

7th Chapter of the Abbot General OCist for MFC – 02.09.2013

There is another aspect of the creative work of God, that the Psalms emphasize: it is the aspect of the totality and unity of creation in its many forms.

The psalmist often expresses his astonishment at the immensity of God's creatures, and the fact that He created all things. All creatures have only God as creator, all are the work of his hands. We have already seen in Psalm 103/104: "How many are your works, O Lord! You have made them all with wisdom, and the earth is full of your creatures." (103/104:24).

But there is an expression often used to describe this totality: God created "heaven and earth", that is, the totality of reality which man has experience of or can guess. It is the expression taken up again in the Creed to say who God the Father Almighty is and what he does: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible."

I'll quote you just a few examples in the Psalms: "In the beginning you founded the earth, the heavens are the work of your hands" (Psalm 101/102:25).

An expression of blessing returns in 4 psalms: "May you be blessed by the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (115:15). "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (120/121:2). "Our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (123/124:8). "May the Lord who made heaven and earth bless you from Zion" (133/134:3).

Psalm 135/136 continues to speak about the creation of heaven and earth: "He alone has done great wonders, for his love endures forever. He created the heavens with wisdom, because his love endures forever. He spread out the earth upon the waters, because his love endures forever." (135/136:4-6)

As I said earlier, for the psalmist to speak of heaven and earth means to mention all creation, and to mention it as a totality that includes and harmonizes even what seems to be opposed, what seems to be contrasting. Heaven is not the earth and the earth is not heaven. But both are "facts" from the Lord, they have the same origin in the Creator. In God's work, that which is opposed, is harmonized, and harmony is the work of God hidden and revealed in creatures.

The Psalms seem to enjoy pointing out that God creates contrasts: "Yours is the day and yours is the night, you have established the moon and the sun, you have established the ends of the earth, summer and winter you have shaped"(73/74:16-17).

"The heavens are yours, yours is the Earth, you founded the world and all it contains, the north and the south you have created" (88/89:11-12).

God created everything – even those things that are opposed, or are in tension. This contrast, this tension is also a secret of the beauty of the universe, because the differences highlight the unity of the work of God who makes everything. God also creates the relationships between creatures, he creates the passage from night to day, between summer and winter, the tension between the north and the south, the alternation between the moon and the sun.

All this creates awe, wonder, and above all, worship of God himself: "For you give me joy, O Lord, with your wonders, I exult in the work of your hands. How great are your works, O Lord, how profound your thoughts!"(Ps 91/92:4-5).

The beauty of creatures is all in God who makes them. The Psalms never fall into pantheism, into deifying creatures. And this allows us to contemplate creatures, and enjoy them knowing the truth of how fleeting they are. Because they are created, creatures are not eternal. They come into being, they pass away. Only God abides forever, and the creatures to whom He gives eternity. As Psalm 101/102 expresses it: "In the beginning you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain, they will all wear out like a garment, like clothing you will change them and they will pass away. But you are the same, and your years have no end." (101/102:25-27)

This means that if we lose the reference point to God who works, his work loses any real beauty in our eyes, and nothing remains but the melancholy romantic who sees things vanish into thin air. Those, instead, who do not lose the constant and ontological connection of the creature to the Creator have a key to a beauty and a wonder that does not fade, but rather is always renewed, so there is no fear for the end of things. The message moves on, changes, varies, but the One who speaks to us through his works never passes away, nor does he abandon us.

But there is another aspect that we must not lose sight of and that the Psalms help us glimpse when contemplating the works created by God. This is the aspect of the creatures' obedience to their Creator. The psalmist contemplates all creatures, and is surprised by how each creature obeys a precise design. I'll only mention Psalm 148: "Praise him, you highest heavens, you waters above the heavens. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created. And he established them forever and ever, he has set their bounds which shall not be passed. Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all of you: depths, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind that execute his command" (148:4-8).

Creatures obey the Lord's plan. This is one thing that struck me when I walked in the Swiss mountains, in the middle of the meadows. In summer the mountains host a whole swarm of insects, flowers and herbs, birds, etc.. And every creature, if we observe it, does its duty, does what it is created to do. Even the flies do

what they are created to do. And even the stones, in their immobility, actually obey their physical structure even more tenaciously, which involves an extraordinary acceleration of atomic particles, which last millions of years!

Of course, all these creatures do not have the freedom not to obey God's plan, but their "obedience" is a sign for us that we have received this freedom and we must use it. For all the works without freedom create a harmony of beauty that lets the beauty and goodness of the Creator become transparent. They provoke us, therefore, to consent with our freedom to the harmony and beauty that the design of God has predestined us to; a harmony in which freedom cooperates with the work of God and reflects his love. But we will see this tomorrow in the second level of God's work that the Psalms teach us about, that of the history of salvation.

However, it is important not to forget the first level, the level of the work of God in creation, because, as we have seen, it allows us a positive and grateful relationship with reality, with the whole of reality, which becomes for us a constant and ever new announcement of the goodness and greatness of the Creator. Only a relationship with creation that listens to the message of God inscribed in it, allows us to truly respect creation, and also to rest ourselves in it. Beauty is not so much on the surface of things, but it is in that message of love which, through creatures, God calls out to our hearts. A person who is not open to God and to the brethren, cannot really see and enjoy the beauty of nature, because for them creation is like a dead letter, a document in which no one speaks to them.

This level of relationship with the work of God seems very "atrophied" today, because many children and young people are not taught to look and listen to reality, to nature, as a message of an Other, as a sign of One who loves you and who writes you a long love letter, a cosmic letter that goes from the atom to the galaxies, and which we will never finish reading.

So there you are, when St. Benedict speaks of the liturgy as the "work of God," we must understand that this level also includes the creational work of God, as the Psalms educate us to perceive, listen, and contemplate it.

But there are also other levels that we will see from tomorrow.

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