

19. The open space of hope

“We are sending you a modest young man and, as they say, already learned for his age. All the rest is in hope.” (St. Bernard, Lt. 537)

This letter of recommendation that St. Bernard sends to Pope Eugene III reveals to us the secret for making every relationship truly paternal or maternal, that is, capable of generating fullness of life in others.

St. Bernard is a holy father who writes to another holy father, Eugene III. Between them there is a young man who, like every young person, has some seed of good human virtue, either by nature or by formation already received at home or elsewhere. He is a young man full of modesty, perhaps in the sense of being timid, or a bit bashful, who does not dare present himself to the Pope on his own, and this is understandable. It seems he does not have the qualities needed to be a warring knight or commander. But his education's being above the norm shows that he is a studious kid, who must have spent more time reading and meditating than playing or competing with the young people of his age. St. Bernard does not know him well directly: maybe he met him when someone presented him to him or recommended that he be able to go to Rome and put himself under the protection of or in service to the Pope. All this one can deduce from the little that St. Bernard says about him. But the great heart St. Bernard has in looking upon people made him realize more than what he saw or heard. He saw that in this kid God can do much more than what is seen, than what is, than what he knows. He saw that one can hope for much more for him from God. And thus, it is as if Bernard had transferred this kid from his own hope to the hope of Eugene III, that is, from his relationship with God, from his prayer and charity, to the relationship with God, to the prayer, and to the charity of the Pope.

In the painting “First Steps” by Van Gogh, one could also read the thought of St. Bernard between the baby's mother and father, as if the mother were saying to the father: “I send you our little one, a bit afraid of falling, but I know that his little legs are already capable of making the first steps, and above all he loves you, his daddy, so much. All the rest is in our shared hope that he walk, that he run on the way of life.”

What immense need there is for this gaze in the world today, especially for the young! It is the gaze of a paternity and maternity that do not close in on themselves, but leave an infinite horizon open for the young person to live fully, to grow, to proceed toward God. This space is a charity full of hope that already inhabits the heart of the father, of the mother, and which they transmit with the confidence with which they rely on the work of God. St. Bernard could have kept this young man to himself, telling him to stay in Clairvaux, to become a monk, not to go to Rome to study to become maybe a diocesan priest or ... a monsignor of the Curia. St. Bernard respects the space that God reserves for this young man, the space of life and of a mysterious path that is there between this young man and Christ who calls him to follow him. That is, he respects the space in him of the hope of God.

Writing to Eugene III that “all the rest is in hope,” it is as if the two pastors were united to welcome this young man into the depth of their relationship with God, of their hope in God, and hence into their prayer. Bernard knows that in the heart of the Pope this young man can find welcome, not merely or not mainly material and logistical, like when you receive a scholarship, but welcome into the hope of Eugene III. And this is a great act of charity. You love someone truly when you welcome him into the space of hope that allows God to fill up his limitations with grace. Indeed, what is “the rest” that is always lacking to each of us and that we can only hope for from God? Grace, the gift of the Spirit.

To look at a young person with hope, and at each person whom we meet, and especially the people with whom we live, means leaving the horizon always open to the grace of God, to what God can still and always work in that person, and also in our relationship with them.

Nothing is sadder than thinking that there is no more hope for the other person, that there is nothing else to hope for them, even if I do not see it now. Sometimes this gaze goes missing in the gaze between two spouses, or among members of a community.

When we notice this, it is good then to recognize that what is missing in the relationship with that person is above all our hope, our hope in God. Then it is important to begin asking the Lord again for the gift of hope that expands our heart and our gaze upon our neighbor.

This is important in order for us not to live a patience that is sad and sterile with regards to ourselves and to others, our and others’ defects, a patience that resigns itself to its limitations without hoping for more for ourselves or for others. This resigned patience is not charity, and above all it is lived without faith in the Lord from whose love we can always hope for everything for ourselves and for all, “hoping against hope” like Abraham (Rm 4:18).