

At the Service of Peace An Introduction to Lanza del Vasto

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Abstract

This short essay provides a general overview of Lanza del Vasto's philosophy. On the 40th anniversary of his death, his teachings about nonviolence and interreligious dialogue are still positively provocative for the promotion of peace and justice in an international context of disquiet, turmoil and uncertainty.

Keywords: *Contemporary Philosophy, Interreligious Dialogue, Philosophy of Religion, Peace and Nonviolence Studies.*

Discretion will protect you and understanding will guard you.

Proverbs, 2:11

Introduction

At the beginning of 1981, in a small town between the mountains of the Sierra de Segura and the Sierra de Alcaraz in Spain, Lanza del Vasto (1901-1981) died. The day after, the main Spanish newspaper traced his life and intellectual parabola, defining him as the “apostle of no-violence.”¹ After almost 40 years, his philosophy and teachings are still positively provocative for the promotion of a peaceful co-existence in an international context of disquiet, turmoil and uncertainty.

Born in Southern Italy, he spent his childhood and youth in Paris with all its intellectual vibrancy. During the years after the October Revolution in Russia (1917), the French capital was one of the major driving centers of the Russian religious diaspora that would deeply mark European culture² where the recurring themes of psychological and metaphysical introspection of Slavic literature were settled and revisited.³

In the period after the First World War a number of people belonged to his cultural circuit who – in the wake of phenomenology – introduced the Eastern European Hasidism and the contemporary Jewish philosophy, which had its point of reference in Martin Buber.⁴ In receiving these different perspectives – as through a prism of diversity – Lanza del Vasto artfully weaves all these different voices and experiences in a harmonic synthesis.⁵

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In this context and at some time of these turbulent years, Lanza del Vasto changed completely his approach to life so that the ascetic trip from the Ganges's sources to the Holy Land and Mount Athos can be considered as a keystone in his cultural formation; his journey may be configured as a bridge to the East, capturing its spiritual essence and making a modern synthesis of the various steps to this discovery.⁶ The earnest desire to discover the unexplored depths of human nature – and its indissoluble bond with Transcendence – was the primary stimulus to visit distant places that the fame of Mahatma Gandhi had made intensely meaningful.⁷

If the influence of Indian traditions is undeniable – especially of Upanicad, Bhagavadgîta and Dhammapada – the role of Byzantine Christianity⁸ is no less important in understanding his work as an *anchorite of modernity*.⁹ In his personal research, LanzadelVasto attempts to propose a perspective that, while recognizing human limitations, is capable of *silent listening* and of a *bright proposal* in the path of justice and peace. It is not a circumstance that Gandhi gave him the name of *Shantidas (Servant of peace)*. In the period immediately after the disastrous consequences of the Second World War, his search for a “symphonic language” is in a world that was, even while expanding through globalism, shrinking.¹⁰

An Inner Discovery

This desire to understand the meaning of existence leads him to the study of philosophy. The in-depth reading of Thomas Aquinas and his “angelic logic” contributes to LanzadelVasto’s intellectual formation and reopens the doors of an uncertain faith. Through the influence of Romain Rolland,¹¹ his charismatic sensibility accepts the “prophecy of the Other” and the refusal of violence as a means of resolving disputes: “The same thirst for possessing things and subjugating others has, as a counterpart, the inability to possess and dominate themselves.”¹²

In this thought – as dense as it is short – the essence of the doctrine of LanzadelVasto is enclosed. His simple words express that tension between the exterior and the interior, between the ephemeral and the permanent:

Do not trust the hurry, escape it, fight it, because it is one of the great destroyers of inner life. [...] Do not lose our time to hurry. [...] let's voluntarily resist not to be overwhelmed by this common inclination. Let's deliberately slow down our gestures and our steps, the expression of the words and the course of our

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thoughts. Let's suspend our acts and especially our reactions, the explosion in anger, the response in dialogue to practice, even just for the time of a blink of lashes, the call of conscience.¹³

In a society obsessed by a sort of perennial state of agitation and apparently condemned to an infinite and fruitless series of interferences¹⁴ the *constraint of time* seems to have diverted the gaze of the humanity away from the fundamental necessity of a “constructive dialogue” to which a deeper attention, common sense, comprehension, silence and patient listening are essential.

