

10) Necessity

Necessitas is a word derived from *necesse*, which, it seems, is composed of the negative prefix *ne-* and the verb *cedere*, which means “to fall, to fall back or retreat”. Necessity is therefore a reality or situation from which it is not possible to leave, which cannot be avoided, in front of which one cannot escape.

Necessity is therefore reality as such, the reality of our human and earthly condition which we cannot flee, unless one lives in a dream or illusion. In Greek and Roman mythology, *Ananké* or *Necessitas*, was a divinity that personified destiny, unalterable necessity, inevitability, and therefore a dimension of human life that has a terrible character; terrible because one cannot master or know it; and it is she who frustrates freedom and threatens the life and joy of human beings.

Christianity does not take anything away from the drama of necessity in human life, but it allows us to see the necessity of reality as the expression and will of a loving and creator God. Reality is not the stormy ocean on which the human being is tossed around like a tiny boat; rather, it is the immense sign of the providence of the Father by which the human being enters into contact and dialogue with this same God and Father. The necessary, inevitable circumstances of our lives become the places where we can respond to the will of God, where we can become responsible in front of the Father.

In this respect, Jesus' attitude in the boat in the middle of the sea during the storm is significant: “He got into a boat and his disciples followed him. Suddenly a violent storm came up on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by waves; but he was asleep. They came and woke him, saying ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing!’ He said to them, ‘Why are you terrified, O you of little faith?’ Then he got up, rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was great calm. The men were amazed and said ‘What sort of man is this, whom even the winds and the sea obey?’ (Mt 8:23-27). Jesus sleeps like a baby in the arms of his mother. The disciples, on the other hand, are afraid and cry: they feel they are at the mercy of a destiny of death which they cannot control. The necessity of their situation – like a reality from which they cannot escape – is for them like a torture. Jesus calls them back to trust, to faith, and he does it by showing them that he completely controls this terrible and threatening reality.

But attention! Jesus does not rebuke his disciples for not knowing how to dominate a turbulent sea. He rebukes them for not believing that he can and knows how to control everything. Still they do not believe that he is God, and that necessity is not a reality set against him or in competition with him, but rather a reality in the palm of his hands.

The disciples of Jesus have to learn that it is Christ who puts an end to the dominating influence of necessity in the life of human beings. Without Christ, necessity is a frightening divinity. In the light of Christ, necessity is a creature, therefore an expression of the love of God, or, in any case, a reality which God can and always knows how to control.

In the light of Judeo-Christian revelation, necessity, rather than threatening and crushing the human being with its inescapability, becomes a space for work;

it becomes a reality from which the human being can make something, a reality with which the human being can interact for his good and for the good of others.

In this way, Christ reveals to us that the necessary character of existence is not only and before all else a consequence and punishment of original sin. For Jesus bids and asks us to return through faith and through grace to the relation with necessity that Adam had before sin.

As I already noted, work is a vocation of the human being from the first moment of creation. It is toilsome work that is a consequence of sin, but not work as such.

We read, in fact, in the second chapter of Genesis: "There was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the LORD God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the ground [...]. The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made grow every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food [...]. The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it" (Gen 2:5-15).

The dimension of tilling the earth – therefore of working with the nature that God created – is contemporaneous to the creation of the human being. Even the creation of vegetation was made only in relation to the human being who could till it, nourish himself by it, and admire it. Work is part of the plan that God conceived in creating the human being. It is as if the earth – nature – would not have meaning without human labor. God creates so that his creation might be creative, and it is not [creative] if not through the work of the human being.

In Christ, therefore, it is as if necessity returned to its condition in paradise, to the work of Adam before sin. It is significant that the necessity St. Benedict speaks about is the necessity of the harvest, which is certainly the very first work Adam was able to do, because "Out of the ground the LORD God made grow every tree that was delightful to look at and good for food" (Gn 2:9). Adam had only to collect the fruits in order to nourish himself with Eve. Christ allows us to return to this positive necessity, even if now work is in fact toilsome, while it was not so before sin.

Christ allows us therefore to reconcile ourselves with necessity. Necessity is not an angry divinity, nor is it a curse, inconvenience or obstacle to the plan of God for us, but rather it is a possibility to return to this design and to live it in cooperation with God. Our task within the necessity of the real becomes for us a work of God, a participation in the work of God, like the prayer of the Divine Office, of the *Opus Dei* which we fulfill in church.

This theme must be taken up again, because the use of the term *necessitas* is rather frequent in the Rule, and it has to do not only with the realm of manual labor. In fact, the true *necessitas loci* in front of which we find ourselves every instance, is that of the body, our own body as well as the body of the community of which we are called to be living members. Manual labor is only an element of the life of this body. It is necessary that the hands work in unison with the whole body, otherwise they become terrible and absurd like the hand that the king Balthasar saw writing alone on the wall of his palace: "*mene, tekem, peres*" (cfr. Dn 5).