

6. The promise in the Rule of St. Benedict

I was saying that, to live out the human vocation and whatever personal vocation, hope is necessary. Let us see how St. Benedict was aware of this.

At the beginning I cited the passage of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that says: “Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness” (CCC n. 1817).

It is important then to be aware that the promise of God, the fundamental promise to which we are called to anchor ourselves ever anew, is the promise of eternal life and happiness.

This idea of reaching toward eternal life as man’s supreme happiness takes us back to a passage of the Prologue of the Rule of St. Benedict that I never tire of citing, because it is fundamental for understanding how each Christian vocation is sown in the field of our humanity, of our heart, made as they are for eternal life and complete happiness. St. Benedict indeed has monastic life begin from a mendicant God who goes about the world in the midst of the crowd crying out a verse of Psalm 34: “Who is it that desires life and longs to see prosperous days?” (Ps 34:13; RB Prol. 14–15). This question, essential in every heart, in every culture, in every religion, this question is a provocation, like a challenge, but a challenge full of promise. That mendicant God has in himself the good that he proposes, He himself is the good he offers, He himself is life and fulness of joy for the human heart. The Lord challenges the crowd, not to judge it, but because in Him there is a source of life and happiness that thirsts to spring forth, to reach and meet all humanity. In Him the embrace to receive man, like the arms of the father in the van Gogh painting, is already open and extended toward every human being from the eternal instant in which he thought it and created it with love.

St. Benedict makes everything start from this proposal and promise of God’s, but also from the freedom of whoever in the midst of the crowd responds: “I do!”

Starting from this elementary response of freedom that recognizes that it desires life and happiness, God makes the path begin, a “path of life” (RB Prol. 20). A path of education, of formation, of accompaniment so that the “I” who says, “Here I am!” can grow in that awareness and experience (cf. RB Prol 14–21). A human heart that says, “I do!”, that says, “Here I am!”, that is: “Look at me! I am here! I am ready!”, is a heart that express a hope in that which God promises us, calling us to life and to joy from the very moment of our creation; it is a heart that expresses a hope in the promise of life and happiness that God himself is for us by calling us, drawing us to himself, creating us to live and be happy.

If the hope in us, in living out the Christian life and even more our particular vocation, does not start and ever restart from this fundamental dialogue, which more than a dialogue of words is an ontological dialogue, an anthropological dialogue, then it will always be a fictitious hope, a hope that does not have its feet on the ground but will hop from one little need to another, from one passing necessity to another, instead of settling itself on our deepest being, our heart made

to be aware of the fundamental desire of life, which is the desire animated by the heart of God reflected by our heart.

In fact, in the Prologue of the Rule, to the man who responds “I do!” to God who promises him life and happiness, God responds in his turn with the gift of himself: “even before you ask me, I will say to you: Here I am” (RB Prol. 18). And the Rule adds, with wonder: What, dear brothers, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us? See how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life.” (Prol. 19)

This dialogue between God and man is not only what happens at the arising of a particular vocation, like the monastic vocation: it is a dialogue that constitutes us ontologically, in which the life and path of every human being is unfolded, of every human freedom. If we enter into dialogue with the God who proposes us life and happiness, if we become aware of his presence and welcome it, if, then, we accept living in communion with Him, precisely in this way He creates our freedom, creates our fundamental freedom, that of choosing the life and happiness that God offers us and for which he desired, loved, created us. Freedom is called to choose that for which it is made, that for which we have been made. Or better: human freedom is this call to choose Him who makes us, him without whom we do not exist.

Hence it is from this point, which is at the origin of our existence – at the origin, as I was saying, not only chronologically, but ontologically, for which it is a permanent point, an eternal point, not only in God but also in our heart –, it is from this point that the path of life comes to coincide with the path of hope.

For us this path is not linear, is not always ascending. It is a path full of moments of confusion, of moments of disorientation, of falling down and falling back. And this is true for the personal life of each one as it is for the life of a community. It is important, then, to understand how all this is presented and how hope is given to us and asked of us precisely so we can progress on this path, notwithstanding everything.