Such a “praise of slowness” is nothing else than return to the roots of the human essence in which time is measured not only through scientific instruments but also by the natural passage of the seasons as well as the common and providential sharing of history. This aspect is clearly evident in everyday life – perhaps, too burdened with imposed rhythms and paralysed by repetitiveness of unnecessary rituals – that it is not more able to control or successfully manage a never-ending series of events.¹⁵

Introspection and Prayer

In this vortex of anxiety, LanzadeVasto's teaching can trace a new way. Through his particularly human and spiritual experience, he calls for a return to an *intimate and introspective reflection*, expressed in poetic language and lyrical tones:

The distracted man searches for his whole life not to reflect, not to turn his attention to himself. But it happens that, at a certain point, he stumbles on the thing that obliges him to the reflection. And every effort he makes to avoid this moment, every man, at one turn, will meet himself! And that's exactly what he does not want to meet, he does not want to know, he does not want to hear about it. Stay closed with herself, nose to nose, for long hours, especially at night, is a kind of disaster for the man who has been distracted all day.¹⁶

In this approach, prayer is a movement towards a necessary and indispensable *kenosis* for a truly lived spiritual life.¹⁷ It does not seem to be secondary to his philosophy the praying method of *hesychasm* (from the Greek *hesychia* (ἡσυχία)¹⁸: “quiet, stillness, rest, silence”) that, in addition to the constant repetition of a simple or deeply inspired prayer, is a daily and methodical exercise of the breath with the consequent limbs' rule and

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the possession of oneself:

Like in music, you must achieve in the breathing the precision, the exact measure, the sharpness, the intensity, the delicacy of the touch. Finally, you can make sense of your breath, like the musician at his song.¹⁹

The symbiotic activation of the mind and body together in this mystical form of prayer, in fact, corresponds to the emptying of all that is considered superfluous or supra-structural in a temporal process of continuous renewal.²⁰ Understanding your emptiness is first and foremost the sharing of pain and suffering. This is the common denominator of humanity and leads to a call to serve.²¹

Such a *sympatheia* (συμπαθεια-simpathy) is the ontological foundation of a silent approach to the *Other* in the mutual belonging to human nature. *Otherness* is not a distance, but a motive for a common engagement in an ethical perspective: a shared proposal within a humanity torn by the voluntary condemnation to an inner blindness that covers the beauty with ash and sneaks with jealousy and misunderstanding. Even evil and pain become instruments of a regeneration that goes beyond any closure:

They accuse us of going against the times; We do it deliberately and with all our strength; Time is like water: it flows down. Time is the current that drags toward death. Going against time means to bring back the desires, the abandonment, the collective lice. Nothing is more appropriate than going against “the times that run” to fill gaps, warn souls in danger of being submerged while they are sleeping or having fun.²²

Humbleness and Transformation

This renewed attention to the signs of the time and its manifestations through human experience is a service offered to reason which becomes “formative”, opening itself to the outside and realizing the person in a “revelatory” process. The reason, however, needs dialogue that develops in a daily personal encounter because “living with the other as a form of knowing is justice. Living with the other as form of being is love.”²³ In this way, they form a deep relationship and a purposeful perception without the risk of getting lost among the world’s appearances.

It is enlightening to understand that such a vision is the basis not of a

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personal but also political and social renewal. Inspired by Nicholas of Cusa,²⁴ Lanza delVasto makes a remarkable attempt at reconciliation of opposites and reveals where that point of contact between the human and the divine – the “unity of the contraries” – becomes the pedagogical architrave in the perennial search for a constructive synthesis.²⁵ Such a search for unity is generated – as claimed by Simone Weil²⁶ – by a leading “soul transformation.”²⁷ This is not a retreat from the world but a purification or, as we would say with a language understandable to the contemporary audience, a decontamination of the being from unnecessary and dangerous toxins.²⁸

This journey back to the “original questions” – that are strictly correlated with the “last things” – is a “pilgrimage to the sources” in a process in which we are also able to partially annihilate ourselves to be daily reborn through compassion and mercy. It deals with an “infinite relationship” between the I and the Being, which – while distinct – complement each other.²⁹

In this framework, a metaphysical union bonds individuals in a transcendent perspective and makes them partakers of a common destiny. This interdependence is based on a responsible sharing, temperance and sobriety.³⁰ The beauty of simplicity is renewed in the encounter with those we daily meet with their personal experience and with which we share our time in wise and discreet humility.³¹ There is a desire for a return to something lost by humanity:

They will never know what beauty is, those who seek it with ease and take it for a greater pleasure. But this hunger, this thirst, this extreme abandonment, this burning vigil at the feet of the naked night, make it shine in the blood most present to me of myself, it [is] “the truth of the forms”, “the splendor of the true.”³²

