

16. The regeneration of the self

The Unnamed rediscovers himself in the experience of encountering a great and responsible “I”, that of the cardinal Federigo, with a self whose beauty is no longer that young and immature beauty that tries to be admired, but the elderly and wise beauty that beholds; the beauty of a gaze that reveals to the other *his own* hidden, profound beauty; the beauty that draws us because of what it stirs in us, that it does not fill us with concupiscence, or envy, but with a desire for a beauty that is also possible for us, by the desire for a charity that is also possible for our freedom.

“The Unnamed covered his eyes again with a hand, and, lifting his face at the same time, cried out: – O truly great God! [*his heart expands to magnify God, like the Virgin Mary in the Magnificat!*] O truly good God! Now I know myself, I understand who I am; my sins are before me; I am disgusted with myself; and yet...! and yet I feel refreshment, joy, yes, such a joy as I have never felt in all my horrible life!” (*The Betrothed*, ch. 23).

In this “and yet...!”, the Christian genius of Manzoni has expressed the whole newness of Christianity, the newness that the mercy of Christ makes us experience, which the Spirit of Jesus makes us feel: to be able to see the whole mess of one’s own life and not be overwhelmed by it, because the mess makes even more clear the esteem of Christ’s gaze; the fact that we do not disgust him, that to his eyes we are always precious!

Without knowing it, the Unnamed repeats the experience of self that king David expressed in Psalm 51, the *Miserere*, which Manzoni almost has him cite:

“Yes, my transgressions, truly I know them,

my sin is always before me. (...)

Grant me the joy of your salvation,

sustain in me a willing spirit.

I will teach the rebellious your ways

and sinners will return to you.” (Ps 51:5-15)

And he is reborn precisely in the desire for the good, for reparation, for love, for giving his life for the work of God that can transfigure all his misdeeds.

To live in this liberty, we have seen that it is necessary to correspond to a mysterious call that, in one way or another, makes us come out of our fortress to open ourselves to an encounter that makes us be reborn. I think again of the thought of Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* that I already cited: “Giving priority to time means being concerned about *initiating processes rather than possessing spaces*” (EG 223).

When one lives, like the Unnamed, or like Graham Greene’s architect, to conquer areas of power, of every type, instead of initiating processes in time – above all the process of one’s own conversion, of the opening of our life and our heart to the Redemption that transforms the old man in us into a new man in Christ –, sooner or later it is inevitable that one stops to defend the conquered spaces. Then the entire effort is reduced to building barriers and walls, to surrounding the areas of our power by building bastions, of every type—ideological, like those of Fr. Ferreira, or

cowardly like those of Don Abbondio. And in time, and perhaps right away, the conquered area, however big or small it may be, is nothing more than the shut-up enclosure of our fear. An enclosure that tends to involve the whole area, until it becomes the bunker of our fear of losing our area of power. Then, even if we have become masters of the entire world, our “kingdom” possesses us, dominates us, makes us slaves, closing us up in itself, enclosing the heart made for the infinite into the bastions of the fear of losing it.

Jesus expressed all of this in the phrase that, as we have seen, he spoke after correcting Peter, a phrase that we cannot forget: “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” (Mt 16:26).

But, paradoxically, man saves himself from losing and ruining himself, his own self, *by losing himself*, by sacrificing himself for Another: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:24-25).

To follow Christ means to listen to his call to find ourselves beyond ourselves, outside the areas of power to which we always risk assimilating our identity, the fullness of life, and therefore beyond the bastions that our fear has built around ourselves, like the Unnamed defended by a fortress, by valiant men, and by the weapons he carries. And by asking us to find ourselves beyond ourselves, Jesus invites us, as the Pope says, to enter ourselves into a temporal process. The process in time is a reality that begins, but which, ideally, tends toward the infinite, toward eternity. It means coming out of the bastions, coming out of the bunker, to start a journey in an infinite space, without limits.

The journey begun by the Unnamed when he encounters Cardinal Borromeo – but even earlier, when he left his castle without the escort of the “*bravi*”, who were the “bodyguards” of the time, to go down into the valley, still unsure of the call he was following – it was a journey without limits. It started there never to end at all, because it was a life process drawn by love toward the limitless gift of life itself.

Like in the episode of Zacchaeus. At first this man hides among the leaves of the sycamore, is afraid to be seen, is ashamed of himself. But Jesus looks at him and calls him. And this call makes Zacchaeus come out of the secure bunker of his riches, of his life of high-handedness and “legal” robbery. And his identity is reborn: “Zacchaeus, getting up, said to the Lord: ‘Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost’ (Lk 19:8-10).

“Look, Lord, I give!”

One who rediscovers his “I” as the possibility of gift, begins a life process that will never end. Certainly, he loses the defenses of his area of power, but he rediscovers the freedom and possession of himself, of his own life, and, in the end, of all of reality. To give, to love, is a possession of reality without limits.