

12. Contemplating the victory of the Risen one

In the letter to the Ephesians Paul practically makes Christ's being seated at the right hand of the Father coincide with his resurrection, and he describes it as his dominant position over all powers of heaven and earth, and also as his position as Head of the Church, his Body.

"The immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." (Eph 1:19-23)

St. Paul practically tells us that the Risen one, seated at the right hand of the Father, is the perfect fulfillment of all, and that this fullness is expressed and revealed in the body of the Church. The Church manifests her Head risen in glory. I do not know if we are always aware of it, and if we truly live out our membership in the Church with this awareness. Certainly we all need to be converted to this awareness of ecclesial life in order to live it out effectively.

This seems to be exactly what St. Paul is asking of us in the letter to the Colossians: "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory" (Col 3:1-4).

Then the letter continues with St. Paul's instructions to the community of Colossae about individual, communal, familial conversion, so that the mystical awareness of the glorious mystery of Christ in which we are involved in baptism make Christians "appear" ever more as they are "with him in glory," so that "the life hidden with Christ in God" become ever more visible in this world too.

But here St. Paul demands first of all a contemplative labor: "Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God: Set your minds on things that are above" (Col 3:1-2). A contemplative labor that must not serve only to know God, but also ourselves, because our life is already "hidden with Christ in God," and Christ is our life. Jesus at the right hand of the Father is our true life. We are dealing, then, not with a beautiful, pious image, with a beautiful icon, with a majestic mosaic in the apse of an ancient basilica: Christ at the right hand of the Father is our life, the mysterious truth of our life, because he brings together the death and resurrection that have redeemed us and given us back our life, dead as we were.

St. Peter, too, in his first letter, contemplates Christ at the right hand of God in a context in which he speaks of the paschal mystery, of baptism, and of conversion: "And baptism, which this [water of the flood] prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him" (1 Pet 3:21-22).

Christian baptism is an act that calls upon the Father for salvation in virtue of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and which asks the Father to identify and conform the baptized with the Son who is at his right hand. It is like asking God to make us like the glorious Son, because He died and rose for us. His position by the Father is what he went to prepare for us, and now he bears us with Himself by means of his coming to us in the Church, in the sacraments.

But it is most of all the letter to the Hebrews which insists, a good five times, on Christ's being found at the right hand of God. It does so within the framework of its theology of Christ's majesty as the one priest and victim for the redemption of the world. From the very beginning of the letter, the author sings the mystery of Christ, revelation of the Father: "But in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb 1:2-3).

Christ is above all the angels precisely because He alone has the privilege of sitting at the right hand of the Father: "But to which of the angels has he ever said, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?'" (Heb 1:13; cf. Ps 109:1)

At a certain point in his long meditation on Christ the new and definitive priest of the new Covenant, the author of the letter to the Hebrews exclaims: "Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up" (Heb 8:1-2).

For the letter to the Hebrews, Christ's being seated at the right hand of the Father is, therefore, a cultic, priestly position; it is an eternal and perfect ritual, a Eucharistic ritual, because Jesus is eternally before the Father to present the offering of Himself for the redemption of all sinners.

Indeed, we also read in the letter to the Hebrews: "And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God,' and since then has been waiting 'until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.' For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Heb 10:11-14).

This emphasis is important for us, because it makes us realize that Christ's glory is our complete redemption, is the glory of the Cross, is the fulfillment between the Son and the Father of the work of the salvation of sinners. Jesus is at the right hand of the Father to fulfill to the very end the redemption of the world, to obtain the salvation of all in virtue of the one, perfect paschal Sacrifice. We understand that what depends on Christ's keeping himself at the right hand of the Father is, as St. Paul says, our life, the truth and fullness of our life. The risen Christ's communion with the Father, who stands at the Father's right hand with his risen and glorified human body, yet always wounded by the passion and death, is the source of salvation that reaches us and engages us through the Church in her sacraments.