This modern *via sanctae simplicitatis* is not only a process of self-discovery but appears – also as an invitation to the praise of creation as a gift to share and protect. Such visionary spirit brings Lanza delVasto to propose to contemporary men – now addicted to evil, careless and indifferent – the fundamental questions in an eschatological and salvific way:

Every now and then the Vain is frightened of his inconsistency

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and, taken up by dizziness, says “All is useless. God is not there.” Every now and then the Dark is irritated, goes to shake the Vain, blushes with madness or crime, or at least, nightmare and bad thoughts.³³

The classic use of negative theology is linked to an inseparable mystical experience, shared by various faiths in the search for Transcendence. In the moment of silence and contemplation, we are able to “recognize the error [...] because you cannot go farther than anything and you can not dwell in the black.”³⁴ In the horror of extreme solitude – even covered by false distractions – the voice of an appeal to the High becomes stronger, leading to the beginning of a new horizon:

The son does all this to forget his father, and to escape from him, and that’s why he sticks with agony to the outer objects and all the distractions, and clings to his alike futile and fluctuating like him. But his business, the unremitting necessities of his work, the multiple duties are the strongest bastion he can build between him and himself, protection and support against the truth. The Father is doing everything he can to attract the attention of the distracted person. It stirs it up, prevents it, makes it stagger. Traps of temptation very often are not the bad intentions of inner life, the effort of the powers of the soul [...]. Conversion begins when the man is disconnected from things and people to turn to their own shadow side and substance, towards their own soul to bring the light of intelligence, the power of attention, the heat of life and love.³⁵

A Conclusion

In our historical contingency of disquiet and insecurity, the thought of Lanza delVasto and his nonviolent ethics are still positively challenging.³⁶

In a famous review in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Fr F. Lombardi affirmed that:

Through the living and hard experiences of the road, through the encounters with the school of ascetics, wise and religious men, the pilgrim knows the stages and the trials of every path to the truth (and as Gandhi says, “Truth is God”).³⁷

Through a trustworthy witness and its transformative values, we – in our pilgrimage in the world – can create the required conditions to cultivate a culture of encounter³⁸ and – as through a prism of diversity³⁹ – weave all these different voices in the harmonic synthesis of dialogue. The

philosophy of Lanza delVasto is – undoubtedly – a starting point of an inner and societal transformation.⁴⁰

Endnotes

- ¹ A. Munoz, “Murió el filósofo Lanza del Vasto, “apóstol de la no violencia” en Murcia”, https://elpais.com/diario/1981/01/07/cultura/347670007_850215.html Accessed January 7, 1981.
- ² See S. Karlinsky, *Freedom from Violence and Lies: Essays on Russian Poetry and Music* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013).
- ³ See J. Deutsch Kornblatt, R. F. Gustafson eds., *Russian Religious Thought* (University of Wisconsin: Madison, 1966).
- ⁴ Cfr R. Simini, *Il chassidismo polacco e l’escicismo slavo: genesi, sviluppo, affinità e differenze nella comune reazione alla modernità* (Bari: G. Laterza, 2002).
- ⁵ “Lanza del Vasto è stato, a quanto noi sappiamo, l’ecumenista religioso più spinto, più rischioso di questo secolo. Eppure egli è stato, dopo la sua conversione a 24 anni, un cattolico indiscutibile, sincerissimo ed anche obiettivamente verissimo. Questa sua doppia posizione, insieme di identità e di apertura entrambe ad oltranza, è stata perciò tra le più ardue quanto a coerenza e possibilità per lui e per gli aderenti all’Arca [...]” G. Sommovilla, *Il bello e il vero: scandagli tra poesia, filosofia e teologia* (Milano: Jaka Book, 1996), p. 86.
- ⁶ See A. Drago - P. Trianni ed., *La filosofia di Lanza del Vasto. Un ponte tra Occidente ed Oriente* (Milano: Circolo Il Grandevetro/Jaka Book, 2009).
- ⁷ “Libero è colui che fa ciò che vuole e cui piace fare ciò che deve, facendolo per amore piuttosto che per dovere.” G. G. Lanza del Vasto, *Vinôbâ o il nuovo pellegrinaggio* (Milano: Jaka Book), p. 156.
- ⁸ Cfr. G. Salmeri, “Lanza del Vasto tra metafisica greca e metafisica cristiana” in A. Drago - P. Trianni ed., *La filosofia di Lanza del Vasto. Un ponte tra Occidente ed Oriente*, pp. 31-46.
- ⁹ Cfr. G. Patriarca, “La riscoperta dell’essenziale. L’ontologia della pace e la metafisica dell’incontro. Introduzione al pensiero di Lanza del Vasto”, *Rassegna di Teologia*, 58 (2017): 277-288.
- ¹⁰ "I will never forget the feeling of true astonishment of my first encounter with meditation. I was in my twenties and I had the chance to attend a summer camp of the Communauté de l’Arche, a community based on non-violence founded in France, just after World War II by an Italian disciple of Gandhi, Giuseppe

