

15. The fear of responsibility

Fear does not reside in what threatens us, but in ourselves; it is a feeling that attacks the self, that screens it from the reality that calls. Reality, and God through reality, calls the self to come out, calls the self to respond, to show itself, as when, after the first sin, the Lord comes into the garden and calls Adam: "But the Lord God called the man and said to him: 'Where are you?' He answered: 'I heard your voice in the garden: I was afraid, for I am naked, and so I hid myself.'" (Gen 3:9-10)

Fear is something that comes to change our feeling for ourselves, our own sense of self: "I was afraid, because I was naked". It is not the lack of clothing that makes Adam feel naked, because up to then he had not even imagined that the body would need to be clothed. It is fear that gives him a sense of himself trying to hide, not to be seen, not to *present himself*, not to say "I!" in the moment when God calls him. Adam fears the responsibility to which his person is called.

In the same chapter 23 of *The Betrothed*, certainly the most moving of the whole novel, there is another person who comes out of the multiple crowd, but does so in order to rediscover a responsible "I": the Unnamed. When he comes down from his castle to meet Cardinal Federigo Borromeo, cousin of St. Charles, it is because he has allowed himself to be stirred by a mysterious call to desire a liberty that he had never experienced. The call reached him through his restless heart, through the meeting with Lucia, the festive sound of the bells that reached him from the valley floor, seeing the people go to meet the Cardinal.

When he arrives in the house of the local curate, where Cardinal Federigo Borromeo is staying, the little crowd of priests gathered in the antechamber greets him with fear, and isolates him:

"The chaplain was moved, saying to himself: 'There's nothing for it: all these saints are stubborn.'

When he opened the door and faced the room where the lord and the brigade were [*let us notice that the group of priests has become a "brigade", as if they were the delinquents and not the Unnamed*], he saw them restrained onto one side [*they are closed in fear*], to whisper and look askance at him, left alone on his side. He went towards him; and then, focusing on him as much as he could from the corner of his eye, he kept thinking what sort of weaponry could be hidden under that coat; and that, really, before introducing him, he would have to ask him at least... but he did not know how to conclude [*fear of the other always makes us believe that the other is armed against us, that all the danger is in him; it's enough to think of how today in airports, and in all public places, we are alert to uncover potential terrorists among the people standing around us*]. He went up beside him, and said: – Monsignor awaits your Lordship. Please come with me. – And preceding him in the little crowd [*this term keeps coming back up*], which suddenly grew wings, he threw glances right and left, which meant: What do you want? Did not even you know that [the Cardinal] always acts in his own way?" (One seems to hear certain comments about Pope Francis...).

And, in fact, the Cardinal has an identity, an “I” that does not fear, which *is there*, and which for this reason is open, defenseless, unarmed before reality, before the call the God suggests to him through circumstances and encounters: “Once the unnamed had been introduced, Federigo came to meet him, with an attentive and serene face, and with open arms, as if to a desired person”.

And Federigo confesses to the Unnamed that his coming, if it is a joy, feels like a reproach. Because he realizes that he should have been the first to respond to the call of pastoral charity that that man had been for him, his bishop, for a long time: “Oh!” – he said: – What a precious visit this is! And how I should be grateful for such a good resolution; however much of a reproach it seems to be to me!

–“Reproach!” exclaimed the lord, stunned yet refreshed by these words and by this way of acting, and content that the cardinal had broken the ice, and started some kind of dialogue.

–“Certainly, it is a reproach to me,” – he answered, – “that I let you take the first step toward me; when, for so long, so many times, I should have come to you myself.”

I cannot resist citing another passage from this chapter of *The Betrothed*, in which Manzoni depicts the meeting between an “I” that is being reborn to its proper identity as a desire for the good, for the beautiful, for God, a redeemed “I”, that is, and an “I” in the full responsible maturity of charity, a maturity of self that is fecund, that generates the self of the other. The identity of Borromeo forms the identity of the Unnamed, of this man without a name, without identity, full of hate and shame for himself, isolated by the fear that he sowed around himself. The Cardinal *educates* in the etymological sense of the term: *e-ducere*, to lead out, to make the self come out from being closed in upon itself.

“The two who remained stood for a while without speaking, and suspended in different ways. The Unnamed, who had been drawn there as if by the force of an inexplicable madness, rather than guided by a determined design, was also standing there by force, ripped by two opposed passions, that desire and that confused hope of finding rest from inner torment, and on the other side a pang, an embarrassment to come there as a penitent, submissive, miserable, to confess in guilt, to implore a man: and he found no words, nor almost was he even looking for them. But, raising his eyes to the face of that man [*what draws us out of the tangle of feelings and ideas that pride and fear cultivate in us is always an encounter, meeting someone else, to come out of ourselves to live in relation, even with just a glance, discovering who we are in the gaze of the one who loves us, who loves the true beauty in us*], he felt himself ever more penetrated by a feeling of veneration at once commanding and gentle, which, increasing his confidence, mitigated his disregard and, without taking pride from out in front, beat him down and, I will say it thus, imposed silence upon him [*the truly authoritative man frees the self from the reductive and suffocating mask of pride, inspiring confidence in the other, making him a son who lets himself be generated by a father*].

Federigo's presence was indeed that kind of presence that announces superiority and makes it loved [*precisely the authority of a father, of one who generates the truth of our self, is the antidote for both the moralistic authoritarianism and the anti-authoritarianism of '68*]. His comportment was naturally composed, and almost involuntarily majestic, not curved or slackened at all by the years; his eye grave and lively, his brow serene and thoughtful; along with the white hairs, and in the pallor, between the signs of abstinence, meditation, labor, there was a kind of virginal floridness [*virginity is the fecund beauty of one who loves without possessing, without consuming the other, but granting the other what he needs to exist, to be himself, as other, as an identity irreducible to ourselves*]: all the features of his face indicated that, at other ages, there had been what can more appropriately be called beauty; [*but Manzoni hastens to list the factors and experiences that educate and form a much more profound and substantial beauty:*] the habit of solemn and benevolent thoughts [*they are the thoughts according to God that Jesus asks of Peter*], the inner peace of a long life, the love of men [*the love of man as man; wonder and esteem regarding the human*], the continual joy of an unspeakable hope [*the joy, continual and therefore constant, in each moment, because the heart does not consume the object of its enjoyment, but possesses it in the desire of unspeakable hope, of a hope that cannot be expressed in words, and which therefore fills you with silence*], had substituted there, I would say, an elderly beauty, that stood out even more in that magnificent simplicity of the purple."

How much we need the genius and the inspiration of pages like this! Precisely to rediscover a sense of our self, of the self of each man, that is not mortified, alienated, censured, masked by the false models of identity which bombard us, with which the air is full, like when a toxic cloud passes which we cannot see but which enters into us and makes our cells go insane to take us to the death of all that is human!