

13. The desire that defines the self

I was saying that, when it hears a vocation, the human heart emerges as it were from the waves of the ocean to manifest that it is there, and that it is there exactly as a search for life, as a search for salvation. And it is then that, in man, the “I”, an identity, his personal being, is affirmed.

This theme of self-identity has perhaps become more dramatic than ever in the society and culture in which we live today, but it is not a new theme. We know, in fact, that in the Prologue of his monastic Rule, St. Benedict puts on stage a God who is searching for man, and who searches for him “*in multitudine populi*” (RB Prol. 14), in the midst of the crowd. What does it mean to search for a man in the middle of a crowd? Perhaps that the crowd is not a multitude of men? It is not like searching for a needle in a haystack, but it is as if God were searching for needle in a million needles. Would it not be enough just to take one? Are they not all the same?

The fact is that God is not searching for just any man. He searches for him with a precise qualification, which he expresses by citing Psalm 33: “Is there a man who wants life and desires to see good days?” (Ps 33:13; Prol. 15). And to find him in the vast crowd of people, God must *shout* this question: *clamat*.

St. Benedict likes to present to us a God on a panicked, I would say agonizing, search, like a father or a mother who has lost their child in the middle of a crowd. But what precisely identifies the man whom God needs is not a name, because God does not yet know who this man is, but a desire for life and happiness: Who is he who wants (*vult*) life and desires (*cupit*) to see [that is to experience] good days, “*dies bonos*”: prosperous and beautiful days.

And it is precisely in regard to this question that, in the text of the Rule, the word *ego*, “I”, appears for the first time. “If you, when you hear this, answer: I do!...” (Prol. 16). God searches amidst the crowd for a man who responds “I” to the question: Who is the man who desires life and happiness?

In a few lines, St. Benedict, together with the whole biblical and patristic tradition, has transmitted to mankind a fundamental concept, on which will depend whether the culture of any age is true or not, or rather, is *human* or not. This concept involves the definition of the human self, of the personal “I” proper to man, that the man has received from God and which not even original sin could negate. And that is, that what defines and qualifies the self, that which defines and qualifies the identity of a man, is not first of all a possession, but *a desire*. St. Benedict reminds us that the self is not defined by what it has, and not by what it is in itself, or thinks that it is, but by the desire that it turns toward another, by the desire of a good for itself, of a life and happiness for itself, that recognizes the need to seek from Another, that it does not create for itself, that it does not give to itself.

It seems fundamental to me to recover this conception of the self, or rather this feeling, this awareness of one's own self, because it is there that the deepest discomfort of contemporary society resides, in all cultures, it seems to me. The problem of every society and cultural epoch, is not so much the thousand problems emerging in them, but the self-awareness of the persons living there.

Mankind is always, in one way or another, a "*multitudo populi*", as St. Benedict wrote, an expression that suggests the idea of an anonymous multiplicity, simultaneously united in time and space and yet pervaded by divisions, disagreements, conflicts, contradictions. Every human being is part of this crowd, and as such is subject to conditioning and pressure. The tensions inherent in being part of a multiple whole give rise to positive and negative forces, that unite for good and for ill, that can divide in a destructive way, or separate to construct a new unity, a new harmony.

All this is proper to each epoch, to each culture, to each type of society, but we live in an epoch in which the "crowd status" of society is globalized, and therefore accentuated. Accentuated in being flattened out, like when a little jelly is smeared on a larger surface of bread. Globalization "smears" the human over ever less definite spaces, flattening and diluting the identity of the self. If God searches for a man who desires life and happiness, if he seeks a man who says "I!" and thus lets himself be defined by the desire for what he does not know how to give himself, and does not receive from the crowd itself, it is as if He had to search for it in a multitude that is at one and the same time more concentrated and more diffuse. The self is more hidden than ever, more dispersed than ever, more drowned than ever in a sea of anonymity, of identity-levelling, of confusion about self-awareness.

And I would say that it is precisely in the way it defines itself as desire that the self is in error, that the self is a lost sheep. I am ever more convinced that, if there is a negative influence of today's means of communication on the self, if there is something in the computer world that erodes the person, it is precisely that which regards the human capacity for desire, for expectation, for wonder, for asking. The "everything-now" that is the measure of the quality attributed to the means of communication, if, on the one hand, it can be an instrument of growth, of development, of formation, deep down however it erodes the self, the deeper and more precious nature of the human self. "Everything now!" is really the synthetic formula of a thirst for power that comes to prevail over the desire for the infinite, and which supplants it in the heart of man. A thirst for power that wants to grab hold of all space and time without desire, reducing them to the immediate cheapness of a measure that we pretend to control, to possess.

The modern means of meeting and communicating, if guided by a heart thirsting for the infinite, can also be powerful instruments of this opening that exalts the human. Man, however, would need to have an awareness of his own "I" that would allow him to use this "net" without letting himself get stuck in its mesh.