*Discorso del Santo Padre* 2022).

Indeed, the biography of the Pope clarifies such affection for Dostoevsky. Bergoglio was the leader of the Argentine Jesuits during the period of military dictatorship. It was one of the darkest periods in the history of the Argentine state, or the so-called Dirty War period. Left-wing rebels tried to oppose the military junta. Opposition to the government was suppressed with the use of "death squadrons". As a result, between 10,000 and 30,000 citizens, real or imaginary oppositionists, went missing. Many Jesuits ended up on the side of the rebels. Bergoglio had a different position, not so much of loyalty to the regime, but of a cautious attitude towards it and an attempt at a dialogue in order to preserve the integrity of the Order. After the fall of the dictatorship, he fell into disgrace, and there were certain changes within his views on the church and its role in people's lives (*Borghesi* 2017).

In addition, there was a work by Guardini (*Guardini* 1989), which was well known to Bergoglio from the time of his rectorate at the faculties of philosophy and theology at San

Miguel of Buenos Aires. It is about Dostoevsky's religious world. Bergoglio, precisely in that period, recommended this work, which was already circulating among the students (Narvaja 2021). Guardini focused on two things—religiosity and faith. He analyzed Dostoevsky's novels and created his own approach to interpretation. Guardini evaluated Dostoevsky's heroes through their understanding of life, soil and people, considering the concept of the people in writer's novels as a religious concept. Bergoglio deeply perceived the idea of the people as an autonomous bearer of the religious idea. Later, it would become the key to his view of the church. The image of institutions that limit freedom for the sake of earthly well-being appeared in Bergoglio's reasoning. Dostoevsky's project for the creation of a Christian community attracted him. He was inspired by the ideals of justice, humanity, and freedom exhibited by Dostoevsky and Guardini, as well as the call to realize their Christian character and bring them to the church.

The Pontiff highly appreciates Dostoevsky's idea about the transformation of society and the development of each individual, whose moral and spiritual ideal is the God-man (Jesus Christ). Pope Francis, following Dostoevsky, speaks that the idea of goodwill, solidarity, mercy and love must be perceived first on a personal level and then on a societal level. He advised to the seminarians who met at Pontifical Regional Seminary in the Marche region on 10 June 2021: "Read also those writers who have been able to look inside the human soul; I am thinking, for example, of Dostoevsky, who in the miserable events of earthly pain was able to reveal the beauty of the love that saves" (Pope Francis 2022).

The idea of a Christian community, or rather a Christian people, forms the basis of Francis's church program called the "Synodal way". One of the key points is the idea of the Church, understood as the totality of the evangelizing People of God. The Church is perceived not only as an institution, but also as an organism based on a living faith. For Pope Francis, "people" is not a logical category, nor is it a mystical category, but it is an angelic category. As noted above, the pontiff discovered this idea in Guardini's book on Dostoevsky. On the evening of 13 March 2013, immediately after Pope Francis' election, he spoke from the balcony of St. Peter's: "And now, we take up this journey: Bishop and People. This journey of the Church of Rome, which presides in charity over all the Churches. A journey of fraternity, of love, of trust among us. Let us always pray for one another. Let us pray for the whole world, that there may be a great spirit of fraternity" (First Greetings 2022). This thesis is close to Dostoevsky's formula of Christian humanism and idea of the Church as Christian community.

1.3. Closing Remarks

Pope Francis's universal view on Dostoevsky is characteristic of the writer's perception within European culture. Dostoevsky is a Christian humanist. However, it is important that for Dostoevsky the idea of universal love is closely connected with the Russian idea. Russian thinker Vasily Zenkovsky concluded, "Here is the key to Dostoevsky's famous idea that the Russian people are God-carrying. This belief is the deepest and most creative in Dostoevsky, from which grew his dream of a 'universal' calling for Russia" (Zenkovsky 1997). In his "Pushkin Speech" (1880), Dostoevsky laid the foundation for developing Russian culture's universality content, i.e., the Russian culture is the Christian culture, and the Russian people are Christian people. Dostoevsky's Christian universality is based on his idea of soilness, where universality is the core of nationality. Cristian moral consciousness forms through self-knowledge as not only an individual, but also cultural subject; it passes through the necessary stages of its ascent and includes everything from individualistic selfishness to family, nation, and finally human. For Dostoevsky, the universality cannot contradict the nationality because it is its highest blossom in its essence and truth (Nizhnikov 2021). This is the point that makes Dostoevsky not just a prophet of universal love for all humanity, but also a prophet of the Russian idea. This is the complexity of its interpretation on the one hand, it is a point of attraction, and on the other hand, of repulsion, in relation to Western European culture and thought.

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Notes

- ¹ He was arrested 23 April 1849 for participating in a circle of Petrashevists, imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress, and sentenced to death by firing squad; at the very last moment the death sentence was commuted to hard labor.
- ² This term was introduced by Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov in his work *The Great Debate and Christian Politics* (1883–1885). It means a jealous, fussy attitude towards secular power, the desire to put this power on the soil of external formal law, to substantiate it legally, strengthen it with a clever policy, and defend it by force of arms. In the realm of the ecclesiastical proper, *papism* manifests itself primarily in the abolition of the independence of large local churches, or metropolises. The dependence of bishops on their archbishops or metropolitans ceases and is replaced by the direct subordination of all bishops to the Pope.
- ³ A papal encyclical issued by Pope Pius IX on 8 December 1864. In it, he decried what he considered significant errors afflicting the modern age. These he listed in an attachment called the Syllabus of Errors, which condemned secularism, socialism, and religious indifferentism.
- ⁴ Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1866–1941) was a Russian novelist, poet, religious thinker, and literary critic. A seminal figure of the Silver Age of Russian Poetry, in 1901 he published the work “L. Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky” which was popular among French intellectuals.
- ⁵ In this work, the idea of Dostoevsky as a Christian thinker is clearly heard. Solovyov notes that Dostoevsky’s key idea is the idea of the Church as the best social structure.

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