

## 2) “Who is the man who longs for life?”

Posing the question in this way: “who is the man who longs for life and desires to see happy days” (Prol. 15, Psalm 33:13), Benedict gives in the same moment his response, a response that is a definition of man, of the nature of the human being. The human being is the creature “who longs for life and desires to see happy days”.

But this response is precisely a response that expresses a desire. The human being is not so much the creature who lives and is happy. He is the creature who longs for life, and desires to see happy days. He is completely, in his own desire of life and of joy, a being needing completion, a being reaching for a goal that exceeds him, which is not in him already, which is not himself. Following in the vein of the Church fathers, Benedict is convinced by his own experience that man is man if he is reaching for the fullness of his humanity; that the human being is alive if he desires life; that the human being is happy if he desires joy.

And it is the very humanity of man that produces this desire, that constantly revives this thirst for life and for joy. The desire for life and for joy, the desire of the blessed life, is inscribed in our humanity. If we dream and seek to be creatures that can possess life and joy beyond, outside, or above our humanity, our human condition, the result would be that we walk right past the blessed life.

One of the most important characteristics of the Rule is that it helps us actually to work within our humanity, with our humanity as a font of desire for life and for happiness. The workshop of the Benedictine *conversatio*, of the life of conversion according to Saint Benedict, before the monastery, is our humanity, our human condition that is at the same time both universal and personal. And if the monastery is a workshop, this is true only inasmuch as it is where one works on the raw material of our human condition and our human vocation.

This is at bottom the method of Jesus, the one that he applies throughout the whole Gospel. One does not really encounter Jesus without also encountering our human vocation, and frequently Jesus must redirect his interlocutors to their own humanity, that they might then return to Him with true availability, open to the life and the joy that He came to bring them. “Go, call your husband and then come back here”, Jesus says to the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:16). She had already gotten started with spiritual discourses. No, this is useless. It is more urgent that she should encounter Jesus, bringing to him her human condition, without any attempt to hide her concrete, and also disordered, situation. Go, call you husband, call your man, the man who is inside of you, the human being who you are. And you will see that this being has needs that are much more profound and urgent than your questions about Jews and Samaritans.

All of the parables, too, if read attentively, return Jesus' interlocutors to their own humanity, to their down-to-earth humanity, to their heart. Frequently Jesus begins his parables by saying: the kingdom of God is like a man, a woman, who does this and that, like so many men and women who live and die on this earth, like the man whom we are. Our humanity is the field where the seed of the Kingdom, of the Gospel word, wants to sprout. This is why, at bottom Benedict did nothing other than offer us a journey in which our whole humanity, mysterious and poor, might emerge and humbly place itself at the disposal of the Lord, who wants to fertilize it with his own life and his own joy.

Who is man according to Saint Benedict? At bottom, one ought to begin by saying that Benedict does not have *his own* response to the question. For him, like for all those who sincerely ask themselves this question, man is a mystery unto himself, which means that man cannot define himself within his own humanity, from his intelligence, or from the feelings and experiences that he lives. As I have already emphasized, the most realistic observation is to recognize that the human being is a being of desire, of desire for life and for happiness, and this already reorients the response to the question of man beyond man himself.

This meaning of the mystery of the human being, this thought that man is a mystery unto himself, is not outside of our humanity, but rather constitutes its very heart. Man is man because he does not resolve by himself the mystery of his own existence, and cannot respond alone to the question that he has within himself: "Who am I?" The very fact that this question is inside of him is already a mystery. Why should an existing being pose for itself the question of why it exists? Can it not content itself with the very fact that it exists? Or at least content itself with the fact that it is aware of its own existence?

The problem is that the human being does not exist forever. He is born, and, above all, he dies, and this already notably complicates things. But the question about the meaning of our existence is not within us merely because of the mystery of our origin and of our demise. It is always within us, it always accompanies us, in every experience, in every circumstance of life. Our heart is an unending question of meaning; it ceaselessly poses the question of "why" to our existence. The mystery of our origin and of our demise is not confined to the two extremities of our life: it penetrates us, penetrates all of life, in every moment of our conscious existence.

Saint Benedict was not a philosopher, and, at bottom, was not a theologian either, but he was a man, and a man who had a very strong and acute sense of his humanity, and therefore of the mystery of his life. From his Rule, as I have already emphasized, emanates this acute understanding of humanity. One can feel it in all of the details of the life of the monastery about which he speaks. But it is explicitly

manifest where he reminds all monks that man is a mystery, and ought to be treated as such.

Now, what is the meaning of treating the human being as a mystery? It means precisely remembering that the thing which explains the human being, which gives him meaning, which bestows upon him his value, is greater than he is, is before him, is beyond him, is higher and deeper than he is. However, it is *in* him: it is indissolubly bound to his person, to his humanity.

The first consequence of this awareness of the mystery of the human being is therefore the meaning of his dignity, which is always greater than what else he may or may not be, what he may do or not do, what he may have or not have. This is what Saint Benedict expresses through his frequent use of the verb “to honor”. Even if we have already heard talk of this many times, it is particularly good to reconsider it in our desire to comprehend the meaning of man according to Saint Benedict.