

Topic 6: The Human Being, Image of God

Man is the only creature capable of knowing and loving what transcends the material and finite world. God has created us with a spirit, so that we may know and love Him. The creation of man in the image of God implies the possibility of a relationship of mutual intimacy. The human being, created in the image of God and participating in the One who is love, is a being capable of love.

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1. Created in the image of God

The book of Genesis tells us that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.”^[1]

This is surely a revelation of the utmost importance. After the creation of the material world, the plant world and the animal world, God creates (we do not consider here the world of angels) the human being. A clear and radical distinction exists between non-human creatures and human beings. Only men and women are in the image of God; they reflect much more of God than simply being created by Him; they participate in God’s divinity in a way superior to non-human creatures, although logically this similarity does

not cancel out the distinction between human nature and divine nature. “The human person, created in the image of God, is a being at once corporeal and spiritual. The biblical account expresses this reality in symbolic language when it affirms that ‘then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being’ (Gen 2:7).”^[2]

This intermediate position of the human being, between the material-animal world and divinity, can be denied by the two extremes. In the first case, man sets himself up as absolute lord of himself and of all creation; in the second, man is viewed as simply the product of animal evolution, however complex it may be conceived, deprived of spirituality and freedom.

However, to avoid these two errors and to accept this truth of faith more readily, we only need to reflect on our experience of our own way of being.

On the one hand, we experience many limitations that manifest our finitude. For example, we do not manage to do everything we want to do (either because of external obstacles or internal obstacles); many things happen to us that we do not control, want or foresee; we live in a flow of time and events that we cannot reverse or stop. So our finitude is evident.

But, on the other hand, no less evident are certain features of our life that escape this finitude, that somehow make it “porous” or open it to the infinite. To begin with, we note the surprising fact that, being finite, we know this or are aware of it. But if we know we are finite, it is because

our understanding somehow exceeds the limit of our vert finitude.

Moreover, and with respect to the limitations mentioned above, we certainly do not achieve many things we want to, but we can conceive and desire them, even if they are impossible to attain. Uncontrollable events necessarily confront us, but we can always resist them or take an inner stance towards them. Time truly passes by for us and in us in a necessarily irreversible way, but we always live in a continuous and permanent “now” from which we can contemplate and give meaning to the past and in a certain way to the future.

In short, we are undoubtedly a finite being living in a finite material world; but we also have the capacity to distance ourselves from the conditions of our finitude. This capacity is only possible because we are spiritual, and here we see what

makes us similar to God, the infinite and absolute Spirit.

Some humanistic theories claim that the human being has a spirit, but a finite spirit – more or less enlightened – that is neither in the image of God nor therefore oriented towards Him. Such a conception is problematic first of all theoretically, since the nature of a spiritual being is to participate in the absolute Being and to tend towards it. And also practically, since personal and historical experience shows that breaking the relationship with God ends up undermining the dignity of the human person. “We have no other alternative. There are only two possible ways of living on this earth: either we live a supernatural life, or else an animal life.”^[3]

2. The human being: created out of love, created to love

That “God created man in his own image” also implies two fundamental truths: that we are created out of love and that we are created to love.

In the first place, if God is perfect and absolute, He stands in need of nothing and no one. Hence God is absolutely transcendent and free; that is, He did not create the world and mankind out of necessity, but freely. Creation is a free gift of God. In other words, all creation is the work of his love. We need to fight against the frequent temptation to subject God, or God’s Will, to our logic or limitations.

Secondly, if God has created us in his image, it is in order to enter into a possible relationship with us. In other words, if God has made us capable of knowing and loving

beyond the material and finite, if He has created us with a spirit, it is so that we may know and love Him. “Of all visible creatures, only man is ‘able to know and love his Creator’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 12,3). He is the ‘only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24,3), and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God’s own life. It was for this end that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity.”^[4]

From another point of view, it can be said that the creation of man in the image of God implies the possibility of a relationship of mutual communication. But the initiative for this communication, since it involves intimacy, can only come from God, since natural human knowledge cannot of itself have access to God’s intimacy (nor to any other intimacy unless it opens itself to it). And that is

what God has truly done. God has revealed Himself to us, and communicated his innermost nature to us. This profound revelation reaches us in the most explicit way in Saint John's words: "God is love."^[5]

Hence the human being, created in the image of God and participating in the One who is infinite Love, is a being capable of loving. This is the deepest nature and definition of the human being, what we are and become, "for one is what one's love is."^[6] We are capable of loving because, having been created out of love, we have already received that love, we have been loved first: "In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us"^[7]; "we love, because he first loved us."^[8]

Therefore the whole dynamism of the moral life, the life of the virtues, is informed by love, by charity. "Charity orders the acts of the other virtues to the ultimate end, and

therefore also gives the other virtues their form. It is therefore said to be the form of the virtues.”^[9]

3. Dimensions of the human being: intellect, will, affections

Defining the human being as a loving being or a being capable of love can be ambiguous depending on what is meant by love, a term that is currently used much too broadly and diversely. In general, it can be said that love is, or at least harbours, a desire; but human beings can desire in different ways (selfishly or altruistically), at different levels of their nature (sense or spirit) and, furthermore, in the direction of very different objects (for example, inferior or superior to man himself, objects in themselves good or bad, etc.), which characterise this desire and, therefore, the very subject who desires, in different ways. The light

of faith tells us that the way of loving that is most proper to the human being, the image of God, is to love as He loves.