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- Lanza delVasto. This community is founded upon an harmonious blend of Christian heritage and oriental wisdom. One of its rule is the daily attendance of yoga and meditation sessions, which are not exactly in the wake of Indian tradition, but follow faithfully its spirit.” S. Pitruzzella, *Drama, Creativity and Intersubjectivity: The Roots of Change in Dramatherapy* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 14.
- ¹¹ "But action is force, struggle is blood. His gentle spirit desires peace; his moral craves for the right.” S. Zweig, *Romain Rolland; the man and his work* (New York: Seltzer, 1921), p. 84.
- ¹² Lanza del Vasto, *Introduzione alla vita interiore* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1989), p. 68 (my translation).
- ¹³ Lanza del Vasto, *Introduzione alla vita interiore*, p. 212 (my translation).
- ¹⁴ Cfr F. Booth, *The Distraction Trap. How to Focus in a Digital World* (Harlow: Pearson, 2013).
- ¹⁵ "In light of the delirium of doing, of getting excited, of talking, it is necessary to get into, on the contrary, an oasis of tranquility, of slowness, of calmness. The eagerness – which gnaws our soul – creates people affected by stress, unsatisfied, numb to their conscience and to others.” G. Ravasi, “Elogio della Lentezza”, *Avvenire*, <https://www.avvenire.it/rubriche/pagine/elogia-della-lentezza> Accessed May 15, 2004 (mytranslation).
- ¹⁶ Lanza del Vasto, *Introduzione alla vita interiore*, p. 64 (my translation).
- ¹⁷ See O. Zijlstraed., *Letting Go: Rethinking Kenosis* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2002).
- ¹⁸ L. Rossi, *I filosofi greci padri dell’esciasmo: la sintesi di Nikodemo Aghiorita*(Torino: Il Leone Verde, 2000).
- ¹⁹ Lanza del Vasto, *Introduzione alla vita interiore*, p. 121.
- ²⁰ Cfr A. Bongiovanni - P. Trianni ed., *Lanza del Vasto. Filosofo, teologo e nonviolento cristiano. Uno sguardo critico sull’opera omnia*(Ariccia: Aracne, 2015).
- ²¹ F. Rognon ed., *Lanza del Vasto. La sperimentazione comunitaria*(Milano: Jaka Book, 2016).
- ²² Lanza del Vasto, *L’arca aveva una vigna per vela*(Milano: Jaca Book, 1979), p. 79 (my translation).
- ²³ M. Buber, *The Martin Buber Reader: Essential Writings* ed. A. Biemann(New York : Palgrave McMillan, 2016), p. 83.
- ²⁴ See I. Bockened., *Conflict and Reconciliation: Perspectives on Nicholas of*

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Cusa (Leiden: Brill, 2004) and C.M. Bellitto, T.M. Izbicki and G. Christianson eds., *Introducing Nicholas of Cusa: A Guide to a Renaissance Man* (New York: Paulist, 2004).

²⁵ W. Beierwaltes, *Identität und Differenz: Zum Prinzip cusanischen Denkens* (Opladen: Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1977).

²⁶ “Mi stanno dinanzi due vite poetiche, in quanto creative nella libertà di adesione alla propria incarnazione, quindi all’obbedienza alla propria vocazione, anche se questa ha comandato cose impossibili. Questo, in una fedeltà alimentata da una volontà consapevole, malgrado tutti gli impedimenti della loro condizione umana. Trasformando, nella luce della «aspirazione al bene» (inglobante bellezza, verità, giustizia e ogni specie di virtù) «la pesanteur» dell’apparenza fisica e psichica, attingendo la vera forza, che è energia di “coraggio interiore”, all’unione con «l’altra realtà» (Simone Weil), dove avviene la Riconciliazione ispiratrice (Lanza del Vasto). E’ «il terzo ordine», quello dell’abbandono della volontà propria, ciò che riteniamo più prezioso, e che in effetti ci aiuta per una parte del cammino; si tratta dell’ordine della Religione, il cui atto fondamentale è il Sacrificio (Lanza).” G. Fiori, “Lanza del Vasto e Simone Weil. Prime note sulla sintonia fra i due pensatori”, *Prospettiva Persona* 86 (2013), p. 30.

