

3. The great desire

To go more deeply into the topic of vocation and of joy, we must always meditate on the episode of the rich young man. It is a page of the Gospel that has to do not just with the beginning of a vocational path, but which must always accompany it, because every day, every instant, every step that we live out following Christ, presents us again with this same drama. This young man, in fact, goes to Jesus full of desire for fullness of life, and of happy life: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mk 10:17). He is a dissatisfied young man. He has many material goods and has an honest, virtuous life, who does not transgress any commandment. But he is not content. He understands that his heart is asking for more, is asking for something much greater, is asking for the infinite. He understands that his rich and virtuous life is asking for eternity, is asking for what does not end with death. Material goods and good actions end in death, but life demands something that would be stronger than death, it demands eternity, it demands to become an eternal life. It demands, deep down, "holy Easter" as St. Benedict tells us, that is, a life that has conquered sin and death and will no longer die.

It is interesting to note that, before meeting Jesus, the rich young man was certainly dissatisfied, but he was not sad. Why? Because joy was still the horizon of his life, because he was living in search of joy, of eternal life, of the fullness of life. He felt in himself a mysterious nostalgia for that joy of spiritual desire of holy Easter that St. Benedict speaks of. He felt that everything in him was reaching out toward something great, beautiful, eternal, and this gave meaning to his life, even to his riches and his moral effort to observe all the commandments. His life was stretched toward the fullness of life and of joy that Jesus will actualize for us in the paschal mystery. Perceiving this, his heart urged him vehemently, as if it were thrown forward, toward Jesus: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mk 10:17). So strong in him was the desire for eternal life and the intuition that in Jesus he could find it, that when he saw him passing from afar, he started running like a madman, to the point of falling at his feet. What drives him is not so much his youthful energy, but that desire, that question that he launches at Jesus at the end of his run: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Everything in him wants to live eternally; everything in him desires the life that only Christ can give us, as he will give it soon after this episode by dying on the cross and rising again.

But, after meeting Jesus, this young man goes off sad, with a different sadness that what felt before. Before he had a sadness that was full of desire, open to the infinite. Now it's like something has closed in him. The Gospel says that "his face darkened" (Mk 10:22), as if his face, his gaze, had been closed to the light. There comes to mind what St. John writes at the moment when Judas leaves the Upper Room to go betray Jesus: "And it was night" (Jn 13:30). At the moment when the rich young man did not want to follow Jesus out of fear of losing his riches, the desire for eternal life was extinguished in him, and so also "the joy of spiritual desire of holy Easter." It's like everything in his life was blocked. First he ran toward Jesus like an arrow shot toward a target. Now he stops and turns back. Everything he had and did, even his fidelity to the commandments of God – instead of being a prophecy of a fullness greater than everything, now has become a defensive wall against what he was looking for before. A defensive wall against eternal life, against joy, that is, against Jesus who is, in person, the eternal life and infinite joy of every man. The rich young man did not renounce a particular vocation, as one can renounce becoming a monk, a priest, or rather getting married and having kids. He renounced the vocation of his heart, the vocation to eternal life and the joy of his heart, of the heart of every person.

The particular vocation of each one of us, in fact, is nothing other than the vocation of our heart. The particular vocation of each one of us is the path on which our heart is called to follow to the end its vocation to eternal life and to the joy of possessing it, that is, its most profound desire.

The monastic vocation, from its beginnings, when it arose and spread in the Church after the era of the martyrs, was right away understood as the Christian vocation in which the call to follow Christ is everything. In a certain sense, the monastic vocation is the vocation whose content, aim, task is nothing other than the vocation itself. For this reason, the episode of the rich young man describes it in an essential way. We do not know what mission Jesus would have entrusted him with afterward. Probably an apostolic mission. But the Gospel recounts to us his essential vocation, the heart of every vocation: "Leave everything, give to the poor, come, follow me!" The monastic life, even if in time it took on many missions and works, in essence is concentrated on this fundamental and universal vocation.

St. Antony, father of monks, is the great paradigm of this vocation. For him everything started with hearing in church the proclamation of the Gospel according to Matthew, right where Jesus tells the rich young man: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mt 19:21). Antony later understands that to live out this vocation he had to venture into the desert, into solitude. St. Benedict will do the same: he perceives this calling to live nothing other than the calling of Jesus to leave everything to follow him, and he leaves in search of the desert. He receives the monastic habit from the monk Romanus and straightaway withdraws himself for three years in the cave of Subiaco.

Let us notice, however, that their vocation was not the desert. It was not the desert that was calling them. They chose the desert as the environment in which the vocation to follow Jesus could be all. The desert for them was where their whole life, their heart, their body could be focused on the call of Christ to leave all for Him. In fact, after three years St. Benedict understood that really the best environment for focusing on the vocation was no longer the absolute solitude of Subiaco but the cenobitic life at Montecassino. The reason for this was that the vocation that Benedict was following was the calling of Jesus to be with Him and not an abstract form of monastic life.

The Church has always needed this vocation. It has always needed persons called by Christ to focus on the calling of Christ, without other aim or task than that of living out and bearing witness to the fact that being called to be with Jesus is a full vocation, which fills one's life, which gives it meaning, which gives it, as Jesus says, a "perfection": "If you would be perfect ... follow me!" Perfection does not mean not having defects, frailties, and sins. Being perfect means reaching the goal of life, meeting and remaining with Him for whom our life has been made and granted to us. Being perfect, since God became man and let himself be encountered, means following Jesus, being with Him at every step of life, even when one falls, even when one must start over again each day to say yes as if not even a single millimeter of progress had been made. For perfection is not in us, but in Him, or rather: He himself is our perfection, and it becomes ours when we attach ourselves to Him. The gospel of the rich young man is important for showing that joy is essential to vocation. The sadness with which he says no to the vocation to follow Jesus makes us understand that joy and vocation go along together. To separate them, to think that the one could go before the other, is an error not only at the psychological but especially at the theological level.