

In the Image and Likeness of God

“Jesus Christ is the answer to the question that is every human life.” (cf. Pope John Paul II - Homily in Orioles Park at Camden Yards - 8 October 1995, n.6) This is a quotation from the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II, of blessed memory, who said: Every human life is a question, and Jesus is the answer. The question of meaning in life; the question of human destiny; the hungers of the human heart for love, relationship, peace; the ultimate question of salvation: all find their answer or fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He is the Son of God, truly God and truly human. He reveals to us the truth about God; he reveals to us as well the truth about ourselves (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 21). Jesus is the answer to the question that is every human life.

When we meet Jesus as this one and only truly satisfying answer, we discover for ourselves the truth proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI during his very first homily as the successor of Saint Peter: “There is nothing more beautiful than knowing Jesus Christ and telling others of our friendship with him.” These words of the Holy Father describe what we are about in this five-year journey we are launching this evening. Tonight we begin to delve into the mystery of our faith, the beautiful faith of the Church in which we were immersed at baptism. As we do, we pray that the Holy Spirit will lead us to a new encounter with Jesus Christ. Through a series of catechetical presentations, such as this one that I am offering now, the essential outlines of the Christian proclamation concerning Jesus Christ and all that he has revealed will be explored. At the same time we shall also hear people share with us something of their friendship with Jesus, such as Lea Singh will offer this evening. By means of this combination of catechesis and witness, we will discover the truth of the Holy Father’s words: “There is nothing more beautiful than knowing Jesus Christ and telling others of our friendship with him.”

It is important to emphasize from the outset that this is not intended as an academic exercise or an information session. This is all about *encounter*. My hope and prayer is that all who participate in this journey will encounter Jesus Christ anew and discover Him as the answer to the question that is every human life. The Christian life stems from and is nourished by this encounter, this deep personal relationship with the Lord. (*Deus Caritas Est*, 1)

And so we begin our reflections with a story about encounter taken from Sacred Scripture. We consider a particular passage from the Gospel of John (1:35-42).

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. It was about four in the afternoon. Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus. He first found his own brother Simon and told him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). Then he brought him to Jesus.

In this episode, John the Baptist points to Jesus as the Lamb of God, that is, the one who, by the pouring out of his blood, would free the world from sin. The disciples begin, therefore, to follow Jesus. Jesus turns to them and poses a question. On the surface the question seems rather simple, but in truth it is the one question that determines the direction we give our lives: “what are you looking for?” What are you searching for? What is your deepest desire? What answers do you seek? Notice that they do not give a direct answer to the question. What they ask is: “Rabbi, where do you live?” They cannot put into words what they are looking for. Many times neither can we. There is a deep longing, a profound yearning in every human heart, often beyond our ability to articulate. We know we want *something*, but find it difficult to name what this *something* is. As a result we can end up searching in all kinds of different directions and places and find ourselves never satisfied. Tonight Jesus is posing to us that same question he first asked those disciples: “What are you looking for?” The disciples brought to Jesus the human longing that is beyond words, and what is instructive for us is that they sensed that the answer to their hunger would be found in this person Jesus. They knew they needed to be with him and so they asked, “Where do you live?”

In answer to their request, Jesus says “Come and see”. They spend time with the Lord, and after that Andrew goes running to find his brother Simon and tells him “We have found the Messiah!” That must have been quite the visit! Having spent time with the Lord, Andrew is utterly convinced that this man Jesus is the long-awaited one, anointed by God to save the world. He cannot keep this news to himself and runs to tell his brother. “There is nothing more beautiful than knowing Jesus Christ and telling others of our friendship with him.” There are other such stories in the Gospel. Take some time and reflect, for example, on the encounter in *John 4* between the Samaritan woman and Jesus at Jacob’s well. He revealed to her the truth about herself in such a way that she could not help but to run to the village saying, “Come see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Messiah?” (*John 4: 29*). There is nothing more beautiful...

“Come and see.” Jesus is offering that same invitation to us tonight. Like those early disciples we know that by spending time with Jesus we shall find the answer to that question that is the life of each one of us. This is the heart of our *Nothing More Beautiful* journey. Our pilgrimage into the mystery of our faith will lead us through five fundamental truths of Christianity. This journey will be, essentially, time spent in the presence of Jesus Christ, a response to his invitation to “come and see”. I have no doubt that this encounter with the Lord will strengthen within each of us the desire to share with others the good news that is Jesus Christ.

Indeed, as members of the Church we share a call to evangelize, that is to say, to tell others about our friendship with Jesus Christ. In order to do so in a manner that is at once convinced and convincing, we need to be well grounded in this beautiful faith of ours. Who is the person of Jesus Christ? What has he revealed to us about God and about ourselves? How has the person and message of Jesus been handed down to us in the teaching of His Church? This and more will unfold for us over the next five years, beginning this year with a consideration of the beauty of the human person. We take this as our starting point because, as Pope John Paul said, every human life is a question and Jesus is the answer. By considering what Scripture and the Church teach us about the nature and condition of the human being we are led to a new appreciation of

the wondrous love of God for us, of the purpose for which we have been created, and the reason why the Son of God became one of us in Jesus of Nazareth.

