

5. Paradise or hell

Being with Jesus is our paradise, the condition in which we are redeemed from Adam and Eve's distancing from God after sin. In the paradisiac condition before sin, the human being live his whole life in communion with the Lord, and for this reason everything was beautiful and harmonious, in human relationships too, also between Adam and Eve. Sin wounded the communion of man with God. It was like an alliance between Adam and God had been broken, through the unilateral decision of man. The departure from the earthly paradise did not consist so much of leaving behind a place, but a relationship, a condition of communion with God that was gratuitous, that was a gift, a grace.

The earthly paradise is a symbolic image of a state of communion between God and the human creature in which the creature finds meaning and beauty. Everything, from the flowers to the stars, was created not so much for man, but *for the communion of man and God*. When man wants to enjoy creation only for himself, forgetting the relationship with God, he ruins it, he destroys it. We see this in the condition in which we find nature today, after too much exploitation aimed only at human profit. Only a religious spirituality that looks to and makes use of creation in the light of and for the purposes of communion with God enables one to enjoy its beauty, to make it stand out, and to taste all the good that creation offers us with amazement and gratitude. Only by thinking to the Father who gives them to us can we use all the creatures with truth and beauty. But also with brotherhood, since communion with the Father urges us to use everything in fraternal sharing.

On his own man is not able and does not know how to return to this paradisiacal condition of relating to everything in communion with the Father. For this reason God came to live with us, he became Emmanuel, God-with-us, to show us the truth and beauty of our humanity, the "*magnifica humanitas*" that Pope Leo XIV brilliantly describes in his encyclical.

Jesus lived out his relationship with each person and thing, with the stars and flowers, the birds and the sky, with all creatures, with a heart always in communion with the Father, always in trusting adoration of the Father. He showed how it is possible for man to rediscover paradise, to be able to live anew in that communion with God that transforms the whole reality around us. To return to paradise it is not necessary to change location, but to change the heart with which we live in the reality that surrounds us. When Jesus granted him to be with Him in paradise, the repentant thief did not come off of the cross: the cross itself immediately became for him a paradise, because from that moment he knew that he could live out that circumstance with Jesus, like Jesus, with the heart of Christ.

This is the transformation that Jesus promised and offered to everyone when he exclaimed: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:27-28).

First he describes paradise as mutual awareness of the Father and the Son in the love of the Holy Spirit. Paradise is the communion of the three divine persons. One does not enter it by means of a door, but through the encounter with the Son who introduces us into his relationship of love with the Father. Jesus came to reveal the Father to us. Not giving us a discourse about Him or describing his face to us, but associating us with his relationship with the Father. Living with Jesus, we discover his filial relationship with the Father, and we are drawn by it, we would like to live it with Him, with his own happiness and confidence, with his own love.

When Jesus tells us to learn from Him, meek and humble of heart, to find rest for our lives, for our soul (cf. Mt 11:29), he invites us to unite ourselves to Him so closely, so intimately, that with his heart we live out his relationship with the Father. And this transforms into paradise the whole reality we live, even if it be wearisome and painful, because all then resounds with the communion of the heart with God. Our life, in all the circumstances through which we pass, becomes a space of communion with the Lord, a place in which to be with Christ, and this is already paradise.

For this reason we must understand well what St. Benedict means when he twice asks us to prefer nothing to Christ and his love (cf. RB 4:21 and 72:11).

Let us notice especially that in chapter 72 of the Rule he makes a list of good attitudes that make us live in the monastic community as if it were a paradise. In fact at the beginning he says that “as there is a bad and bitter zeal that separates from God and leads to hell, so there is also a good zeal that distances one from the vices and leads to God and to eternal life” (RB 72:1–2).

The alternative is always between being with God or not, and hence between paradise and hell. The list of attitudes that denote the good zeal describes a way of relating oneself with people and circumstances that is imbued with meek and humble love like the heart of Jesus. And this is what makes a human community a Christian community, a sign and anticipation of paradise.

So, the secret for this to be possible is contained in how we live out our preference for Christ. Chapter 72 ends with the words: “Let them put absolutely nothing before Christ: and may he lead us all together to eternal life” (RB 72:11–12).

Whether it be in chapter 4 or in chapter 72, to express the preference for Christ St. Benedict uses the Latin verb “*praeponere*,” which the English “put before” translates literally: to set in front, to put first, to put forward.

St. Benedict asks us not to put anything between us and Christ, that there be nothing between us and the Lord, that nothing separate us, that nothing encumber our relationship with Christ. So, he asks us to be with Him without anything in between, to live a total communion with Him, perfectly clinging to His presence. That between our heart, our life, our “I”, and the “Thou” of Jesus there be only clinging tight, belonging, immediate contact, perfect communion.

Only thus can Jesus guide us all together to eternal life, that is, into paradise.