

11. The embrace of God

Meditating with Palestrina on Psalm 42, we have taken a taste of a few fundamental themes for the truth of our life in Christ which I found expressed also in the three phrases in the church of Chau Son Nord: desire, the expansion of the soul before the YOU of God for whom it is made, in the experience, that is, of God's embrace, in the end the experience that precisely this itinerary leads us to a surprising and shared rest, that creates among all a perfect harmony. Finding together the fulfillment of the heart in God brings to completion the fraternal communion among us.

This is the itinerary that St. Benedict translated into the path of cenobitic monastic life that begins when God seeks a man who desires life and happiness (cf. RB Prol. 14–15; Ps 34:13), passes through the life of fraternal humility in which “the heart expands and runs along the way of God's commandments” (RB Prol. 49), and is completed in being brought all together by Christ to eternal life (cf. RB 72:12).

When one does not live Christian and monastic life with this intensity, it becomes a path without meaning, which does not accompany our humanity to the fullness of life with Christ and in Christ for which He died on the cross and rose again. Living our vocation intensely does not mean living it perfectly, as “saints right away,” but living it with truth, including the truth of our frailness and our sin.

When the soul, that is the heart, meets Christ and finds rest in Him, a rest that floods our whole life and every aspect of life with meaning and peace, it sees that that “*Te Deus – You, O God*” that expands it in fulfillment is an embrace, a belonging, of surprising dimensions.

The embrace is the form of God's love for us. An embrace of surprising dimensions, surprising in the involvement, indeed, of one's whole life. One wanted a fulfillment that would free him from trials, from sickness, from effort, from miseries, from hostilities, from antipathies, from boredom, a fulfillment then that permitted him to flee all this, to leave it behind, and see now how in the experience of that fulfillment everything is included, everything is embraced, finds fulfillment, that is, in belonging to the Lord. Above all, all relationships are embraced, even the most negative, exhausting, odious; even those in which we ourselves are negative, exhausting, and odious. And we realize that this is exactly what we needed, this charity, this charity of God that becomes ours in his embrace. We find that we did not need to flee anything, but rather to find an embrace large enough, expanded enough, *magnificent* enough, *magnifying* enough, to embrace everything and everyone, everything in us and everything in everyone. We needed an expanding of the heart, of a capacity to magnify, literally to make things bigger, which our soul desired but could not give itself. The surprise is that, once embraced by God and embracing God, the soul embraces everything and everyone. But it is made capable of this because it learns this universal embrace by letting itself be embraced by the Lord.

How does a baby learn to hug? By letting itself be hugged by its mommy and daddy. It always makes me smile to see to see very little babies who want to hug another baby. You can see that the gesture is not yet decisive, measured, proportionate. They don't know where to put their hands, where to put their head, if they need to pull hard or soft. They perform with trouble an experience of which they are object, of which they have perfect experience when they are embraced by their parents, by their grandparents, or by their older siblings. I have always in my eyes an image of a young boy whom I met in the middle of a poor region of Eritrea. He must have been about twelve years old. He had in his arms his little brother, maybe three years old, and he was doing it with a tenderness, with a love, with a pride before which I told myself: "Ah, if only in our communities we knew how to love like this, to embrace like this, if we had this tender and mature concern for each other!"

I was saying that a baby experiences perfectly its parents' embrace. A mother's embrace of her baby, from the very first day, is always perfect, humanly perfect, it is missing nothing, it has an absolute naturalness. See, the baby intuits that it is called to correspond to that experience, that it is called to make it its own, because *naturally* it wants to become like its mommy, like its daddy, it intuits that its growth must follow the tracks of belonging, and hence of the embrace that expresses it. But when it sets about trying to embrace other children, there is a hassle, it makes unfitting gestures, it puts a little finger into the other child's eye, or it clasps it too tight and hurts it, or bonks its head against the other's head, or its nose against the other's nose. On the one hand it hesitates and at the same time is too impulsive. Basically, it needs to perform it to the point of assimilating a gesture, a relationship, a relating itself that passively already constitutes it, which is already the passive fullness of its being, so that it can become its appearance, its gesture, its relationship with others.

This is true for our whole human, spiritual, vocational growth: it is necessary that what constitutes us passively, objectively, what we freely receive, become the active and subjective constituting of our person. It is above all necessary that the deed with which God shapes us become a free form of our personal expression. In clearer words, it is necessary that God's loving gaze upon us, that gaze that creates us, that shapes us, that grants us existence at every moment and for eternity, become the loving gaze of our heart toward God and others. Man finds the truth of himself when he lifts up his gaze toward the Lord's gaze, to find that he is loved and forgiven, and is called to love God and forgive his neighbor. Because when looking at the Father's good gaze, each of us sees not only that he is loved and forgiven, but that God loves and forgives all people. One cannot lift one's gaze to the face of God without feeling called to love everyone with the same love. This is the instrument of good works from chapter 4 of the Rule of St. Benedict that, if we truly observe it, would change the world: "In the love of Christ, pray for your enemies" (RB 4:72).