“Two poetic lives lie before me, as they are creative in the freedom of adhering to one’s own incarnation, hence obedience to one’s vocation, even if this has commanded impossible things. This is found, in a fidelity nourished by a conscious will, despite all the impediments of their human condition. By transforming, in the light of the «aspiration to good» (encompassing beauty, truth, justice and every kind of virtue), «la pesanteur» of physical and psychic appearance, drawing true strength, which is the energy of “inner courage”, moves forward to the union with «the other reality” (Simone Weil), where the inspiring Reconciliation takes place (Lanza del Vasto). It is «the third order», that of the abandonment of one’s own will, that we consider most precious, and which actually helps us for part of the journey; it is the order of Religion, whose fundamental act is Sacrifice (Lanza).” G. Fiori, “Lanza del Vasto e Simone Weil. Prime note sulla sintonia fra i due pensatori”, *Prospettiva Persona*, 86 (2013), p. 30. (my translation)

²⁷ Read S. Weil, *Waiting for God*, (New York: Harpers and Row, 1951).

²⁸ L. Adler, *L’indomabile. Simone Weil*, (Milano: Jaka Book, 2009), p. 80.

²⁹ D. Vigne, *La relation infinie: la philosophie de Lanza del Vasto*, Vol. I-II, (Paris: Cerf, 2008).

³⁰ P. Fabiano - G. Patriarca, “Una filosofia per la pace. Lanza del Vasto e l’elogio della sobrietà”, *Lessico di Etica Pubblica*, 2 (2017): 91-100.

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- ³¹ “Quando avremo scoperto il nostro torto, invece di fare come il nostro nemico, invece di dissimularlo, di rinchiuderci nelle nostre giustificazioni e di confermarlo nelle sue, confesseremo il nostro torto e offiremo riparazione con semplicità disarmante, al fine di rompere il cerchio, al fine di costringere il nemico a far ritorno su se stesso.” Lanza del Vasto, *Che cos'è la non violenza*, (Milano: Jaca Book, 1990), p. 33.
- ³² Lanza del Vasto, *Pellegrinaggio alle sorgenti*, (Milano: Jaka Book, 1978), p. 216. (my translation).
- ³³ Lanza del Vasto, *Introduzione alla vita interiore*, p. 64 (my translation).
- ³⁴ Lanza del Vasto, *Introduzione alla vita interiore*, p. 44 (my translation).
- ³⁵ Lanza del Vasto, *Introduzione alla vita interiore*, p. 64-65 (my translation).
- ³⁶ A. Fougere - C-H. Rocquet, *Lanza del Vasto. Pellegrino della nonviolenza, patriarca, poeta*(Milano: Paoline, 2006).
- ³⁷ F. Lombardi, “Lanza del Vasto, Pellegrinaggio alle sorgenti”, *Civiltà Cattolica*, n. 3103-3108 (1979), p. 92. (my translation).
- ³⁸ Cfr A. Drago ed., *Il Pensiero di Lanza Del Vasto. Una risposta al XX secolo*(Trapani: Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, 2010).
- ³⁹ "Lanza del Vasto è stato, a quanto noi sappiamo, l'ecumenista religioso più spinto, più rischioso di questo secolo. Eppure egli è stato, dopo la sua conversione a 24 anni, un cattolico indiscutibile, sincerissimo ed anche obiettivamente verissimo. Questa sua doppia posizione, insieme di identità e di apertura entrambe ad oltranza, è stata perciò tra le più ardue quanto a coerenza e possibilità per lui e per gli aderenti all'Arca [...]." G. Somnavilla, *Il bello e il vero: scandagli tra poesia, filosofia e teologia*, p. 86.
- ⁴⁰ "And here I think of nonviolence as a perspective and way of understanding the world, to which theology must look as one of its constitutive elements. The writings and practices of Martin Luther King Jr. and LanzadelVasto and other peacemakers help us here." Pope Francis, *Address to the meeting on the theme "Theology after Veritatisgaudium in the context of the Mediterranean"*, promoted by the Pontifical Theological Faculty of Southern Italy, San Luigi Section – of Naples (Italy), June 21, 2019. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco_20190621_teologia-napoli.html Accessed June 22, 2019.