

4th Chapter of the Abbot General M-G. Lepori OCist for the MFC - 28.08.2014

Adam and Eve's hiding from God after their sin is in fact the true distance between us and God. It is our true alienation from our Creator. It is not so much sin, because God seeks us even though we are sinners; and I would say that God "pretends not to know" where Adam is when He goes looking for him, because God knows that by now man has become a wounded and savage beast that must be approached with caution. God could have barged into the Garden of Eden with a stick in his hand, like a chastiser, shouting: "If I get a hold of you, I will give you the beating of your life because you have disobeyed and betrayed me." Instead, what tenderness God shows! "Adam, where are you? Have you eaten of the tree ...?" (cf. Gen 3:9-11). After that, God becomes a bit more stern, but rather than describing their punishments, he describes the consequences of the choices that the man and woman have made by distancing themselves from Him. He curses the serpent, but not the man and the woman, even if, due to their hiding from God, a shadow is cast over the woman in giving birth and the man in his work. It will be as if God's blessing on every creature, expressed in principle, will be somewhat blocked in man's heart due to his hiding from God: "Cursed is the soil because of you!" (Gen 3:17). The man who hides from God casts a shadow over all creatures.

I emphasize this because the path of conversion from hiding ourselves from God to exposing ourselves to Him, that path from the "dark forest", as Dante would say, must lead us more and more into the presence of the Lord, passing from fear to love, from the fear of punishment to trust in forgiveness. It is the path to conversion on which, willingly or not, we are occupied each day. And the meditations of these Chapters in this course must also serve to help us come out, a little more, a little better, from behind the bushes where we still hide ourselves from God who seeks us, who loves us, who yearns for us. Every time we pray the Divine Office, or we get ready to celebrate the Eucharist, or we come in contact with the people and duties of our community, with our neighbor whom we are to love today, in whom we encounter Christ today, this conversion is being requested of us again. And, thanks be to God!, this conversion has been granted, that is, to come out from behind the bushes where we have distanced ourselves from meeting with the Lord who searches with love for us.

Two days before hearing within myself the Lord on Calvary saying this verse of the Song of Songs of which I have spoken about before and which we will examine in depth later ("You have seized my heart, my sister, my bride, you have seized my heart with one glance of your eyes" - Song 4:9), I was on Calvary where the Office of Readings prepared me with a sweet phrase of the Bridegroom to his Beloved, that is, Christ speaking to the human soul: "O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow places of the cliff, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely!" (Song 2:14).

Let us let this verse resonate in us; we are before this eager search of a God who wants to see our face, to hear our voice, who craves a face to face relationship with us. Let us ask ourselves if and how we keep ourselves hidden, unable to be found, insensitive to this desire, this passion of God for the human person, for each one of us. Let us listen as he calls us. We are at the back of the cave, in the hollow places of the cliff, and this voice reaches us there, this appeal, this desire. In which crevice of the rock are we hiding? How is it that we refuse to offer our face to His gaze, or our voice to His ear? He does not ask us, first and foremost, to look at him, to listen to him. This will come later. He only asks us not to hide from Him, to just be ourselves in his presence. Nor does he ask us to climb up to who knows where, to cry out who knows what or how long: he is there, just outside the cleft of the rock. All we have to do is to leave that hiding place and he is there, and immediately he sees us, he hears us, and he rejoices in this, he rejoices to see us, to hear us; that is, he rejoices because of us! Christ rejoices because of us! ...

"O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow places of the cliff, show me your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely!" (Song 2:14).

I think that we will never be fully aware of the desire that God has for us, of his search for his human creature, of his yearning for a relationship with us, of his seeking us right there just where we have hidden ourselves because of fear, pride, ignorance of Him, and ignorance of ourselves, ignorance of our being made by Him for Him. Today we celebrate the feast of St. Augustine and how can we not think of the beautiful expression in his *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" (*Confessions*, 1,1,1).

This verse of the Song of Songs is the synthesis of the nature and form of this desire of God for us. God knowingly draws near to where we are hidden, he knows that we are "in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow places of the cliff." Perhaps the dove does not know where he or she is. When one is inside a hiding place, it is dark. From the inside, a hiding place seems a secure place, it seems to protect us, it seems to solve the problems of life and those of the heart. We do not realize that there, where we are hidden, we do not live a full life. A dove hidden in the cleft of the rock cannot fly, nor does it know that it is white and beautiful. In our hiding places, we lose the awareness of our true beauty, because no one sees us, no one looks at us.

But, God does not draw near to the soul only to reveal its hiding place nor to flush it out, as dogs do with a fox, or as the police do when they locate a criminal: "I've found you, I know where you are, now I will catch you".

God comes close to the soul, *blessing it*, speaking well of it, speaking of its beauty, of the beauty that he sees in it: "O my dove, (...) your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely." What esteem, what appreciation for this frail and timid dove which now feels itself being called, with a blessing, with appreciation!

We just have to think of all the times when Jesus calls someone who has hidden. With what kindness, with what eyes of appreciation he calls it! Zacchaeus, for example, climbed up the sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, but I also believe that he climbed up that tree because he did not want to be seen. He was a rich and powerful man; he would not have had to struggle to make his way through the crowd to get to the front row. The poor people who surrounded Jesus would have immediately moved away, more out of fear than out of love, so that they might not suffer any revenge when Zacchaeus collected taxes. Instead, Zacchaeus climbed up the tree where he thought he could see Jesus without being seen. Like the dove in the Song of Songs which can look out through the fissure in the rock without being seen. But «Jesus looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.» (Lk 19:5). To go to someone's house, to sit at their table with them, is the same as saying to them, "Show me your face, let me hear your voice," that is: "I want to be in a relationship with you."

And in the eyes of Jesus, from the moment when he looked up at him through the leaves of the sycamore tree, there is already a blessing, an esteem, an appreciation, a way to tell him that his voice is sweet and his face is pleasing. He is such a nice person that one wants to be with him, such a nice person that even God himself wants to be with him. Jesus himself expressed this in other words: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham" (Lk 19:9). For a collaborator with the pagans, a tax collector, as Zacchaeus was, there is no greater esteem than to recognize that he is a "son of Abraham", a member of the Chosen People. But the blessing, more than in words, is in the eyes of Jesus, in His gratuitous relationship with us, in his love, in his friendship. But above all these definitions of our comeliness and qualities ("your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely," "a son of Abraham"), there is this relationship that Christ has with us, his desire, his look of love that gives consistency to our comeliness, to our dignity. The whole beauty of the bride in the Song of Songs is in the eyes of the groom. "*Nigra sum sed formosa* – I am black but beautiful" (Song 1:5). The canons of beauty are not there, but the bride is beautiful because she knows that the groom looks at her with blessing. In the Song of Songs the groom keeps on repeating: "How beautiful you are, my love, how beautiful you are!" (Song 1:15, cf. 4:1, 6:4, 7:7).

The gaze of Jesus confers on the person his or her real beauty. This real beauty is not due to beauty in oneself, as the dominant narcissistic hedonism would have us believe because that is the result of sin and feeds on lust. Rather this real beauty consists in this desire for a relationship, for communion, for friendship.