

12. God, salvation of my face

We have seen that Psalm 42 repeats twice a refrain that is taken back up in Psalm 43, which was originally united with 42:

“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, salvation of my face and my God.” (Ps 42:5,11; 43:5)

One senses the whole feebleness of his soul, a sadness that shakes the heart, a restlessness that one does not know where it comes from or where it goes, a frailty that makes everything anxious and shaky, agitated, fearful, not free. But there is at least a glimmer, and above all an encounter, that dispels the clouds and makes one hope in God as in the sun that lifts up behind the clouds. And then the heart opens up to the renewed possibility of praising God, of thanking him, of singing of his salvation instead of remaining oppressed by lamentation over oneself and one's own situation. Then we understand, or at least intuit, that staying with belonging to the Lord, indeed with his embrace that constitutes us, that staying with “my God” saves our face, saves and constitutes our person. Better: we recognize that the salvation of our face, of that which we are in ourselves and in relationship with everyone and everything, is connected to belonging to the Lord, to being His, to being embraced by Him.

And this is a hope that is overflowing with gratitude: “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him!” Hoping in God means recognizing that being His saves our person, the face of our person, it means that it gives us identity and puts us in relationship with others. Being God's saves us in our “I” made to be unique even in relationship. The face gives us identity, is unique, but it gives us identity in the measure in which it enables us to look, speak, pose the lips in a smile or in sadness, to express on our forehead calm, scorn, severity or amazement. My face is not just the appearance of my “I,” but its *manifestation*, its clear appearance. A face is not beautiful if it makes itself viewed, but for how it views. The face is not an object, but the manifestation of a personality, of an “I” willed and loved for the sake of loving.

This is precisely what God wants to save in us. It is in this salvation that we can hope, it is this salvation that opens us up to praising God: “I shall again praise him.”

This true face can also express itself even when sickness, or fire like at Crans Montana, destroys the physical face of a person. The most beautiful face that I have ever seen in my life was that of a young boy, Matteo, absolutely deformed, whom I met years ago. Because it was a face that, without eyes, without a mouth, without ears, without anything, expressed to me a capacity for encounter, for joy at meeting me, at meeting everyone, that I have never seen in anyone else. It was a face in which the heart blossomed directly, and a heart in which Christ clearly dwelt.

“Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, salvation of my face and my God.”

Consider if, to solve all our problems, personal, communal, ecclesial, ecumenical, global, we started from here, from this hope, from this truth of relationship with ourselves and with everyone that consists in letting God save our face from every falsehood and mask, from every negativity of scorn for ourselves, for others, for everything and everyone, even for God.

In the Rule, St. Benedict returns many times to the importance of the view we take of each other. For example, he asks the monks to humbly ask pardon from elders who show them an irritated face, so that the irritation be transformed into a blessing (cf. RB 71:7–8). Also when he asks us “not to give a false peace” (RB 4:25), he teaches us not to show a hypocritical face to our brothers.

In human experience, the true evil deep down did not begin to manifest itself with original sin but when Cain looked ill upon his brother Abel.

“And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.’ Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him” (Gen 4:4b–9).

The lie that the serpent insinuated into the heart and mind of Adam and Eve becomes with Cain a principle of falseness that, starting from the heart, pollutes all relationships, with ourselves, with others, with God. Guided by this lie, Cain loses contact with the truth of himself and of everything, and this generates hatred and violence. How evident it is today, also at the global level, that the evil that can come to the point of destroying entire cities and peoples, and which could destroy the whole of mankind, is born and nourished always by the deceit of faces cast down through a false conception of self and hence of others!

In this episode, the protagonist is actually the face of Cain which, dominated by envy and by the hatred in his heart, becomes “fallen,” that is cast down, to the earth. It no longer lifts itself up in desire, in the gaze directed toward the stars, to heaven, to God. It is closed in on itself, on its angry and frustrated ego. It closes up because it sees nothing but itself. It no longer wants to see the other; and in fact it gets rid of him, eliminates him, not only when it kills him, but already when it closes itself off to fraternal relations with him.

God makes him “face” the condition of his face, as if he put a mirror in front of him, telling him, “See what a sad and sulking face you have! Why do you keep it downcast, turned in on yourself? If you do well, if you are aimed toward the good, you could keep it high!”

The height of the human face is determined by the gaze, by the direction of the gaze. If I look at the sky, my face is high, not downcast. If I direct my heart’s gaze toward God, my face is high, the highest, as high as reaching God, seeing God. But also when I look upon my brother or sister with kindness, with gratitude, with a smile, with approval, with esteem, recognizing their value, their true beauty, that of the heart, of the good they do, of the pain they suffer, my face is high, not downcast.