

Abbatial Benediction of Dom Dominic Savio Trần Thiết Hùng
Abbot of Châu Sơn Đơn Dương
Our Lady of Sacramento, October 12, 2019

Readings: Genesis 12,1-4a; Acts 2,42-47; John 17,20-23

Every vocation and every mission begins, like the vocation of Abraham, with a promise: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you All the families of the earth will find blessing in you” (Gen 12:2-3).

The content of God’s promise, which gives substance and strength to the vocation, is essentially *the benediction*. The benediction of God is not only what starts a vocation, a mission, and is not even just its reward, but rather is that which constitutes it. Abraham’s vocation is a benediction so that he himself become a benediction; it is a blessing from God for blessing all the families of the earth. God’s blessing is the calling, the vocation, and the mission that it generates is that of transmitting this blessing to all. Abraham is blessed by God in order to become God’s blessing for all.

But what is a blessing or benediction? It is an important question in this moment in which we prepare to confer on Abbot Dominic Savio the most important and solemn blessing that the Church offers, after the sacraments.

God blesses man from the creation of the world. The creation of man and woman is immediately the object of a special blessing that God has not expressed for the other creatures: “God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply...” (Gen. 1:27-28).

To give a benediction means, literally, to “say well,” to “speak well” of someone. But when it is God who “speaks well” of man, his word is not only an act of admiration, of approval, of satisfaction: it is a word that *creates* the good of man, that creates the goodness, the beauty, the truth of the human creature. A goodness that God wants to be immediately fruitful, which makes the man and the woman capable of transmitting life, love: “God blessed them (...): Be fruitful!” Thus God’s blessing is a word that creates that particular goodness that is reserved for man and woman, which is the *paternal, maternal goodness*, the goodness that gives life, that loves the life of the other and takes care of it.

And this is how God’s blessing is transmitted, how man and woman, how Abraham too, become a blessing by “creating,” like God, the goodness of others, or better: by giving rise to it and recognizing it in the name of God.

A beautiful thought of St. Augustine in the *Confessions* says that the divine light enabled Isaac not to bless his sons by recognizing them, but to recognize them by blessing them (cf. 10.34¹). The blessing is not so much the consequence of the good

¹ “Isaac ... *cum filios non agnoscendo benedicere, sed benedicendo agnoscere meruit.*”

we see in others: it is rather the source; it creates the good, it makes it grow, it makes it recognizable in those whom we bless.

In the end this is the great secret of a true paternity or maternity. Abraham is the great figure of a father in faith that the Bible presents us. In him, God's paternity is reflected in an exceptional way, not only in the extraordinary fecundity of his biological and spiritual offspring, but because God's paternity is reflected in Abraham's expressing himself in blessing, in transmitting the blessing of God to all his sons, down to us.

But to understand completely what it means to generate in blessing, we must look to Jesus Christ, and listen to the Gospel. The whole Gospel is a benediction, is "good news," and hence a word that speaks what is good to those whom it reaches, to those who listen, who let themselves be reached by the beauty, goodness, and truth of the Word of God. The Gospel of this liturgy also describes a blessing. Jesus speaks to the Father, has lifted his eyes to Him (cf. Jn 17:1), like when he took the bread to bless it and give it to his disciples and to the crowd. Jesus asks the Father for the unity of his disciples, that they be united in love, and not in just any love, but in the love that unites the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. There is no love greater than this unity, there is no greater good than this. By asking for this, and dying for this, Jesus blesses us with an infinite, insuperable, eternal blessing.

When the Risen Jesus ascends into Heaven, he does so with a blessing upon his disciples who see him lifted up: "While he was blessing them," St. Luke writes, "he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven" (Lk 24:51). Jesus in person is our whole blessing, the whole good that the Father speaks about each of us. In Christ, the Father recreates the human being and makes him fruitful. Every blessing of God is now transmitted to us by the risen Christ. In Him the Father blesses us and grants us to be blessing for each other.

Thus we must read the second reading of this liturgy as a description of what creates in us and among us the blessing of the Father in Christ. One can say that the primitive Church that Acts describes is the immediate effect of the blessing of the Risen One who ascends into heaven. Pentecost is also a great blessing, the blessing of the Father and the Son that transforms the disciples into a fraternal community, into the People of God, into the Body of the Lord. And this is the great missionary work of the Church, that we celebrate in this month of October in a special way, because only if the disciples are "perfected in unity" can the world know that the Father has sent the Son and loves humanity as he loves his only-begotten Son (cf. Jn 17:23).

Our fraternal communion is a great blessing of God with which we are called to bless the world. If we welcome among ourselves the communion granted us in Christ, we become blessing for the whole world.

Thus, the first Christian community is described for us as a place in which the disciples work to receive and increase the communion that God communicates with us: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (...) All who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:42-44).

This is what St. Benedict and our Cistercian Fathers asks us to live out. This is the reason that every abbot is chosen and blessed in service of his community. The abbot receives a special blessing so that he become a blessing for his brothers, so that he transmits the blessing of God to the community that is entrusted to him, and, through it, to the Church and the world.

It is nice to think that our great father in the monastic life carried the name “Benedict” and, as St. Gregory writes, this was not just a name for him but also the grace of his life (cf. *Dialogues* 2, Prol.). In the Rule, it is above all the abbot who is invited to give a blessing: “*benedicat abbas* – let the abbot bless” (RB 9.5; cf. also 11.7; 44.10; 60.4; etc.), not only in the liturgy, but through all that he says, teaches, through the example he gives and his prayer. All in all, an abbot must receive and transmit God’s blessing to the brothers, the beautiful and good word of the Lord, his mercy that corrects and pardons, that allows the community to grow in the unity of hearts and souls. The abbot must be the first to show that the blessing is stronger than the curse, to show that humility consists above all in “blessing those who curse us” (RB 7.43; cf. 4.32).

In communal life, to bless is often more difficult than simply doing something good, because when we bless those who curse us, those who speak or think ill of us, who criticize us – sometimes rightly, since we are all men and women full of limits and defects – we sacrifice for the sake of unity in charity not only our goods or our exterior powers, but our heart, our pride, our need to defend ourselves and vindicate ourselves. Blessing can be a martyrdom. But it is also the secret of the true fruitfulness of our life and of our community, because one who blesses from the heart becomes a blessing like Abraham, but above all like the crucified Jesus who “speaks well” to the Father even of those who are nailing him to the cross.

Thinking back to my twenty-five years of abbatial ministry, if there is one thing for which I feel sorrow and regret it is not that I was often wrong, that I often lost patience, that I often lacked generosity, etc., but that I did not bless my brothers enough, I did not transmit God’s blessing to them enough.

To be a shepherd and father, dear Abbot Dominic Savio, dear brothers and sisters, is truly a ministry of blessing, is a service toward the blessing of God for us and for all, to be cultivated in prayer and in listening to the word of God, making ourselves disciples and children of Jesus, who always speaks words of life to us and is with us every day, blessing the Father in the Eucharist; and making us disciples and children of the Virgin Mary, “blessed among women” (Lk 1:42), who teaches us to bless the Lord, magnifying him with our whole soul!

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