To love as God loves or to love spiritually means, in short, to love freely in and with truth. In other words, it means raising affectivity to the level where reason discerns in it truth or falsehood, rightness or wrongness, and opens or directs love towards the other person; which, obviously, can only be done freely or voluntarily. It is a matter, then, of bringing into play the three fundamental dimensions of the human being as spirit: the intellect or “logos” that lucidly discerns the kind of love and opens it to other people; the will that freely decides how to respond to this lucid and loving requirement; and the affectivity that, in its deepest and highest form, properly constitutes love.

Of course, we also see in ourselves a non-spiritual level where lucidity, freedom and authentic love are lacking. Therefore we need to integrate these three human dimensions at their higher or spiritual level, without giving in to a reductionism which, in the end, presupposes an idea of the human being as only a material, animal or socially gregarious being.

On this spiritual plane, intellect and love go hand in hand harmoniously and simultaneously. “Intelligence and love are not in separate compartments: love is rich in intelligence and intelligence is full of love.”^[10] Eros and agape, which have often been radicalised and opposed to each other (as love of desire and love of benevolence, ascending love and descending love, possessive love and oblate love, love of self and love of the other, etc.), integrate by elevating and purifying themselves.

“*Eros* and *agape*—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized. Even if eros is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to ‘be there for’ the other. The element of agape thus enters into this love, for otherwise eros is impoverished and even loses its own nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by oblate, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift.”^[11] —

4. Human sociability

In God's revealing to us that his essence is love, He has also revealed to us something of How he loves; and not only how He loves human beings, but how He loves in himself. God loves interpersonally; God is Triune, a Trinity of persons who know and love one another. So, if we are created in the image of God, we are called to love in this way and we already possess within us an imprint or participation in this interpersonal love.

This dimension of love, love for the other person, can already be glimpsed in the natural experience of both love and the experience of the other as another person. On the one hand, if love is desire, it involves movement; and it is only natural that it leads the person out of himself towards the higher, towards other people. On the other hand, the

authentic experience we have of others is not simply the experience of other “objects” to which we may respond if we wish; it is rather the experience of other “subjects” who already from the outset demand a response from us, before whom we feel primarily challenged. In turn, this natural discovery is reinforced by the truth of faith that we have been considering: the human being as the image of God. Indeed, if the other person is the image of God, to love the other is to love the image of God, to love someone God loves, to love God himself.

Therefore, love is essentially interpersonal love: “Because it is filled with truth, charity can be understood in the abundance of its values, it can be shared and communicated. Truth, in fact, is *lógos* which creates *diá-logos*, and hence communication and communion . . . Truth opens and unites our minds in

the *lógos* of love: this is the Christian proclamation and testimony of charity.”^[12] This is why the New Testament presents the commandments of love for God and love for neighbour as closely united^[13], such that one leads to the other: love for God leads to love for neighbour, and love for neighbour leads to love for God. “If you love your brother, you must love the same love. Now ‘love is God,’ therefore he who loves his brother must also love God.”^[14]

It is on these profound anthropological and ethical presuppositions that human sociability is founded, and not only on a factual question of the need and usefulness of living in a community. Hence, too, sociability is nourished by love and is primarily composed of relationships and communities that are truly loving: the family and friendship. It is only through

socialisation, through contact with others, that human beings grow and develop. “Human beings are so made that they cannot live, develop and find fulfilment except ‘in the sincere gift of self to others’ (*Gaudium et spes*, 24). Nor can they fully know themselves apart from an encounter with other persons.”^[15]

We see this in the Gospel itself, “Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, my sister and my mother.”^[16] From these words we can draw rich consequences for the family as the basic cell of society. “God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and

innate vocation of every human being.”^[17]

And it is the same with regard to friendship: “I have called you friends.”^[18] Friendship is nourished by God’s love and builds community. “By the gift of his grace, we are elevated in such a way that we truly become his friends. With the same love that Christ pours out on us, we can love him in turn and share his love with others, in the hope that they too will take their place in the community of friendship he established.”^[19]

Basic bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 355-368.

^[1] Gen 1:27.

^[2] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 362.

^[3] *Friends of God*, 200.

^[4] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 356.

^[5] 1 Jn 4:8 and 16.

^[6] Saint Augustine, *Commentary on the First Letter of Saint John*, treatise 2, 14.

^[7] 1 Jn 4:10.

^[8] 1 Jn 4:19.

^[9] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Question 23, Article 8.

^[10] Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 30.

^[11] Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 7.

^[12] Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 4.

^[13] Cf. Mt 22:40; 1 Jn 4:20 and 21; etc.

^[14] Saint Augustine, *Commentary on the First Letter of Saint John*, treatise 9, 10.

^[15] Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 87.

^[16] Mt 12:50.

^[17] Saint John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 11.

^[18] Jn 15:15.

^[19] Pope Francis, *Christus vivit*, 153.

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