

18) “He had pity on him”

“He saw him, and had pity on him” (Lk 10:33)

The reflex, or the leap, is entirely in pity, in compassion. The whole inner difference between the other two travellers and the Samaritan consists in compassion. It is compassion that changes everything, which distinguishes the Samaritan from the other two. In the parable it is pity, compassion, that shifts the Samaritan’s responsibility into action and makes him the neighbor of the man who is wounded and abandoned. In the text itself, the act of “coming near,” of “becoming a neighbor,” follows immediately upon the movement of compassion that he feels for the other: “...he saw him and had pity on him. He went near him...” (Lk 10:33-34).

The expression “he had pity” is the same one used in the parable of the Prodigal Son to describe the inner movement of the father when he sees his son returning from afar: “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him” (Lk 15:20).

It is essentially the same scene, the same situation: someone sees a wretched man, a “half-dead” person; he is moved by pity and draws near to him, even to physical contact: the Samaritan’s treatments, the father’s embrace and kiss.

Now, the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son is an illustration of God, an icon of God’s mercy, a portrait of the Father in Heaven. Deep down, the Samaritan also illustrates the love of Christ. But in this parable, Jesus describes above all the man called to imitate God, insofar as he has been created in his image and likeness.

This means that the reflex of responsibility when faced with the misery of our neighbor has the substance and importance of the image of God inscribed in our heart, in our freedom; an image that sin has obscured, but which, in a certain sense, is activated and reconstituted above all through compassion. Compassion for our neighbor is like an awakening of the image of God in us, and nothing realizes our “I,” nothing is “eternal life” for us as is this becoming really the image of the Creator, of God who is Love, Mercy.

This means, then, that the movement of compassion which is felt when facing the misery and suffering of another is not only a sentiment. Or rather: it is a sentiment, but is not merely sentimental. Indeed, it is a stance of the heart and of freedom that is based on the way in which we have been made by God; it is a feeling that derives from the deepest ontology of our human nature, from our deepest being, because, in the beginning, we were created in the image and likeness of the merciful and compassionate God.

This interior movement remains sentimental if responsibility does not arise from it. If we stop at the feeling of compassion, it is a bit like feeling nostalgia for our infancy for a moment. It is nice, but it does not make us become babies again. If, on the other hand, responsibility arises, it is as if that for which we feel nostalgia were to become a present experience again.

There is a touching description of this in chapter 21 of *I Promessi Sposi*, the famous novel by Alessandro Manzoni, when the Unnamed, a rather powerful lord who has spent his life in crime and violence, has Lucia, the betrothed, kidnapped to hand her over to Don Rodrigo, another noble without scruples, who longs for this girl. Once the servant entrusted with the mission, with the eloquent nickname *Nibbio*, the bird of prey, a man by now habituated to all types of crime, has returned to the castle of the Unnamed with Lucia, he goes to his lord to give an update on the mission. It all went well, but there is a “but.”

“But, to tell the truth, I would rather have received orders to plunge a dagger in her back at once, without hearing her speak, without seeing her face.”

“What is this? What is this? What do you mean?”

“I would say that the whole time, the whole time . . . she has stirred my compassion too much.”

“Compassion! What do you know of compassion? What is compassion?”

“I have never understood it so well until this moment: compassion is an issue a bit like fear: if one lets it take possession of him, he is no longer a man.”

The Unnamed does not manage any more to free himself from this word, “compassion,” or from the fact that Lucia succeeded in provoking this feeling in a hard and violent man like Nibbio.

“She has some demon on her side,” he then thought [...], “some demon, or... some angel that protects her... Compassion in Nibbio! ... Tomorrow morning, early tomorrow morning, she is out of here; to her destiny, and let her not be spoken of again, and,” he followed along with himself, with that attitude with which one gives orders to an indocile boy, knowing that he will not obey, “and let her not be thought of again.” [...] But those words returned to his mind once again: compassion in Nibbio!

“How could she have done that?” He continued, dragged along by that thought. “I want to see her... oh, no ... yes, I want to see her.”

“Compassion in Nibbio!” It is this word, this reality, that does not leave the Unnamed at peace, because it corresponds to his heart infinitely more than all the evil he has done. This word drags him, though against his will, to rediscover himself, to rediscover his true identity, his true freedom. And in him too, as in the Samaritan, a need for nearness arises: he goes to Lucia. And when he meets her, he lets himself too be wounded by pity for her, and decides to take upon himself the burden of her misery, to take care of her, to protect her and save her from the evil that threatens her.

“Tomorrow morning we will see each other again, I tell you. Go, and take courage for now. Rest. You must need to eat. They will bring you something now.” This, this attention, this compassion, changes his whole life, frees it, renews it. Moreover, it is Lucia herself who explains this to him with a popular catechetical formula that she must have learned by memory when she was a little girl: “God forgives many things for a single work of mercy!”

Compassion, therefore, is a movement of the heart, a sentiment, that we must never scorn, even if most of the time we transform it rapidly into sentimentalism. But, as I was saying, by its nature, this movement is not sentimental, because it is ontological, it stands at the heart of our nature, it is the true and deepest substance of our heart, created in the image and likeness of a God who is Love, Mercy. Nibbio is wrong when he says that if one is taken hold of by compassion, he is no longer a man. Exactly the opposite is true.