

4) "... in the image and likeness of God"

If, as I have emphasized in the previous chapters, man is a mystery because it is only the reference to God that gives him meaning and significance, it is God whom we must ask in order to know "Who is the man who longs for life and desires to see happy days".

The place where God expresses himself, where God manifests himself, is the place where we ought to look; it is there where we ought to search, because it is there that we find the light which illuminates the human being. The entire meaning of man, the entire meaning of our humanity, comes to us from God, because man as a whole comes from God. The very question, "Who am I?", man cannot pose to himself; he must pose it to God. If he puts it to himself, it is a vain question, a question without any possible response. Naturally, the Word of God is inscribed also in every one of us, in our heart, in our intelligence, and also in our body. God speaks in each of his creatures, because every creature is an echo of the creative Word of God, is an objectivization of God's thought. But in the Scriptures, God renders explicit the fact that it is He who speaks, it is He who expresses personally all that exists. In the Scriptures, the name of the Sender of the Word written in all creation is written on the back of the envelope, and this permits better comprehension of what He writes to us, of what He tells us.

When I receive a letter, it is difficult to understand that which is written to me until I become aware of the identity of he who is reaching out to me. This is true also with respect to the message's importance. If on the back of the letter I should read, "Pope Francis", and furthermore this is hand written, it is evident that I would open the letter and read it with a little more attention and emotion than if I should have read "Father Meinrad"...

Man is a message, the sender of which is God in person. But the first recipient of the message is the message itself, is man, each one personally. And because of this, every man is also a message for the other, for his neighbor, for all the men of the earth. God speak to us human beings, each one, ourselves and all other men and women. To listen to the mystery of man, to consider it more deeply, means to listen to God.

But in the economy of Judeo-Christian revelation, it is given to us, with the man-who-is-a-message, the word of God upon man, which is then like an explanation that accompanies the gift, that accompanies the encrypted message that is man. At bottom, with respect to man, as with respect to God, the Bible gives an exegesis. It is normal for people to perform exegesis upon the Bible, but in reality it is the Bible that is itself an exegesis of God, of man, and of all of reality. The word of God sets forth and interprets for us the mystery of man.

Therefore it is useful to ask ourselves who man is in the story of creation in the book of Genesis. The most simple method is that of drawing out of this story some sort of list of themes about this topic that we might then utilize to understand the image of man in the Rule of Saint Benedict. I think that we will see how, at bottom, Benedict will do nothing other than create a place of life in which each monk is called and accompanied to live his humanity in its truth, the truth about man that God has revealed, in particular in the story of Genesis.

Who is man in Genesis?

Man is made by God, by a God who expresses himself in the plural, the God whom we know to be Trinity. He is made in the image of this God, in God's likeness: "And God said: Let us make man in our image, in our likeness" (Gen 1:26).

What is the meaning of this image and likeness of God? In the first place, it is that man is called to have dominion, to exercise the authority that God transmits to him: "Have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, over the tame beasts, over all the wild beasts, and all of the reptiles that crawl on the earth!" (v. 26). Man is therefore created from the very beginning in a total dependence upon God, because God makes him, He gives him being – but, within this dependence, God transmits to him a supreme dignity, a space of shared responsibility with Himself. Man is created dependent, and at the same, ruling. This is an important aspect that we must retain to understand the Rule of Saint Benedict, where the two dimensions of service and of authority, of obedience and of responsibility, interact with one another, and are always present.

Yet the story of creation continues: "God created man in his image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (v. 27).

Man and woman, male and female. What does this mean in a monastic community?

We should ask ourselves about this in relation to the significance of the aspect of human nature that is fruitfulness. The book of Genesis in fact continues in this way: "God blessed them and said to them: 'Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth; subdue it and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living being that crawls on the earth'." (v. 28).

It should be noted here that it is after having given to man and woman the vocation of fruitfulness to fill the earth with their own descendants that He reveals to them the command to exercise dominion over all the animals conceived in His thought before their creation.

Then there is the question of food. "God said: 'Behold, I give to you every plant that produces seed and that is on the earth, and every tree in which there is fruit,

which produces seed; they shall be your food” (v. 29). Only after the flood will man receive from God permission to eat the flesh of the animals (Gen 9:3).

The first story of the creation of man finishes here, with the satisfied gaze of God upon the man whom He has just created, and on the Sabbath rest: “And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And evening came and morning followed: the sixth day. Thus were brought to completion heaven and earth and all their array. Then God in the seventh day put an end to the work which He had done, and ceased from all His work in the seventh day. God blessed the seventh day and consecrated it, because on it He had ceased from every work that He had made in creation” (Gen 1:31-2:3).

We will again find these truths in the Rule when Saint Benedict will express his respect for every man (“Honor all men”, RB 4:8), but also in his act of structuring every week of the community’s life starting from the “Sabbatical” center, Sunday.