

## 14. A mumbled “I”

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis reminds us that “time is greater than space” (EG 222). He writes: “Giving priority to time means being concerned about *initiating processes rather than possessing spaces*” (EG 223).

The “everything-right away” of today’s dominant culture is an illusion of possessing spatio-temporal reality. A detail possessed now, an instant possessed right away, gives the illusion of possessing the infinite and eternal *without desiring them*, without waiting for them, without, that is, being open, without opening heart and life to embracing reality, which does not close in on ourselves, because reality is infinitely greater than we are. Man, however, is created in such a way that he is capable of real possession through desire, through opening to what is greater than himself, to what cannot be held in his hands. And it is precisely the awareness of the self as desire for the infinite that seems to be corroded by the way contemporary culture works. We live unaware of ourselves, unaware that the search for meaning makes life great, gives it flavor, beauty, happiness.

In Shūsaku Endō’s novel *Silence*, when Fr. Rodrigues finally meets Fr. Ferreira, who has denied the faith, and sees all his mental and spiritual confusion, at a certain point asks him by surprise: “Are you happy?” And Ferreira, taken by surprise at the question, answers: “Who?” And Rodrigues must remind him about it: “You” (Shūsaku Endō, *Silence*, Ed. Picador, New York 2016, p. 154).

Endō manages, in two brief lines, to depict the loss of the sense of self into which a person can fall when he betrays the desire for happiness that really gave meaning to his whole life, to his vocation and mission. It is precisely the opposite of the scene St. Benedict describes in the Prologue, where, to God’s cry in the crowd “Who wants life? Who desires happiness?”, a man responds, “I!” Fr. Ferreira does not even understand any more that the question about happiness is addressed to him, concerns his person, his heart.

Ferreira recovers from the surprise, or, if we want, from his being unprepared to defend his image, his mask, from the subtle, quick arrow of the question about happiness. He manages to put his mask back on, to put back in front of his heart, wounded by the desire for happiness, the shield of ideological justification, behind which he feels strong, armed:

“A flame again flashed into the challenging eyes of Ferreira. ‘There are all kinds of subjective factors in the concept of happiness,’ he said.

That’s not what you used to say—were the words that rose to the priest’s [Fr. Rodrigues’s] lips, only to be suppressed. After all, he was not here to censure Ferreira for his apostasy and betrayal of his disciples. He had no desire to irritate that deep wound that lay beneath the surface of the other’s mind and which he tried to conceal” (*ibid.*).

When one reduces the self, one reduces the concept of happiness, and vice versa. To say, "There are all kinds of subjective factors in the concept of happiness," means denying that happiness is an experience greater than the self, granted to the self, that is, and revealing to the self that it is made for what surpasses it, for the infinite, and so that the measure of the self also tends toward the infinite. True happiness gives the self the experience of possessing the infinite, without reducing it to itself. On the other hand, a happiness produced by subjective factors is not an experience of something greater than ourselves, and this reduces the self by closing it in upon itself, and, closed in upon itself, the self suffocates, makes itself insubstantial, to the point of not knowing any more how to affirm itself, to say "I!", at the invitation to life and happiness.

Completely the opposite of the ascesis that St. Benedict proposes from the very beginning of his Rule, when he promises that "the more one advances on the way of monastic conversion and in faith, the more one runs on the way of God's commandments with a heart expanded (*dilatato corde*) by the unspeakable sweetness of love" (RB Prol. 49).

I recently reread, after almost forty years, a novel by Graham Greene that, in high school, I took to my final exam in English: *A Burnt-Out Case*. The protagonist is a famous architect who flees from fame and women, sick of everything, trying to forget himself in a leper's colony in Africa. One day he confesses to the doctor of the leper colony:

"Self-expression is a hard and selfish thing. It eats everything, even the self. At the end you find you haven't even got a self to express. I have no interest any more, doctor [...]"

"Have you no children?" [the doctor asks him].

"I once had, but they disappeared into the world a long time ago. We haven't kept in touch. Self-expression eats the father in you, too." (Graham Greene, *A Burnt-Out Case*, Viking, 1961, pp. 51-52)

This loss of the sense of self by the man who betrays his own desire for happiness, this loss of the mature self, the adult and fruitful self that expresses itself in paternity, we find also in Don Abbondio in *The Betrothed*, a village priest who, for fear, agreed to assist the high-handedness of a local lord who wanted to impede the marriage of two betrothed young people, Renzo and Lucia. The genius of Alessandro Manzoni succeeds in depicting it in a few lines, for example when Cardinal Federigo Borromeo has him searched for in a room stuffed with clergy, to send him with the Unnamed, a cruel evildoer who has just converted, to free Lucia who has been kidnapped:

“From amid the crowd came out an: -“I?” mumbled, with the intonation of wonder.  
-“Are you not the curate of \*\*\*?” – the chaplain asked.  
-“Indeed; but...”  
-“His most illustrious and reverend lordship wants you.”  
-“Me?” (Ch. 23)

Whoever betrays the desire for happiness that was at the origin of his mission, of the meaning of his life, does not manage any more to put his identity clearly in front of reality, he does not manage to say “I!” with an exclamation point. The most he manages to express, more through force than through conviction, is a mumbled “I?” or a “me?”, full of doubt, with a question mark which, even graphically, seems to bend back upon the timid, doubtful self that is forced to face the reality that asks for it, that calls it. It seems like Manzoni is actually thinking of the Rule of St. Benedict when he writes: “From amid the crowd came out an: - “I?” mumbled.” He speaks precisely of a “crowd”, even if Don Abbondio is only in the little parlor of the house of a Lombard village priest, in the company of a small group of priests. Don Abbondio does not want to be taken out of the “*multitudo populi*” in which he was keeping quiet, protected by anonymity, protected by not desiring anything, by not needing to respond to anyone.