

## 16. Vows of hope

The coming of Christ makes our freedom responsible for going out to meet him, for corresponding with our steps and our open arms to the arms outstretched to embrace us. Let's think back to the painting "First Steps" by Van Gogh. The scene basically illustrates the birth of the child's freedom. The child, for the first time, decides to walk on its own. But it is not an autonomous decision. The child did not wake up that morning saying to itself: today I am going to start walking on my own. No, human freedom gets going only within a relationship of love, especially the love between the parents who have welcomed this child and create between them the space in which the child can move, become itself, walk autonomously. A freedom is born and grows if it is given relationships of love that welcome and also let one go free. In this scene, the child can decide to walk because its dad is drawing him towards his embrace, and its mom supports it and encourages it to separate itself from her to go toward its dad. If we meditate on our life, we see that we have grown up into freedom only thanks to the people who have welcomed us without attaching us to themselves. There are sadly parents who put down this freedom in their children, not only when they want to separate themselves off, for example, to start their own family, but also when the children feel drawn to follow the Lord in a particular vocation. Today, however, it is often the young people themselves who do not dare to make the first steps that would engage their freedom to become part of a vocation or life mission that demands fidelity, like getting married and having children or leaving everything to follow Jesus. It is as if they were lacking hope for a fullness of life to which God draws us and that he cannot give us if we refuse to throw ourselves toward his embrace.

For this reason, it seems to me that an important aspect to emphasize is that hope should be like the dynamic soul of our monastic vows. As it should be the dynamic soul of every vocational commitment, like marriage or the sacrament of holy orders.

The definitive monastic vows, like those of obedience, poverty, and chastity, are not final decisions, but acts in which one's freedom recognizes in faith that the "for ever" is a space of certain hope in the God who calls us, who asks us to follow him, to belong to him exclusively. Without the dimension of hope, the vows become a closing off around ourselves that eventually suffocates us, makes us feel ever more imprisoned, and then ends up making us feel free only by fleeing. Hope, on the other hand, opens up an infinite space in front of our commitments, into which we will never finish going deeper, running, feeling ourselves freer and freer, free especially from ourselves, to run toward God by following Christ.

Hope also allows us to keep from closing ourselves in on our faults in living out our vows. Hope in God offers us a space of mercy that is always open, of humble restarting, of beginning ever anew. We must not start over from ourselves, but always and only from the Lord in whom we trust, from the promise that Jesus has made to us by calling us and that he keeps making to us.

We are always disappointing ourselves, but Christ does not stop at our disappointments because He never disappoints us. God does not disappoint our hopes because he keeps his promises, especially the promise of his arms open to embrace us for ever. But we think that God keeps his promises only by bringing them immediately to completion. Instead, God often keeps them as promises not yet fulfilled, that renew our calling and the confidence that we can continue to walk up to the end. Judas felt betrayed by Jesus because he did not see the promise of the Kingdom fulfilled as he had imagined it, as an earthly kingdom. Instead, Jesus kept the promise open in a Kingdom that he established by rising from the dead and that will be fulfilled at his Second Coming.

The vows always include a renunciation, a despoiling oneself of something precious: with obedience we renounce the freedom of self-determination, with poverty we renounce the private possession of goods, and with chastity we renounce the affective relationship of marriage and the family. If we live out these renunciations without the horizon of hope, they become merely negative, they are only negations of essential values of human life. In hope, rather, these renunciations become spaces in which these values expand in the relationship between us and the Lord who is, in himself, the good, the value, the love that fulfills them all and saves them all.

It is necessary, however, that the free space that the renunciation creates in our life and in the life of our communities become truly a witness of hope, become ever more fully an incarnation of hope, and hence a living witness of the fulfillment that is promised us. We possess the fulfillment of life and of everything by hoping for it from the Lord rather than by grasping it tight in our hands. One can say that hope is a possessing that possesses the gift by leaving it in the hands of the Giver, of the Father who gives us all that we are and live. Hope enables us to possess our freedom, every created good, and every relation of affection, with the fruitfulness promised by God to all, leaving them in the hands of God, receiving them at each moment from God who grants them to us as he wants and according to his design of universal love.

This is how Jesus lived: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father," Jesus shouts with joy (Mt 11:27). Or rather: "All that is mine is yours, and yours is mine," Jesus prays in the priestly prayer to the Father (Jn 17:10).