

## 8) "You are dust..."

"God said, 'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness'" (Gen 1:26).

We have seen how the sense of human dignity is inspired by this mystery in the Rule of Saint Benedict, as well as how this mystery is accomplished in the search for and imitation of God.

But one must not forget the second account of man's creation, which concludes with the test of liberty and the fall. It is in this narrative that the biblical text enters into more detail regarding what God has done in creating man and woman:

"No plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up- for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground, but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground- then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there He put the man whom He had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil [...] The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and guard it" (Gen 2:5-9, 15).

In this second account, the man is taken from the dust, and all his nobility derives from the divine breath that God blows into his nostrils. There is dust and spirit in him, and the spirit is given him to remain in the dust, in his own flesh. Man is, therefore, created as the integration of earth with the breath of life. The earth has already been created before him; the breath comes directly from God. The earth also, naturally, comes from God, from His creative Word, but it is not created here, at this particular moment: it is taken up and formed by God. It is taken up as it comes forth from creation. One could say that it is taken up as nature in order to serve as a receptacle for the breath of grace, for that which comes to us directly, personally, from God.

When a child is conceived, the physical matter which will form its embryo, its body, already exists beforehand; it is taken from the body of the mother and the father. Then its body grows for nine months thanks to the sustenance which the earth furnishes for it through the mother. But the breath of life which makes of the child a human being, which ensures that its body is a human body, is not taken from a creature that exists prior to the child- it comes directly from God.

Man is, therefore, spiritualized earth. Not in the sense that the earth becomes spirit, but in the sense that the earth receives the spirit and lives thanks to the spirit, thanks to the breath of life. God has need of the formed body of the earth so that the breath of life which He gives does not dissipate into the void. The formed body of the earth is necessary for the breath of life so that the breath of life can truly vivify, can truly be a breath which vivifies that which without it is not alive.

This structure renders man a unique creature all its own, whether with respect to angels or to animals. Only man integrates earth and spirit.

Now God does not limit Himself to impressing this unique structure on the human being as such; He wishes that it be reflected over all the human world, in all of creation, of which man is the center, scope and peak. God wishes that all of that reality which hosts man becomes the image of man, of the structure that He has impressed upon man, in the sense that the world should become for man that which dust is in man for the spirit. The created world, the mineral, vegetable and animal world, must become human by means of the “breath” which man must introduce into it. Nature, through man, becomes culture, just as dust, by means of the breath of life, becomes man.

This is the vocation which God gives right away to the man. In effect, the man immediately received the Garden of Eden “to till it and guard it” (Gen 2:15).

What does all this mean for us, and how does the Rule of Saint Benedict account for it?

In the first place, we should note the essential role of the earth, of dust, in the creation of man. There can be no human being without earth. Nor can there be one without spirit, but I have the impression that after the original sin, man forgets and more easily blames the fact of being earth than of being spirit. This probably derives from the fact that the original sin, and every sin, is fundamentally a sin of pride.

It is not an accident that after the sin, God reminds Adam that he is dust: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19).

This return to the earth is not only the consequence of death, but begins even during life. How? Through humility and work, thus through two realities that are at bottom positive. It is there that we find Saint Benedict. Through humility and work, the monk is led to transform the condemnation of death into a path to life. It is as though the monk, through humility and work, places himself once more at the service of the Lord, like clay, so that He can renew in him the gift of the breath of life.

Let us attempt to see this from a closer view of the Rule. Humility in the Rule is always a return to the earth which we are. This is not only expressed by the etymology of the word “humility,” which derives from *humus*, but is taught by actions and choices which make us adhere to the earth in order to retrieve our true interior position, our true self-understanding.

Practically all the passages of the Rule in which the word *terra*, “earth,” occurs are passages in which Saint Benedict prescribes a humble lowering of the eyes, or passages where he asks the monks to prostrate themselves to become humble once more after an error or a sin of pride. In the twelfth step of humility in chapter 7, he states that the monk will have, “always and everywhere, his head constantly bowed and eyes lowered [...] repeating continually in his heart what the publican of the Gospel said, with his eyes fixed on the earth: ‘Lord, I, a poor sinner, am not worthy to raise my eyes to Heaven’” (RB 7:63-65).

In chapter 44, on the reparation excommunicated monks must complete, he writes that the guilty monk should “remain prostrate with his face on the ground at the feet of all those who are leaving the oratory,” and then “at the end of all the hours of the Divine Office, let him prostrate himself there where he is” (RB 44:2, 7).

But this prostration down to the earth must not express humility only when one is guilty. In the chapter on the reception of guests, we read: “In the same manner, let him already show a profound humility toward guests, whether arriving or departing, adoring in them, with head bowed or body prostrate on the earth, Christ Himself, who is thus received by the community” (RB 53:6-7).

Finally, in chapter 71, this gesture of humility is completed when a brother “simply acknowledges that an elder is upset or even slightly offended in his regard.” At that point, “let him immediately prostrate himself on the ground at his feet, without the slightest hesitation, and let him thus remain there, until the benediction of the elder heals that disturbance” (RB 71:7-8).