

4. With Jesus in paradise

When I visited the church of Chau Son Nord, I thought that everything had already been expressed in the two phrases above the door and then on the altar: "*VOLO TECUM*" and "*ECCE VOBISCUM SUM OMNIBUS DIEBUS*." Instead, when I passed behind the altar I discovered a third inscription etched on a stone that practically is found inside the altar, as if it expressed the deepest secret that we are called to discover when we come into the monastery to be with Jesus. The phrase is: "*ESSE CUM IESU PARADISUS* – Being with Jesus is Paradise."

This phrase expresses faith's awareness that communion with Christ is the fulfillment of human life, of redeemed human life. This phrase evokes the dialogue between the crucified Jesus and the good thief: "'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' And he said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise'" (Lk 23:42–43).

Whoever encounters Jesus from the depth of his desire to be with Him, drawn by his presence totally offered for communion with us, is like an Adam who rediscovers the lost paradise. No longer just the earthly paradise, but that of the kingdom of God in which to live eternally with the Risen One. Paradise is no longer a place in which to be with God: paradise is the very communion with God in Christ.

To reach this fullness each of us is called to follow Christ in our vocation. And it is a fullness that, precisely because Jesus is already with us every day to the end of the world, we are granted to experience already in this life, each day, in every instant of our existence. Jesus tells the good thief not "in three days you will be with me in paradise," but "*today* you will be with me in paradise." We do not need to wait until death to enter paradise because communion with Jesus is offered to us now, and it is itself our paradise. The crucified thief was already with Jesus. For him paradise began in that moment.

How many people who suffer with faith, united to Jesus, for example in sickness, give witness to an incredible fullness of joy! They share the experience of the good thief, who was the first to enjoy salvation in Christ, by living out the last moments of his life with a happiness that was greater than the pain. Perhaps only the heart of Mary most holy could perceive this joy in pain with him, because she experienced from the moment of her immaculate conception the grace accorded to the good thief at the point of death, the grace to live human life in full communion with God. Mary suffers atrociously, but the reason for this suffering, the love that unites her to her Son, is also the reason for her immense joy.

When we live in communion with Christ, our very life becomes a paradise and we are granted to transform into paradise every place and environment into which we bring this communion with Him.

This is also the sign that every Christian community is called to incarnate in the world: being, that is, a human place that becomes paradise because one comes to it to be with Jesus. Everything in monastic life has been given and offered to us so that we can live with Christ in prayer, in work, in silence, in all the situations and ages of

human life. The monastery is the space in which we are called to show truly that communion with Christ transforms every circumstance and condition of life into paradise, not because we become angels or because the struggles and difficulties disappear, but because we help and educate each other to live everything always with Jesus.

But what is paradise for us? The phrase “Being with Jesus is paradise” helps us understand that paradise is more a relationship than a place. Every human being carries in his heart the desire to be loved and to love, the desire to live out relationships of friendship. The newborn starts to be aware of itself by finding its joy and satisfaction in its relationship with its mommy. As one grows, the need to be fulfilled in friendship expands to other people, becoming also more dramatic, because each of us feels the difficulty of remaining in communion with others which original sin introduced into human experience.

Leaving the earthly paradise, Adam and Eve discover the struggle of relating to God and also to each other, a struggle that, already with their first sons, Cain and Abel, becomes tragic, to the point of killing a brother. The man created for a relationship of love with God and his brothers arrives to the point of denying his own nature by killing his own brother and hence eliminating the possibility of being with him. Cain, by killing his brother, kills himself, the meaning and beauty of his life. But God, though condemning the crime, puts a sign on his forehead, probably a cross, so that whoever encounters him not kill him, that is, not enter into the same inhuman logic of living out relationships as if they were not a good to be guarded and cultivated (cf. Gen 4:15). In the earthly paradise, Adam and Eve cultivated the plants and flowers to taste their fruits. Now, it is as if God had made humanity attentive to consider human relationships as the true garden to cultivate to live with joy and bear fruit.

Jesus will say this explicitly in the last Supper discourses. In chapter 15 of St. John, he speaks of himself as the true vine on which the Father labors, and we, the disciples of Christ, are the branches of this vine. The grapevine is not normally isolated. Perhaps we should think that Jesus speaks of himself as a vineyard, so a garden in which the Father cultivates the vines. In any case, Jesus tells his disciples that the fruit of his vineyard is not so much the grape or the wine, but fraternal love. In fact, he takes back up the verb “remain,” which he first applied to the connection of the branches to the vine, applying it to obedience to his love, loving each other as He loved us.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.” (Jn 15:16–17)

See, this is the garden, the planting, the vineyard, this is the “paradise” which coincides for us with communion with Christ. Being with Jesus is not only the paradise of definitive fullness of communion with Him, but also the garden in which we have been called to cultivate fraternal love.