

12) “Be fertile...”

I would like to meditate with you on another very important aspect of the creation account in Genesis and to set it in relation with the desire of St. Benedict to offer us a path for the development of our humanity.

Let us not forget that the first commandment which God gives to the newly created human being, and I would even say the first commandment which the human being should obey, is the commandment to be fruitful – and that happens before the prohibition to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: “God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth’” (Gen 1:28).

Whatever may be the work that we do, whether it is in the material or spiritual realm, it should aim at fertility; it should comply with our vocation to be fruitful. We are living creatures, not inanimate objects, and that means that our development can never limit itself to a functionality, but rather it must be a fertility, a generation, a dilation of the life in us and for others.

However, between this first word of God as he creates Adam and us, there is the fall, and that has rendered problematic the fertility of human life. Sexual fertility, cultural fertility, the fertility of work, spiritual fertility – everything became problematic; all of it can no longer be taken for granted; all of it now entails an aspect of toil, of difficulty, of confusion, of the possibility of failure, of sterility. It is no longer taken for granted that the human being is fertile, that he multiplies, comes to fill the earth, to have dominion over the earth and all the animals. And yet, God does not take this vocation away from the human being, because it is inserted in his humanity; and God, though he punishes the human being on account of sin, does not want to destroy him. God can punish, he can correct; but he does not turn back from the vocation that he gave to the human being. There is here a fundamental aspect of the mercy of God which we cannot forget.

But between the call to fertility addressed to Adam and Eve and our vocation to fertility there is not only sin: there is above all Christ, the event of redemption. And it is in Christ that the call to fertility which God addresses to the human being takes a paradoxical turn: it is realized through death. The command “Be fertile and multiply!” given in the first call of God becomes: “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it does, it produces much fruit” (Jn 12:24).

Jesus, here as in all the parables, does nothing other than describe what happens in nature, in the reality that we can all see. And in the seed that dies in order to bear fruit, he sees the best description of what should happen in our life in order to respond – after the first sin and after the human being became mortal – to the original vocation to be fruitful and to multiply.

“Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28). That cannot happen anymore without taking death into account, without taking into account the fact that our life is now subject to the laws of death. But it is here that the paschal mystery of Christ shines on our lives in a surprising way, because Christ transforms the consequence of sin – which is the most extreme obstacle to the fertility of our life – into the very condition of our even greater fertility.

Jesus reveals to us a death that is for life, for a greater life, for an increased fertility. He reveals it to us by dying for us, by dying for the first time that death which is not, as it is for us, the consequence of sin, but a pure gift of his life.

Now, the death of a grain of wheat is a death of humility, a death that is the consequence of the event of “falling to the ground” – of falling to the *humus*.

The first death, the one inflicted on Adam and on all his descendants, is the fruit of pride, of exaltation. The man and the woman want to be “like God” (Gen 3:5); in their pride they raise themselves above the earth, above the dust from which they were formed. The result of all this is a sterile death, a death suffered, a death that does not give life.

The death of Christ, on the contrary, is the result of his humiliation. It is the lowest point of his abasement, of his humility. “[Christ], though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6-8).

Jesus reveals to us that which from now on is the secret of all fertility, a secret that creation had kept hidden from the beginning in the law of seeds which have to fall to the ground and die in order to bear fruit.

But when one no longer speaks of a simple grain of wheat fallen to the ground to die but rather God himself, and, in his footsteps and through his grace, the human being, his fruit is the resurrection, his fruit is the life stronger than death, his fruit is “the love as strong as death”, as the Song of Songs (8:6) proclaims – the fruit of the tree of life.

It is in this light that we should understand St. Benedict and his whole evangelical vision of monastic life and of the human being in general. The monk who follows his Rule is brought to learn that the fertility of his person can pass only through death to himself. Adam and Eve, all things considered, when they were working, when they were gathering the fruits of the garden, when they were living in total simplicity, were able to forget that all this cannot happen if not thanks to God. They were even able to forget that without God they were not able to do anything, much less live. Sin consists in succumbing to this temptation to forget our inescapable dependence with respect to God who creates us.

Death teaches us that we are powerless to guarantee the definitive fertility of our existence. Death teaches us our reality as creatures, our truth. And if God permitted death to enter the world, it was not for revenge, for pure punishment, but to teach us

life, to teach us the truth of life, that truth that is manifested completely in the death and resurrection of Christ. Humility is the human being who recognizes that he can do nothing without God, that he is nothing without God. By himself, he cannot do anything but remain sterile, but when he consents to die to his autonomous solitude, even his death becomes a place where the miracle of a new life begins to sprout, a life of fertility, increase and communion. The grain becomes an ear of wheat.

Everything in the Rule calls us back to this knowledge. Prayer, work, the common life, guests, the sick, those in responsibility, the brothers who fall, sleep and vigils, fasting and the manner of eating, silence and the word – everything calls us back and forms us in the awareness that without God we are not alive or fertile.

It is necessary, therefore, that at the center of this training to become true creatures, there is a conscience that is able to consent to it; it is necessary that there be a heart which says “Yes” to this. And there we see why Benedict puts at the center of all monastic spirituality the formation of humility in our heart. Only a humble heart can stand at the center of our whole life in the monastery, and of human life itself, unifying everything. Only the humble heart can be the dwelling place of the unity of our life. In fact the humble heart consents truly to live with God, to rest attached to God.

There is a magnificent expression of St. Benedict to define the humble heart. It is found in the seventh step of humility: “The seventh step of humility is that a man not only admits with his tongue but is also convinced in his heart that he is inferior to all and of less value” (7:51). In Latin it is much more expressive: “*intimo cordis credit affectu* – he believes it from the intimate affection of the heart.”

We are speaking of letting the awareness of our own misery penetrate into the most intimate sentiments of the heart. Every step of humility aims at this; every step instills this, this interiorization of the feeling of insufficiency, of not having value in oneself if not thanks to God. All that which in monastic asceticism does not tend toward this, that does not bring to this, at least as an awareness and as a desire, remains vain and sterile – it does not bear fruit. If our heart is not that grain of wheat which consents to fall to the ground of humility to die to its pride, nothing in our life will bear fruit. All the efforts which do not lead to this, which are not drawn to this, are vain and even harmful. A publican, a sinner of humble heart, is more holy in the eyes of God than a perfect Pharisee of proud heart.

But above all let us notice that we are not free without this humble feeling in the intimacy of the heart – we are not free in the face of all that occupies and drives out life. Humility of heart heals everything, even a life completely messed up, astray, even a life incoherent in everything.