

5. Walking toward the Father's embrace

To illustrate more simply what the mystery of baptism produces in us, I like to refer to a work of art that seems to me to express it in a symbolic way. I'm talking about the painting "First Steps" by Vincent van Gogh, which interprets in his own style a painting of Millet. In it a child of about a year old, still held on its feet by its mother, reaches its arms full of joy toward its father, who awaits it a few meters away, smiling with his arms open.



How our whole Christian life is illustrated by this painting, to which I will return because for me it illustrates the essence of what it means to live in hope. But for now I will limit myself to looking at it as a symbolic image of the new life into which baptism inserts us. Baptism is like being put on our feet by Mother Church to begin to walk toward the Father's embrace, who draws us to himself and awaits us with joy. During our life we see the Father by meeting Christ. It is in Christ, present in his Church, and showed to us by the Church, that we are granted to see that the Father awaits us, invites us to walk toward him, because he wants us to be with him in eternal life. The Church supports us, not to keep us back, but so that we can learn to walk and also run toward the Father. The baby in the Van Gogh painting is like Adam whom the Risen One came to revive from the underworld in which he was lying prisoner and paralyzed. Christ takes him by the hand, picks him up, and leads him to the Father. The whole of humanity is put on its feet by the Risen One, to walk in a new life, entirely directed toward the embrace of God by whom we now know we are loved to the point of sacrificing his only-begotten Son for us.

Baptism becomes aware in us in the same way in which a child realizes that its father is standing before it and calling it and inviting it to walk toward him, promising it an embrace full of love. The mother, that is the Church, helps the baby stay on its feet, and certainly talks to it about its dad, invites the child to look toward its father and to go toward him with confidence.

The Church, the Christian community in which we live, is itself if it does this, if it pushes us toward the Father who draws us. And it does so by announcing Christ, “the way, the truth, and the life” of our life, without whom no one can go to the Father (cf. Jn 14:6), and seeing whom we see the Father who loves us (cf. Jn 14:9), the Father who opens for us the arms of his heart, to welcome us.

Some fathers of the Church have affirmed that the Son and the Holy Spirit are like the two arms that the Father reaches toward us to receive us to Himself.

The first steps that that baby takes to go toward its dad are the symbol of the steps that we make through our whole life to go toward God. Taking those few steps that permit it to go and embrace its dad, that child begins the path of a whole life, which perhaps will last 80 or 90 years. Analogously, the whole path of our earthly life, long or short as it may be, represents our first steps in a life that is not limited to earthly life. The earthly life is our first steps of eternal life, because they are steps in which the Church teaches us to go toward the Father. If in one way or another our life is not directed toward reaching God’s embrace, in reality we are not walking, we are not progressing on the path for the sake of which we were given life. Jesus came to spur us on to go toward the Father by keeping himself before us, near us, such that we hear his voice and see his face and his arms, like the child in the painting sees and hears its dad.

For us to realize that this is what life is changes everything. Above all, realizing this, that is, accepting the Gospel of Christ who announces the Father to us and calls us to follow him toward Him, fills every step of our life with meaning and beauty, even the laborious steps, even the steps through the dark valleys or deserts. The path of life, the path of our vocation, becomes joyful, becomes full of confidence, because we travel it while being drawn by the good face of the Father who in Christ tells us “Come! Come to me! Come Home! I’m waiting for you! You can walk!”

This confidence, this joy in the path, is hope. Not so much the hope of managing to walk, of managing to cross through or climb an arduous path, but the certain hope of being able to walk, to advance, because we go toward the Lord, toward the embrace of God who gives meaning and eternity to our life.

This hope is indispensable for living out any vocation. It is indispensable for living a human life as such, and living it truly, that is, respecting the reason and the purpose for which it has been granted to us. And it is absolutely indispensable for living out a vocation, the vocation of our life, of whatever nature it may be, whether it is a lay vocation, in the world, in a family, or in virginity.

Often we see that the young do not persevere in their vocation, that they renounce it after the first steps. Perhaps because they think they have to have the strength and ability to travel a long path. Instead, even if they had the strength and ability, that would not be what would make them faithful to the very end. It is hope that is lacking, it is hope that we need. To live out a vocation to its very depth, a mission in life, we must venture into the path with eyes and heart directed toward the Father who calls us, who draws us and wants to embrace us.