

11. Rediscovering the “I” defined by the call to Christ

When Jesus corrected Peter like he had never done it before, not even when he understood nothing, or got everything backwards, and not even when he will deny Him, He did it by underlining a fundamental dimension of our relationship with Christ, and with Christ at the paschal peak of his mission, of his presence for us. A fundamental dimension that I think we must deepen, because it is on this foundation that one decides, that we freely decide, if we follow Christ or not, if we belong to Him or not, if we let ourselves be saved and redeemed by Him or not.

I have already underlined it, but this is something we need to explore more deeply. Jesus does not shout at Peter: “Get away from me, Satan, you are a scandal to me because you do not understand anything, because you are stubborn, because you are presumptuous, because you are a sinner, because you are a tangle of weakness, of incoherence...”. No, we know that none of this has ever been an obstacle to the realization of Jesus’s mission in his disciples and through them. Certainly all this pained Him, at times made him lose his patience, as happens to all parents when they are raising adolescent children, but none of all that was or is any obstacle to the redemptive mission of the Son of God. Even with the denial of Peter, it is as if Jesus considered it a trifle, something predictable, or rather an experience that would be good for Peter, because through it he would experience himself, the truth of himself, and how little substance his life had without Jesus, without his belonging to Jesus.

During the Last Supper Luke records something that Jesus says to Peter that expresses all his tenderness and all his certainty that the Father’s plan always somehow is realized, despite and through the human frailty of the disciples: “Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Lk 22:31-32).

Yes, Satan sifts us to divide the good from the bad, the faithful from the unfaithful, the pure from the impure, the worthy from the unworthy, and often manages to separate us from Jesus more through pride than through the weakness of sin. Jesus knows that Peter will deny Him, that he will be weak, fragile. He takes it for granted. But he speaks of it as if speaking to a baby who is learning to walk: it is taken for granted that he will fall a hundred times before learning to stay on his feet. Jesus is not scandalized, is not impeded at all by the denial of Peter and the others. He is the Redeemer, He alone. But he reminds Peter that conversion does not consist in not having been weak and sinful, but in recognizing it and setting off again from faith, from membership that trusts only in Christ, entrusts itself only to Christ. And faith is not the recovery of our strength, of our coherence, but a grace, a gift that God gives us to open us up to Redemption, to Salvation, to the force of getting back up, of standing on our feet and walking, which is granted us by the Lord. Faith opens us to the mystery of the resurrection that the Father works in us in his risen Son, by the working of the Holy Spirit.

“But I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail” (Lk 22:32).

Jesus’s faith in the Father is the substance of Peter’s faith, of our faith. Christ prays for us, for our faith, for our free adherence to the mystery that saves us, redeems us, notwithstanding everything.

Whoever turns toward this, “confirms his brothers”, that is, helps his brothers and sisters to have this firmness, this unshakeable solidity, the solidity of faith that abandons itself to what Christ asks of the Father for us, that is, to salvation, to redemption, to eternal life in communion with Him in the Trinity.

Conversion consists not in “repairing” our weaknesses and falls, but in re-entrusting ourselves to Christ, to Christ who defines Himself as total trust in the Father.

What Jesus reproaches Peter for harshly is, instead, not having, regarding Him, the sense, the feeling, the judgment, of the things of God, but of those of men. The verb *phronein*, translated in Latin with *sapĕre* or *sentire*, is not to understand, is not to have understanding, is not being up to the task, but rather a position of the heart, a feeling for things, an intuition of reality, a perception of the real that has been determined and formed by the faith, and a faith in which it is the event of Christ who is present that calls forth judgment, the reaction, the attitude, the perception, even when one does not yet understand.

The verb *phronein* occurs only a single time in the Gospels, in Matthew and Mark, where they transmit Jesus’s correction of Peter. St. Paul, however, uses it often, and in meaningful passages, and I think this corresponds well to his *metanoia*, to the conversion of thought and feeling that the encounter with the paschal Christ provoked in him.

The Pauline passages in which this term recurs would deserve to be explored and commented on more widely. It is not possible for me to do it in these Chapters, nor do I have the exegetical knowledge necessary to do it. I list them in a note for later personal meditation.¹ Let us notice at least that they express a sense of God, of self, of others, determined by the Christ event, that is, a living memory of Christ that involves all of the real. By using the term *phronein*, St. Paul designates a position of memory of Christ, and of Christ who died and rose for us, which transforms the conception and relationship that we have of and with ourselves, with others, with God. Which transforms all of this by the act of exercising this memory. Memory, for example, in relationships is already itself a new relationship, is itself a new relationship transformed by the Christ event. The task then is to exercise this new awareness, fruit of the Christ event, which is an awareness of faith, faith in action in all the corners of life. Only thus, only by exercising this sense of things in which the Christ event defines us more than the things themselves, more than ourselves, more than what others are or are not, and more than the conceptions that we think we have already acquired about God, about our relationship with God, only thus does the newness of Christ change our lives, and therefore the world.

¹ Rm 8,5; 12,3; 12,16; 14,6; 15,5; 1 Cor 13,11; 2 Cor, 13,11; Ga 5,10; Phil 1,7; 2,2.5ss; 3,15-16.18-19; 4,2; 4,10; Col 3,2