

7. The presence that saves everything

The presence of Jesus changes everything, makes all things new: “Behold, I make all things new,” the Lord says in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 21:5). Jesus makes all things new by saving us, coming to save us. God could have saved us from Heaven. Instead he came to save us with his presence, as a phrase of St. Bernard’s expresses it, which I often cite: “He wanted to come who could have contented himself with helping us” (*Sermon 3 for the Vigil of Christmas*).

It is the promise made by God through the prophet Jeremiah: “I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me” (Jer 32:40).

We are saved if God is with us. It is not enough for God to do something for us, that he assist us from far off. That is something he does always anyway by granting us existence, granting us each instant of our life. But he also does this for the rocks, the plants, and the animals. Existing, for every creature, is a gracious gift of the goodness of God. We, however, have not been made by God just to exist, but to *be with Him*, for a relationship of love with Him, we have been made to live in paradise, in the condition, that is, in which communion with God is pure and mutual love and joy. Yes: “*ESSE CUM IESU PARADISUS*.”

In this light we also understand what the “fear of God” is about which Jeremiah speaks, and which often comes up in the Bible and in the Rule of St. Benedict.

True “fear of God” does not consist in fearing God’s presence, but in fearing to lose it. When Adam and Eve hid themselves after their sin when God came to walk in the garden of Eden and to call them, they did not have “fear of God,” but were only frightened of God, frightened of his punishment. They projected onto the Lord their sense of guilt. They were frightened of not being able to defend themselves from the Lord’s punishment. Instead, God, who is love, as Jeremiah says, cannot come to us except to assist us, to do us good, even if we have sinned, even if we have offended him. To Judas who comes toward Jesus to betray him, Jesus says, “My friend!” But Judas does not go toward Jesus to be with Him, to stick close to his presence, but rather to hand him over, to rid himself of Him, so that the guards can take him and carry him far from his disciples and friends. Judas comes near to Jesus and kisses him to suppress his presence in their midst, his presence in the world, and hence salvation. He does not imagine that precisely this delivering of him over will make the presence of Christ even more real, more given, and hence more salvific for all, except for those who refuse it.

In the Rule of St. Benedict the importance of *timor Domini*, the fear of the Lord, comes back up often, to live out in truth the monastic vocation and every task that can be entrusted to us in the monastery. And every time the fear of God is asked for to stick close to the presence of the Lord in the brothers, in the sick, in the guests and pilgrims, to recognize, that is, and serve adequately the incarnate presence of Christ.

For St. Benedict the fear of God is a question of love for God and for neighbor, for God in the neighbor. In fact, in chapter 72 he summarizes the right sense of the fear of God when he asks that the monks “fear God with love – *amore Deum timeant*” (RB 72:9).

Understanding the fear of God as a desire not to be separated off from the presence of the Lord, as fear of forgetting it, of not recognizing it and adoring it in every encounter and circumstance, or in every gesture of prayer, service, work, responsibility, is a great light on our life and vocation, and on the vocation of every Christian. The whole of life is unified by faith in Jesus who is present, in the desire always to contemplate his Face, to receive his benevolent and beneficent gaze on our life.

When Jesus looked upon Peter in the courtyard of the high priest (cf. Lk 22:61–62), even if for Peter it was like being pierced by a sword right in his heart, it was truly an act of immense benevolence, because in that gaze Peter rediscovered the whole truth of his life, the whole meaning of his vocation, his whole dependence on the presence of Jesus. For this reason, for him it was certainly terrible to know that Jesus was dead, because it was as if he himself had died and everything in him was reduced to nothing. But this made it such that, for him, the resurrection was a total rebirth, a resurrection of his existence, of his heart, of his truest “I.”

Every time that in the Order we witness some grave failings of truth, of obedience, of humanity, of fidelity to the vocation, I realize more and more that the real problem is not so much sin, infidelity, and not even the wickedness and lies that certain people express. We are all sinners, unfaithful, wicked, and false, in one way or another. The real problem is the lack of fear of God, the lack of fear of losing the presence of Christ. I do not say this to condemn, but it is important to understand that the real problem is precisely this, and for that reason it is on this that we must all seek to work, to help out, to form, and to be converted. One does not become a saint because one is good, faithful, true, without sin, but because one permits the Lord who is present to save us from our wickedness, infidelity, deceit, and sin.

Above all, one must not forget that, if the fear of God is the fear of losing his presence, one is educated toward it by practicing not fear but Presence. One does not learn to swim by practicing the fear of drowning but by taking a taste of the beauty of being in water, keeping oneself afloat, and advancing with determined movements. Only if we take a taste of the Lord’s Presence, which is the most beautiful and good reality that our life can inhabit, we would be truly attentive not to lose it.

But is the presence of Christ truly the heart of our communities’ life?