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Cardinal Sarah, God or Nothing. A Conversation on Faith

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ROBERT CARDINAL SARAH, *GOD OR NOTHING. A CONVERSATION ON FAITH WITH NICOLAS DIAT*. SAN FRANCISCO: IGNATIUS PRESS, 2015. 284 PP. ISBN 9781621640509. USD\$18.95.

This conversation, reported in ten chapters, brings the reader into the soul of a pilgrim of faith, Robert Sarah, son of the small country village of Ourous in the north of Guinea Conakry, West Africa. This village boy was born in 1945, into the culture of the Coniagui people, animist farmers and livestock breeders. He is the only son of his parents and speaks affectionately of his early family life from which he would depart at 11 years of age to study at St. Augustine Minor Seminary, Bingerville, Ivory Coast. He strongly attributes his vocation to the missionary priests of his home village. "I might never have left my village if the Holy Ghost Fathers had not spoken about Christ to some poor villagers." (148).

That first journey beyond the village and his country was one of many journeys that would lead him to priestly ordination for the Archdiocese of Conakry in 1969. Ten years later, he became its archbishop. In 2001, Pope John Paul II called Archbishop Sarah to Rome and appointed him as Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. In 2010, Pope Benedict XVI appointed him as President of the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* and made him a Cardinal. In 2014, Pope Francis named Cardinal Sarah as Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. In this conversation Cardinal Sarah offers strident criticism on such issues within the church as "the botched preparation for liturgical reform" following Vatican II's renewal of the liturgy (84); the heresy of activism among priests (108); the dictatorship of relativism (115, 183); gender ideology (130); the dangers of interreligious dialogue (139).

Diat, a French journalist and author who wrote *Benedict XVI: L'Homme qui ne voulait pas être pape: Histoire secrète d'un règne*, 2014, explains in his introduction that he sought out the inner truth of the man. The truth he found became clear to him. Cardinal Sarah is "a friend of God, a merciful and forgiving man, a man of silence, a good man" (12). He is also a controversial figure with his analysis of Western civilization as secularized and individualistic. He is ill at ease in an increasingly secular Europe lamenting a loss of Christian faith and culture, source of the faith he received. "How can we Africans comprehend the fact that Europeans no longer believe what they gave us so joyfully, in the worst possible conditions?" (148). He interprets efforts by some bishops' conferences to find pastoral solutions to the situation of Catholics who are divorced or divorced and civilly remarried as a "rebellion against the teaching of Jesus and of the magisterium" (277) to which he, and the Church in Africa are firmly opposed.

The reader easily detects the sense of loss for a golden age now past. Cardinal Sarah is disappointed but not disillusioned at the way the church in the West is moving. It is as if the diverse sounds of the market place have displaced the silence of God. The reverence the Cardinal expresses for sacred worship and the solace he finds in it originates from his early years (50) and continues to hold central place in his life. "The most important moments in life are the hours of prayer and adoration" (70). The worship of God in silence is a theme

explored by Cardinal Sarah in a more recent Ignatius Press publication with Nicolas Diat, *The Power of Silence* (2017).

Diat acknowledges that faith is everything for Cardinal Sarah. Hence the title of this biography, “God or Nothing,” which echoes the dying words of the second founder of the Holy Ghost Fathers, Venerable Francis Libermann, “God is all, man is nothing.” The sons of Libermann in Ourous continued the spirit of abandonment to God’s will so characteristic of Libermann. “They had totally abandoned themselves into God’s hands and considered themselves merely clumsy, inadequate instruments of his Son. They were certain that evangelization remains essentially the work of God” (146).

For the Cardinal the missionaries of his childhood and youth remain the yardstick with which he measures the church in the west and finds it wanting. “The Holy Ghost Fathers in my little village were part of that remarkable tradition of priests magnetized by the breath of God to such an extent that they were capable of things that were humanly impossible” (257). The spirit of martyrdom they then exemplified continues in many parts of the world, while, “in the West, men of the church are trying to reduce the requirements of the Gospel to a minimum” (280). Cardinal Sarah is opposed to this dilution of gospel values and church teaching. A godless West needs to once again “set its sights on God and the Crucified Lord” (282).

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