This first catechesis on the beauty of the human person takes as its focus the specific expression used in Sacred Scripture to describe the nature of the human being. We have been fashioned, the Bible teaches us, “in the image and likeness of God”. Of course, we know from Scripture that we have also been fashioned male and female. What this means will be addressed in our February session dedicated to the theology of the body and in our final session in May when we consider our social nature as human beings. Tonight I am focusing upon the basis for understanding the dignity, the worth and the destiny of each and every human being. We are created “in the image and likeness of God”. What does this mean?

The phrase is found in the Book of Genesis, in the first chapter describing God’s act of creation, specifically in verses 26-31.

Then God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground." God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. 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." ... And so it happened. God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed - the sixth day.

The essential teaching of this first account of Creation is that God is the author of all that exists, and that, among all creatures, the human being has supreme dignity. This point is demonstrated where the human being is placed at the summit of the ascending scale of works of creation, and thus the "crowning masterpiece" of the divine artisan, as well as in the fact that all is ordered to the service of man and woman. Ultimately, however, it is the particular manner of the divine creation of the human which sets humanity apart from all other creatures. Specifically, the human being is created "in the image and likeness of God".

We notice two words here: “image” and “likeness”. As used in this expression, the words are interchangeable, such that we have really just one expression. This is why you’ll notice subsequent verses of the chapter speak of creation “in God’s image”. (cf. also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 355-361, 1701-1709). The expression communicates something along the lines of “resemblance”. Resemblance but not identity. There are some today that suggest an equation between the human soul and God. No. God alone is God; the human being is only a creature. But a unique creature. We should also consider the verb used in this passage. It is, in Hebrew, *bara*’, to create. In the Scriptures, the only subject of this verb is God. (cf. *CCC*, 290). By using this verb the sacred author of *Genesis* is emphasizing that God alone is Creator. Creation as a whole is God’s work of art, and the human being is his particular masterpiece. The expression “image and likeness” conveys the wondrous purpose for which God has made us.

It means that God's desire was to fashion a creature that in some way so corresponds to him that he can address it, and that it, in turn, can listen to his word and respond. Human life proceeds from and is sustained by God's Word (cf. *Gen.* 1:28-30). When the sacred writer says that God made us in his image, he thus indicates that God created us for relationship. This is different from all the other ways in which God chooses to relate to his creation. As the teaching of the Church puts it, the expression “image and likeness” means that the human person is “the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake.” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24: 3). From the first moment of creation, the human being is made for relationship with God, for conversation with God, for a sharing in God's own life! This is not something that is added to human beings; rather, it defines them.

The fact that God creates human persons “in his image and likeness” to be his counterpart in the world, establishes the basis of the inviolable and inalienable dignity of the human being. Each member of the human race is, therefore, an authentic “you” addressed by the “I” that is God. Each is called to a dialogical relationship with our Creator. In this way we see that each and every human being is a unique unrepeatable subject; not a somebody or a something, but a someone, a person. Pope Benedict put it beautifully when he said in that first homily: “We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”

Now, to be created in the image of God, to be fashioned for the purpose of living in a relationship with God, presupposes that God has given us the gift without which relationship is impossible. That is the gift of freedom. Only if I freely return love to the One who loves first can the relationship be authentic. With freedom, of course, comes responsibility. Responsibility here consists in the recognition of truth – the truth about God and the truth about ourselves in relation to God - and living in accordance with that truth. This leads us into the drama of the second and third chapters of *Genesis*. A brief presentation of their essential teaching is necessary to complete our consideration of the mystery of the human person in this opening catechesis. I will not read them aloud here because their content is well known.

Genesis 2 and 3:

These chapters contain what is called the second account of creation as well as the story of what is referred to as “the Fall”. To grasp the significance of the drama that unfolds here I focus our attention upon a word and a symbol. The word is *‘aphar*, translated into English as “dust”, or “dirt” or “clay”. The sacred writer states that it was out of this “dust” that the first man was formed by God, who then “blew into his nostrils the breath of life”. (Cf. *Genesis* 2:7). We have just had established in the language of chapter one the great dignity of the human being, because it is formed in the image of God. By the use of the particular vocabulary of chapter two, the author is underlining the utter poverty and frailty of the human being. Yes, the human person is good and of unsurpassable worth. But the human being remains always a creature, not God, and utterly dependent upon God for the gift of life.

The important symbol in these chapters is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God placed in the middle of the garden, the fruit of which God forbade the man to eat. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* beautifully summarizes the significance of this tree and the prohibition. It

symbolizes the unsurpassable limits to our creaturely condition, conditions which must be respected with trust in the love of God. (cf. CCC, 396). These limits refer to our dependence, as creatures, on God who fashioned us, and to the natural laws and moral norms that God inserted into creation as guides for the use of our freedom. The tree is an invitation to accept the truth of our creatureliness and limits and to trust in the providence and wisdom of God.

