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Comment: *Translating between cultures*

Translation is challenging when one wants to find an equivalent in a different culture. In his second encyclical, *Spe salvi*, on the theology of Christian hope, Pope Benedict XVI insists very strongly on how interdependent human beings are, in what we do, for better and for worse. He concludes by expounding the Catholic doctrine of purgatory (§48), rooting it as usual in the Jewish conviction that one can help the dead in their intermediate state through prayer (citing 2 Maccabees 12: 38–45): 'love can reach into the afterlife'. He spells this out: 'reciprocal giving and receiving is possible, in which our affection for one another continues beyond the limits of death — this has been a fundamental conviction of Christianity throughout the ages and it remains a source of comfort today'. — 'Who would not feel the need to convey to their departed loved ones a sign of kindness, a gesture of gratitude or even a request for pardon?'

The Pope has been attacking the supposition that Christian hope is 'individualistic'. He cites the 'seminal book' by the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac, *Catholicisme: aspects sociaux du dogme*. First published in 1938, this book sought to demonstrate the social reality of Christian salvation, in the context of an individualistically inclined Catholicism that seemed powerless to confront the collectivist totalitarianism of fascism and communism.

However, if purgatory is simply the purification that the soul undergoes as it encounters the Lord, Judge and Saviour, as some recent theologians contend (so the Pope says), that is just another form of individualism: 'how can a third person intervene, even if he or she is particularly close to the other?'

'When we ask such a question, we should recall that no man is an island, entire of itself'. John Donne, we immediately think. How splendid that the Pope should be familiar with the great metaphysical poet of the Jacobean age — no surprise, really. However, turning up the German text, presumably the original, we find that 'no man is a closed monad', *eine geschlossene Monade*. That is also how the official Latin version goes — *clausam monadem* — as well as the French: *une monade fermée sur elle-même*.

Not Donne, then, but Gottfried Leibniz. The familiar phrase from Donne is the translator's contribution, searching for an equivalent. The Pope is thinking of Leibniz. According to his theory of pre-established harmony every substance affects only itself but since all the substances in the world, both bodies and minds, seem to interact with each other, they must have been programmed by God in advance to 'harmonize' with each other. Leibniz's term for these substances was 'windowless monads'. Why did the translator assume that English-speaking readers of the encyclical would be foxed by Leibniz's phrase?

Incidentally, radically solipsistic as his philosophy sounds, Leibniz was quite a sociable being. Curiously enough, the women of the House of Hanover were among his best friends. The Electress Sophia of Hanover, her daughter Sophia Charlotte Queen of Prussia, and Caroline of Ansbach, consort of her grandson, the future King George II, all corresponded with him. He did not have the same relationship with their men folk,

'Our lives are involved with one another, through innumerable interactions they are linked together', the Pope goes on: 'unsere Existenzen', as the German says, always with significantly more philosophical resonance than the English text is allowed to bear. 'No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone. The lives of others continually spill over into mine: in what I think, say, do and

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achieve. And conversely, my life spills over into that of others: for better and for worse'.

That is why, the Pope goes on, our prayers for some one are not 'something extraneous', 'something external'. Rather: 'In the interconnectedness of Being, my gratitude to the other — my prayer for him — can play a small part in his purification'.

'In der Verflochtenheit des Seins' — that stands out, like a phrase borrowed from Hegel or Heidegger. To account for our being able to intercede for one another, including for the souls in purgatory, English-speaking Catholics would have been more likely to appeal not to metaphysics but directly to theology, in particular to membership of the mystical body of Christ. Translating between German and English is always tricky when the very different philosophical cultures are involved.

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