

15. Why does the Father abandon the Son?

Contemplating Christ in his Passion, Christ on the Cross, we see that the desolation is an abandoned solitude. But thanks to the merciful gratuitousness of God, this abandoned solitude is revealed as a place for welcoming our solitude, our desolation, like that of the shepherds, like that of each person who meets Christ in the Gospel and for two thousand years up to today. It is as if God, in the Word incarnate, made his own and flipped toward us the thirst of the deer who longs for running streams, that thirst that the human heart, when it is conscious, when it is not folded in on itself, when it does not fold its thirst back on idols of every kind and nature, feels directed toward God, *ad Deum*.

This is the great mystery revealed by the crucified Lord when he cries out: "I thirst!" "After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), 'I thirst.' A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, 'It is finished,' and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (Jn 19:28–30)

See, this thirst, this desolation of Christ's, will not be quenched up to the end of the world, because it is thirst for communion with all, thirst to quench the thirst for love, for communion with Him, with the Father, with every human heart, up to the last man and last woman of history. No drug, no artificial intelligence, no worldly wealth or power, nothing will quench this thirst of man's except the encounter with the thirst of Christ which is the source of eternal communion with God.

The desolation of Christ is a source of communion offered without repayment to our and everyone's desolation. For this reason the Father did not fill in the desolation of the crucified Son. The "why" of the Son's abandonment by the Father is the love of God that does not hold back, is that thirst for communion with each desolate human person that can no longer abandon humanity and history.

On the night of last December 24, as I was preparing for the vigil and the Midnight Mass, there came to me from the office of a high-security prison the scan of a short letter from an inmate with whom I have been in contact for a few years. He spoke to me exactly of the solitude that the advent of Christ consoles:

"In these days solitude seems to have taken the place of my shadow. The candles that have been lighted in these weeks seem to have given off that light that dispersed the shadow of solitude. These weeks of Advent have prepared me for the joy of Jesus who is born today as back then. My wish for everyone is that all can be ready to receive the joy of Christ and the peace he grants to everyone."

In the Passion according to Mark, we see that after the death of the Lord, the same light immediately illuminates the heart of the Roman centurion: "And the veil of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God!'" (Mk 15:38–39).

The veil is torn that hid what Israel kept as most holy, and the mystery suddenly is poured out from the chosen people and floods the pagan world, a flow of light and truth without limits of time and space, such that it even reached us today.

It is interesting to compare the version of this conversion and confession of the centurion in the Gospel of Mark with the one in Matthew: "When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, 'Truly this was the Son of God!'" (Mt 27:54)

In Matthew the confession is provoked more by fear, and a fear that is stirred by exterior, seismic, cosmic events. It is the fear that the pagan man feels, or the child, before the forces and phenomena that he does not manage to dominate and does not manage to rationalize.

In Mark, on the other hand, the motive for the conversion and confession of the centurion is simply Jesus Christ. Mark emphasizes especially that the centurion is in the presence of Jesus, in the front row, almost face to face with Him. He had to keep watch over him, to attend to the execution of the condemned man, to keep an eye on him up to death. Probably he is in the saddle on a horse, which really puts his face at the same height as that of Jesus. He is better situated than Mary and John. And while he is there looking at him, perhaps without particular feelings, because he had already seen many crucifixions, he finds himself without choosing to do so attending on the crucial moment of history, the event that is the heart of the universe, the moment that reestablishes the integrity and stability of everything, the event that makes all things new. And it is like the conversion of the centurion marked the beginning of the regeneration of mankind and the universe. This centurion, whose name we don't even know, is the first one converted by the death of the Son of God on the cross!

But let's focus for a moment on the instant that the centurion lived through and that overwhelmed his heart and his life.

"...having seen that in this way he breathed his last..."

I have seen two people breathe their last: my father and my abbot. The last breath, the last exhalation, that one to which no inhalation follows, is like a symbol of the nature of life, of the soul, which is a breath received as a gift and which at the end one gives back so that it can breathe eternally in the love of God who gave it to us first in the beginning, like he did to Adam. "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gen 2:7). Without the gift of that breath passed directly from God, man would not be man, he would remain if anything a lovely statue, one of those that are made on the beach by shaping the sand. A wave is enough, a bit of rain, a gust of wind, and it's all dissolved. The human creature becomes living "through a breath," literally. A breath that seems to be nothing, tenuous, but which actually changes everything, makes the whole ontological difference between the dust of the ground and a living person.