We know what happened. Our parents chose not to accept this truth and they reached out to pluck and eat the forbidden fruit. In other words, they reached out beyond their limits; they sought to be other than the creatures they were fashioned to be. This is the first, the original, sin of the human race. Trust in God was allowed to die, they chose themselves over and before God, and they disobeyed the command of the Creator. The result was a shattering of the harmony and unity they had previously enjoyed with God and had shared with one another. Everything falls apart! Separation from God is symbolized in the story by their attempt to hide from the Lord; their disunity with one another is imaged in the clothing of their nakedness and witnessed in the blaming that followed the sin. Traditionally we speak of this terrible state of disunity and conflict as our fallen human nature. This condition did not end with our first parents. As the story of *Genesis* and the rest of the Old Testament unfolds we see that it remained a reality in the lives of those who followed. Cain, for example, was jealous of his brother Abel and killed him (cf. *Gen* 4:1-16).

What we have here are some ancient scriptural roots of the Church's doctrine on original sin. This doctrine cannot be fully developed in the time we have tonight. But it is important to be aware of it in order to complete the picture of what our faith teaches concerning our nature in relation to God's plan to create and save us. So for now I will make just a few essential points.

First of all, the original man and woman did not get into trouble without some help. From our knowledge of the story we know that they were tempted by the serpent. This creature seduced our first parents by means of a lie. The lie was, precisely, that God was a liar and not to be trusted. The lie was also to make what is bad (eating the forbidden fruit and disobeying God) look very good. The first sin was disobedience, caused by surrender to a lie.

Second, we know from our own daily experience the truth of our inherited condition. There is a contradiction that exists within us. Our first desire is always to do good, to do what is right. Yet we know that there are within us conflicting desires to do the opposite. (cf. *Romans* 7:18-19.) To this conflicting desire we give the name "concupiscence", a tendency within us to repeat that first sin, that is to say, to surrender to temptation, to prefer falsehood to truth, to rely on ourselves rather than God, and to reach out beyond the limits imposed by our nature and the moral law. The origins of this condition are, ultimately, a mystery, but we know it experientially to be true.

Finally, we need to avoid two conclusions that could be drawn from this reality of our condition. The first would be to say that the human person is bad or corrupt. No. We have been created in the image and likeness of God. God alone is our Creator, and he has fashioned us for himself. The Church teaches, therefore, that the human person is essentially good. But ours is a fragile goodness, due to the effects within us of the original sin. We are called to be holy, but we are weak and vulnerable, unable to attain to holiness on our own. The second conclusion to avoid is that there are two equal and opposing forces at work upon us, one good and the other evil. This

goes by the name of Dualism, and the Church rejects it. The roots of this rejection are found in the text of *Genesis* itself. There the sacred author acknowledges the existence of evil in the symbolism of the serpent. But this serpent is a creature; as such it is in no way equal to God. Yes, there is an evil force at work in the world, and its origins are a mystery. However, it can be overcome and is therefore not to be the cause of despair.

In fact, when later you review these first three chapters of *Genesis* notice how God addresses the serpent after the fall of our first parents. His first pledge is that evil would be vanquished. God promises that one descended from Eve will come to crush its head, to be victorious over evil, in other words. This is *Genesis* 3:15, a very important verse which, from the early days of the Church has been called the *proto-evangelium*, or the first proclamation of the Gospel. In other words, God's response to the sin of our first parents was not abandonment; it was the promise of mercy, the promise to overcome the power of the evil one. He has made us in his image, made us for himself, and this purpose of God will not be thwarted.

The beautiful news of the Gospel is that God has fulfilled this ancient promise, that evil has been overcome through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. On this note, let's return to where we began, to the story of that encounter between Jesus and the disciples of John the Baptist.

Recall that Jesus invited them to come and see where he lived. We are not told, however, where exactly Jesus was dwelling. This is because in the deepest sense Jesus does not dwell in any particular earthly place. Where Jesus does dwell is indicated by St. John in another place in his gospel, namely 1:18 ("No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known.")

Jesus is the Son of God who dwells in the heart of the Father. From the heart of the Father he has come to the world. He has come to those who have been fashioned in the image and likeness of God and thus called to a communion of love with God. He has come to those in whom this image has become disfigured by sin, so that the image might be restored to its beauty. Jesus Christ, in whom all things were made (cf. *Colossians* 1:16), recognizes the deep beauty of every human being fashioned in God's image, and has come to restore us to life by his cross and resurrection.

And so I invite you to join with me in this journey to a new encounter with our Lord, who said "Come and see." What will we discover? That in Jesus Christ, we are restored to God. From Jesus, therefore, we draw true life. There is nothing more beautiful than this.

Archbishop Richard W. Smith
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